

CHRISTMAS IN THE YEAR 2000

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been brought home to us in a vivid manner that,

"On a narrow neck of land
Twixt two unbounded seas we stand."

Between the glamour of departed days and the rose tints of to-morrow, the affairs of to-day, illuminated by the hard white light of the present, have seemed singularly commonplace and uninteresting.

Meanwhile to parents and educators in general this bi-millennial year has been a Godsend by its effect in generating an historic enthusiasm most needful to help young minds, or old ones for that matter, to bridge in imagination the tremendous gap between the nineteenth century, which closed the gloomy procession of the dark ages, and the twentieth, with which the modern world may be said to have begun.

In the America of our great-grandparents there were among many minor feasts and fasts two great days, the Fourth of July and Christmas Day. Perhaps in no simpler way can we obtain at a glance a more vivid conception of the contrast between the state of human development a century ago and now, than by considering the changes that have come over the popular way of regarding these two anniversaries.

It has been a conceit of some of our romancists, and one upon which divers pleasing fictions have been based, that the suggestions and impressions of the present bi-millennial year have not only influenced deeply our own intellectual and moral atmosphere, but that they have had a like effect in the spiritual world to the extent of disturbing those gravitations by which at other times the souls of the disembodied and unembodied keep their places, and that in consequence many spirits of other generations have during this year been walking unobserved among us and noting our ways, even as it is reported the dead walked during the crucifixion of Christ.

If by virtue of this ingenious theory we suppose the spirit of one of our great-grandparents, representing the last quarter of the nineteenth century, to have been thus going up and down among us during the past year, perhaps nothing has more shocked the dear old soul than finding his beloved Fourth of July forgotten.

This year, indeed, the day has been made much of, but the reason of the revival most probably have hurt his feelings even more than the fact of the previous neglect.

How must his ghostly gorge have risen, if he were at all a typical American of the old time, on learning that the revival of the Fourth of July this year has been solely for educational purposes, as affording a suitable occasion for impressing our young idea with a sense of the contrast between the rudimentary conceptions of liberty and equality which our forefathers made such a fuss about and the same ideas as realized in modern society.

That contrast is indeed so complete that probably even the lately-galvanized Fourth has helped us very little to get the ancestral point of view. What on earth our fathers meant by being so zealous for the mutual independence and equality of the nations as collective bodies, while remaining so entirely indifferent to preserving a mutual equality and independence among the citizens of the respective nations, is more, we fear, than the average modern American will ever understand. To us it would seem of quite invisible importance that America was independent of England if Americans were not independent of Americans.

Meanwhile it ought a little to have mitigated the wrath of our visitor to learn that the Fourth had not been discriminated against, but in passing out of observance had but shared the fate of an interminable list of anniversary celebrations of international conflicts and victories, all of which have lost their former zest since the ideal of a universal human brotherhood has dominated the hearts of men.

This last piece of news would naturally suggest to our respected great-grandparent that if, indeed, peace on earth had finally been realized, Christmas might well have taken on a new significance, seeing that it would now have become the celebration not merely of a mystical hope but of a solid fruition. Here, indeed, he would be at the beginning of the greatest lesson our age could teach him.

DURING the present bi-millennial year 2000, now so near its end, we have been doing an immense amount of looking before and after, especially, perhaps, after. The sentiment of the old hymn writer has

BUT nowhere does the gap between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries so wide as at Christmas Day, and if we would seek to bridge it we must again call the wings of fancy to our aid.

Let us imagine, if we can, an American of to-day caught up by some miracle of translation, the reverse of the one we supposed in the case of the returning grandfather, and set down on Christmas Day among our forefathers a hundred years ago, on some Christmas, say, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Let us suppose him to be fully informed on matters of history concerning the barbarities of the social-economic arrangements of that day, but to be ignorant of the Christmas customs of our ancestors or whether they had any. In this case it is very safe to say that the surprise of our resuscitated grandfather on finding that the Fourth of July is forgotten, would be a mild sensation compared with the astonishment of our contemporary on discovering that in America a hundred years ago Christmas was remembered.

And this astonishment would certainly be a most rational feeling. To any one previously ignorant of the real facts, no suggestion would seem more absurd on the face of it than that a society illustrating in all its forms and methods a systematic disregard of the Golden Rule, would prefer any notice, much less any open celebration, of Christ's birthday.

One would have taken for granted—being, as I say, uninformed beforehand of the fact, so much stranger in this instance than any fiction—that as December twenty-fifth drew near the police would be doubled, and detectives in citizens' clothes stationed on every corner to arrest any who should so much as whisper that tremendous name of Jesus. For what treason so black could there be to the social state of that day, what sedition so dangerous as any act in honor of the mighty leveler who laid the axe at the root of all forms of inequality by declaring that no one should think anything good enough for another which he did not think good enough for himself, and who struck at the heart of the lust of mastery when He said that our strength measured our duties to others, not our claims on them, and that there was no field for greatness but in serving?

