THE MIRACLE OF CHRISTMAS: A GREETING: BY CONINGSBY DAWSON

It's odd that this madness for giving only comes upon us in its full sincerity at Christmas. Most of the year we spend in getting—we must. Only by getting can we get on, and only by getting on we get more on—and getting more and more on is one of the first principles of modern life. The man who doesn't get on, gets left.

Behold the miracle. About the fourth week in December, for one day out of so many, the world turns its back on its necessary selfishness and deliberately retraces its steps to the first generosities of childhood. And why?

That question can be asked of most of our finest moments. Why does a man hamper his pleasures and give to old affections a secondary place for the sake of a girl chance-met? Why does the landscape alter for her sake, so that where yesterday he saw rutted roads of prose today he sees field-tracks and mist-mountains of romance? The same transformation may be attained by witnessing the mysteries of birth and death. More momentarily a stampede of music and the beauty in some flash of phrase may shatter the delusion that life is commonplace.

The truth is we are mystics and as secret in our faith as anarchists—so secret that sometimes we forget. In a society which seeks material ends the mystic is a heretic and has to travel in disguise. Often he disguises so well that he deceives himself. But the soul is full of revolts and surprises.

We have suffered defeat and are tired of the long struggle for unworthy prizes. Life, from the first wide vision we had of it like a sky spacious with sunrise, has narrowed and narrowed until at last it seems a walled-in pathway leading from one locked door to the next. A morning comes when we waken to a day full of liberty—a liberty
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which was in all the other days and of which we have grown unaware. We set out as prisoners to our self-seeking, guarded by the fears which we ourselves have created. We go down into the city when bread has to be earned. Traffic roars by, imperial in volume; if we notice it at all, we see only the dreary threat which is entailed by so many encroaching personalities. The blare of trumpets and thud of drums! Suddenly round a corner swings a regiment of soldiers, heads erect, lips smiling. They are going laughing to some distant place, perhaps to die. Our imprisoning successes and failures sink out of sight. We have gazed on expanse. Scarlet heroism has marched before our eyes. The memory breaks down barriers which selfishness has raised—for that day, while the thud of drums is remembered, life seems dignified.

But why? Having found that men are nobler than we fancied, we are led to hope that our individual destiny may be larger than we suspect. The effect of any glimpse of splendor—whether the splendor of courage or of tenderness—is the same; it makes us want to share. The sharing spirit is the Christmas spirit.

Most of the clamors which arise in the soul are unpremeditated. With Christmas it is different—it can happen only on the one day. Have you ever tried to hold a Christmas on
any other date than the twenty-fifth of December? I have, and it was a dismal failure. As children, I and my sister would desperately feign that certain days in spring and summer were additional Christmases. We would bring all our imagination to bear on the pretense. Going to bed early, we would hang up our stockings and try to conjure up the strangling sense of happiness and expectation. Presently a little white figure would creep in at the doorway and there would be a rustling of paper. When the figure had disappeared, it would be my turn to slip out of bed and put my gift into my sister’s stocking. By strict agreement examination of stockings must not take place until the exchange of presents had been effected. For this there was a reason, born of experience: usually the presents were of unequal value and quarrels followed, the more generous person making a determined effort to recover his or her gift from the meanker party. We often cheated—a thing we should never have done on the real Christmas. I can remember an occasion when I received a ball of paper in return for my best pen-knife: my sister can remember occasions when I was equally unworthy. Our faked Christmases rarely ended happily; generosity was usually supplanted by anger and embitterment.

But the real Christmas, that visited us on the one and only date! It seems to me that always, as the day of the twenty-fourth commenced to shorten, the white fleecy snow began to fall. When the street lamps flickered up like candles on an altar, they gazed on a world that was white. The strife of the city was muffled. Carts went by, but you had to peer out through the blinds to know that they were passing—they made no sound. An atmosphere of gentleness had descended. Everyone in the house went about with stealth, as though planning some secret kindness. And then the night and the trying to keep awake till Santa Claus should come. And the
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waking up, with the frost weaving patterns on the panes. Somewhere far away a harp was being played and a cornet was challenging the silence. The tune they played was an accompaniment to the most beautiful legend in the world. At first dreamily you tried to remember why for once the darkness was not frightening, and then, 'Ah, it's Christmas!' As you turned your feet made the paper crack, and at the end of the bed you were too content and happy even to look at your presents. Why was it that next day everybody and everything was different? The air was full of bells singing riotously. Everyone, for this one day, ceased to think of his own happiness and found happiness in bringing cheerfulness to others. The stern gulf which is fixed between children and grown-ups had vanished—there weren't any grown-ups. Somewhere in your childish heart you wondered why every day couldn't be made a day of kindness.

And that wonder of a child's heart is the Christmas message. Once a year, by a divine conspiracy, all the ships of our hopes and fears turn back from their voyagings to the harbor of tenderness. They are borne back on the crest of a white tide of mysticism that sweeps round the world. A truce of God is declared to all fightings, and men and women walk as children through a world that is kind. They commence to give and cease to annex; they act in the belief that God is in His Heaven. The result is one tremulous white day of unselfishness—a day which gradually all the other days in the year are learning to envy and imitate.

In a story of the Gesta Romanorum the wisdom of Christmas is written above the dead: 'What I kept I lost; what I spent I had; what I gave I have.'