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THE WILL TO PEACE

LIKE all celebrations, sacred or mundane, which recur at regular and foreseen intervals, the feast of Christmas has tended to assume a standardized character. The symbols that surround it—the crib, the stable with its meek and dumb inmates, the shepherds, the Wise Men, the star—have passed into the subconsciousness of Christendom, and to mention but one of them is to re-constitute the story of Bethlehem with a sudden vividness that perhaps no other picture in history, not even the drama of Calvary, assumes.

Modern society has grown so apart from the liturgy of the Church that the setting of the great day, in the order of feasts and fasts, penitential psalms, and canticles of rejoicing that make up the Christian year, is largely lost. To too many it remains the one article of faith which time has completely salvaged, and comes year by year, out of a calendar wholly profane, with a dramatic suddenness that gains from its very isolation. No other feast has been adopted by the world at large with the same whole-hearted enthusiasm; and none other so exploited and separated from its original message. As these lines are being printed, the orgy of buying and selling, of giving and receiving, is passing to its climax through a crescendo of packed stores, and tangled traffic—with only a red-cloaked figure at occasional street-corners ringing a shrill bell to remind the

world that the Man whose feast they are preparing to celebrate was born in a lean-to, lived homeless, and died upon a gallows. There is no commercial enterprise, however petty—no stall or booth—that does not wear Christ's livery for a week. "The Christmas spirit!" "The Christmas trade!"

Certain austere souls there are—spiritual Scrooges, if the expression may be permitted—who view these perversions of the feast of the Nativity askance. They mutter, of a wholly pagan slogan, "Gimme!" which has replaced the Christian "Noel!" But the devout world at large is far from sharing their disgruntled view. It prefers to lay hold of a certain comprehensive charity and indulgence when contemplating the commercialization of Christmas, that at least is of the season. In ancient days, when the celebration lasted a week, and had been prepared for as only the Church knows how to prepare—soberly, with fast and prayer, vestments of penitential purple, and sifting of consciences—part of the fun was a day dedicated to the Lord of Misrule, when mock abbots and bishops, and kings with tinsel crowns made a covenanted parody of government, clerical and lay, and jesters in motley laid lustily about them with clubs of bladder. It was all part of the hearty humor and jollity, the gargoyle element in the middle-ages that was a counterpart to

the deadly seriousness of salvation, possible only in a day when all men thought alike on matters of faith and morals, and before the spectre of heresy had arisen to make the smile upon man's lips suspect, and the wine in his cup bad citizenship. If the Feast of Misrule has vanished from Yuletide and the Church's benison no longer rests upon it, it is not a bad thing to keep a little allegiance to the light-hearted old monarch in one's heart. It will prove an immense solace when regarding the travesties, all the sadder because they do not know what travesties they are, that have descended upon the feast of Christ's nativity—the yearly commemoration of the day of days when the Orient from on high visited earth.

The fact is that the Christianity which looks upon Christmas today is a chastened one, thankful, in homely phrase, for very small and partial mercies. It loves to see the Sign that so many nations have contradicted still fling its arms athwart their national banners. For the sake of the commemoration of Christ's manger, it is content for one week at least to forget how many dogs are barking from theirs.

Particularly does it thank God that one watchword forever associated with the first of all Christmas days has not ceased to echo in men's hearts, and that the urgency of its challenge is all the more keenly realized because four Christmases passed over Europe when to remember it was a bitter humiliation and trial to faith. "Peace!" is the ideal that is enshrined at the core of all the pomp and circumstance with which men surround the feast of the Nativity. "Peace" was the one message heaven had for earth at the moment the veil was withdrawn and a "great company of angels" was seen by the poor hinds who lay awake watching their flocks on the hillside. At the due time, the Child who lay amid the straw was to tell the world just what kind of peace it might have for the asking. It was certainly not the peace which lay over the earth at the time Joseph and Mary went up to their own city to be numbered in Caesar's census. "Not as the world gives, do I give." All that the world could give, Rome had given up to those brief few months when the gates of Janus were shut upon the Forum. Tribute, discipline, legions shaking the ground on their march from one walled camp to another, lictors with rods for the back and axes for the neck, roads drawn by line and plummet that reached to the dark frontiers beyond which invasion and ruin bided their time, teeming cities and emptying farm-lands; baths, temples and theatres for the free citizen—for the slave, the crucifix and the common pit outside the city walls. These were the incantations by which imperial Rome cast her spell over the world until the day when Romans, sick of a rule that had forgotten its yesterday and could not promise its tomorrow, deserted the walls and let the saving barbarians in.

The vision of a peace on Roman terms—a Pax Romana—is one that has not ceased to haunt the

vision of nations; indeed history is largely a record of the world's recovery from one unsuccessful attempt after another to impose it, of which the past seven disturbed and anxious years are but the latest in a long series. At successive periods in the story of mankind, first one country and then another seems to become seized with an overpowering national self-consciousness, a conviction that what it has to offer, by very virtue of its material success at home, is of universal application. Weighing its weaker and poorer neighbors in the scale of its own values, it has had no great difficulty in proving them, to its own satisfaction, backward and unprogressive. The will to dominion once established, pretexts to give it practical effect are never far to seek. A watchfulness, often highly plausible, over the safety of national capital adventured under the prestige of the national name—an exacerbated sense of the dignity and safety of its citizens, and a reluctance to submit them to control by an alien and of course "inferior" code of law—these have been the preludes to wars ever since the Roman Senate went in mourning for the fall of Saguntum, and will be their preludes when contemporary history is as ancient a story.

The "Peace!" which the angels delivered as heaven's message to a few sleepy field laborers at dead of night, on a bleak hillside, in the most despised and "backward" province of the Roman empire, is a peace that was promised only to men of good will, and if there be one lesson that history proclaims it is that good will is incompatible with the desire to control or hector weak neighbors. Nothing is more hopeful in the present European effort to secure future peace than the return to the conception at least of a community of powers with an equal vote, great and small, and an equal right to be listened to when they speak in whatever form of council shall finally be decided upon. Nothing can be of worse augury than the tendency already too often noted among the new nations, to copy the faults which brought the great ones to ruin, and by a system of narrow nationalism, hostile frontiers, needless tariff walls and irksome passports to impede the free intercourse of men and material, the "good will" that is Europe's crying need, and without which peace is a vain word.

The world, in a word, can have peace, old Rome's way or God's way. It cannot have both. The first is the easiest, for the state is still supreme, and a word will set battalions and batteries on the march, and battle-ship propellers revolving. The second is the hardest, for hearts are not changed at an official word, and a city is taken easier than a spirit conquered. But the easy way leads to nothing but ever fresh war, heart-burning, economic welfare sacrificed to the desire for revenge and armed "security" against reprisal. The hard way leads to the kingdom of Christ on earth—to the "Peace!" which celestial choirs hymned o'er that ancient town, two thousand years ago.