It would plainly be the only reasonable supposition that if there were any who loved this revolutionary doctrine, so ir-reconcilable with the existing order, they must live in hiding.

How, then, shall we imagine the stupefaction of our contemporary, who, thus expectant, should awaken on Christmas morning to hear the day ushered in by a chorus of jubilant bells and popular rejoicings? How shall we measure his mounting amazement on going forth to find the disciples of the Golden Rule celebrating the praises of its author, not in caves or forest depths, but in lordly temples in the high places of the city, and what, above all, shall he say when he observes that the rich and the rulers not only permit, but encourage, the toiling masses who serve them to render homage to the memory of Him who came expressly to preach deliverance to the captive, to set at liberty them that are bruised, and to break every yoke save that of love?

Doubtless our contemporary, confronted with such overwhelming evidence of the popularity of Jesus Christ, would presently begin to fancy that the history books of the twentieth century must have been mistaken about the un-Christian character of nineteenth century civilization.

But no. With this well on the ocean shore it is so that whenever speech is broken by a pause the deep undertone of the surf, before forgotten, swells upon the ear and fills the silence with its perpetual moan. So in that day of which I write, one had but to pause a moment and listen to catch the deep voice of a perpetual lamentation, the cry of the blood of Abel against his brother, which, ceasing not from the beginning, has only in these last days been hushed in blessed silence. And if our contemporary, for this reason, did not recognize the dolorous sound, yet he would need but to look about him to see that this generation which so loudly cried, "Lord, Lord!" had yet no more mind to do the things Christ said than the generation He addressed. The names had been changed and superficial modifications of institutions and habits had taken place, but the essential immorality which Christ condemned, the inhumanity of man to man, yet remained entrenched as firmly as ever. On every hand the contrast of pomp and poverty, the full and the hungry, the clothed and the naked—the picture that broke Christ's heart—remained.

WHERE shall we find the explanation of this paradox, well called the greatest in history, of the adoration of Christ, as not merely leader, but God, by communities which tolerated a social organization that made earth a hell and openly outraged every word of His gospel? How shall we understand a race of otherwise rational men who seemed to defy only to defy?

Can you imagine a Christianity with the Golden Rule left out? You ask, what would be left? Never mind that. If you can imagine a conception of Christianity which shall leave out the Golden Rule you will have the explanation of the paradox.

"Peace on earth" was the aim of Christ's work in this world. The whole gist of His doctrine and the burden of His teaching consisted in counsels to men how to put an end to strife with their fellow-men and live together with them in mutual helpfulness. All this teaching, which was the whole content of His gospel, was grouped about and crystallized in the Golden Rule, whereon our modern world is founded as on an everlasting foundation. To believe in Christ and not to believe in the Golden Rule as the only plan for social organization, seems to us a moral and rational impossibility—an unthinkable proposition. Just this, however, our ancestors undertook to do, and it is fair to admit that they were very frank about it; they made no pretenses.

WHILE professing the most reverential sentiments toward Christ and averring the acceptance of His doctrine otherwise, they distinctly rejected and repudiated his law of peace as a desirable or possible social plan, and, on the contrary, explicitly used the entire system of social organization upon the law of strife and contention. Only by peace could human nature perfect itself, taught Christ, but these others said, only by strife. And by this law of strife, they meant not the friendly competition for honorable distinctions that we know, but a struggle for existence itself, an Ishmaelitic lifelong wrangle between each and all, not only for everything that made life dignified or desirable but for bare life itself.

For the credit of the human heart and reason there were some in every generation in those nineteen centuries of so-called Christianity who declared against the law of strife as the devil's law, as wicked as it was senseless, and who were not weary with appealing to Christ's law of peace and mutual helpfulness as the only sane rule by which men could live together. But while it would not quite do, so long as Christianity was universally accepted, to denounce Christ Himself for uttering the Golden Rule, these who echoed His teachings, though in terms that did but paraphrase His words, were hounded down as disturbers of the peace, and as such imprisoned, killed and persecuted, and ridiculed as fools and visionaries.

It was the approved doctrine taught by the leaders of politics and ethics, and accepted by the masses, that if a community should ever abandon the law of strife for the rule of peace, and agree to provide for the needs of the members by working together in the common interest, instead of contending with one another in separate interests, they would all presently starve to death. This would happen not because they could not produce enough to eat by cooperation but because they would lose their appetites if their bread were no longer smeared with the blood and tears of those from whom it was taken away, or, in a word, that no one would care to live unless it were at the expense and loss of others.

SO it was that from the gospel of Christ, vinegar from honey, there was devised a gospel which Dives not only could hear with complacency, but afford to contribute liberally to have preached to Lazarus that he might be more content to lie at the gate.

Thus out of the burning words of Him who came to make all things new, and who taught His people to pray for God's kingdom to come on earth as it is in Heaven, there was evolved a doctrine which was considered more effectual than police and soldiers to repress popular aspirations for freedom and more equal social institutions.

But what, it may well again be asked, could remain of Christ's doctrine after the Golden Rule had been eliminated?

It appears that the body of Christian doctrine as held by our great-grandparents consisted chiefly of what few things Christ said as to the next world, together with a great mass of inferences and speculations based on these utterances. So rooted in the philosophy and practice of the Golden Rule were all these intimations of the world to come, as Christ suggested them, that it is difficult to see how any one who rejected the rule could fancy they had any concern in them.

As we compare from our present point of view the former ages, and especially the nineteenth century with to-day, never came truer the saying of the great social architect that "the stone which the builders rejected is become the head of the corner." For to this rule of Christ, which our fathers were too wise for, we gladly confess our debt as the open secret of the stability of our world-wide house.

OUR whole order is but an application of that rule so simple that a child could not fail to deduce the result from the terms. What is the rule? Simply that if men would live well together every one should see that every other fares as well as he. Individual efforts are inadequate to secure this end. If the Golden Rule is to be realized in society the only method is a collective guarantee from all to each of what each owed individually to every other, namely, as good treatment as he himself had, which means, as applied practically, the guarantee by all to all of equality in everything that touches material and moral conditions. So our state and all the modern states and the world state are founded, and ingrates, indeed, should we be if we did not celebrate Christmas as founder's day in honor of Him who gave us in a phrase the master-key of the political, the humane and the economic problems.

In a society such as that of the nineteenth century, based upon inequalities and existing for the benefit of the few at the cost of the many, it was, of course, out of the question to celebrate Christmas in the way we do, as the world's great emancipation day and feast of all the liberties. One such celebration by its effect in opening men's eyes to the practical meaning and perfect reasonableness of Christ's social ethics would have led to the instantaneous overthrow of the whole order of things, and the breaking into fragments of every human yoke. It was necessary, therefore, if the day was to be recognized at all, to give some other and safer direction to the sentiment of the occasion. These reflections may help us to understand the character of family festival largely imparted to Christmas in the olden time.

Nor was this probably the only explanation of the fact. The family fireside was in that bitter age the only spot on earth in which the law of strife was not dominant, though even there its malign influence was sadly felt. It remained, however, the circle in which more nearly than anywhere else the Golden Rule was recognized.

BUT the devotion of the day to the purposes of the family reunion and a feast of kinship, though so pathetically excused was not the less a singularly complete perversion of the meaning of the occasion. Jesus Christ did not come to teach any new or special doctrine as to the family relation, nor yet to lay fresh emphasis on the old one. There was no need that He should. Nature taught men to love their children. Christ came to preach not the love of kindred, but of humanity. He came not to teach men to love the children of their own bodies, but the children of God's spirit, their brothers by virtue of the breath of the one Father in their nostrils, their fellow-men. So far was Christ from seeking to lay an added emphasis on the duty of family devotion that again and again by example and by precept He warns us not to permit the ties of the lesser family to interfere with our duty and devotion to the greater family of mankind. That gentle reminder of the boy to the doting mother as to the superior importance of the great father's business even to a mother's claims, gave the note of all His subsequent teachings on this matter. Always Christ was seeking to call men out of the narrow paradise of selfish loves and interests, and make them realize the larger ties and greater duties that were theirs as sons, not of men, but of man, as brothers, not of this man or that man, but of all men. What perversion of the meaning of Christmas could then be more curiously complete, however pleasing in itself, than the consecration of this day of all days in the year to a family feast with curtains drawn against the world without?

There hangs upon my study wall a picture—a copy of an old print of the nineteenth century—representing just such a family feast on Christmas Day, save that the curtains not being closely drawn permit to be seen two beggar children, with gaunt and pallid faces marked with scars, standing without, covered with the falling snow as they peer in with longing, hungry eyes at the festival. It is a picture that tells the whole story and typifies the age.

But the evening is wearing on toward midnight. The moment must be at hand when the first sunbeam shall flash on Bethlehem, and give the signal for the world-round trumpet chorus which is to usher in the two thousandth Christmas dawn. Two thousand years the herald angels have waited for the answer to their song. Now, at last, we can echo back their benison of "Peace on earth," with "Peace indeed."

There is something that appeals to the sense of fitness in this idea of making the celebration of the day simultaneous in every land; in the thought that with the first note of the trumpets, whether it be midnight, dawn or evening, it will be that moment Christmas morning everywhere. Other feast days we may wait for as they slowly dawn around the earth, ending here ere at the antipodes they begin, but this day, sacred to the tie of universal human brotherhood, should have no moment that all mankind does not share in common.