

January 9, 1909
The Wrong Books at Christmas
Pages 249-253

I have very little doubt myself that, somehow or other, an inspiring and compelling creed will return to our country, because religion is really a need, like fires in winter: where there is no vision, the people perish, and perish of cold. The nation that has no gods at all not only dies, but what is more, is bored to death. But if ever a faith is firmly founded again, it will be at least interesting to notice those few things that have bridged the gulf, that stood firm when faith was lost, and were still standing when it was found again. Of these really interesting things one, in all probability, will be the English celebration of Christmas. Father Christmas was with us when the fairies departed; and please God he will still be with us when the gods return.

Of course, it is covered up, like every other living thing, with a sort of moss of convention and the unmeaning use of words. I take an example which has just caught my eye. On the literary advertisement page of a weekly paper to which I am strongly attached, I see written in very large letters, "Books Suitable for Christmas Presents." As I glance down the catalogue appended, the first title which captures my eye is our old friend "Sexual Ethics, by Professor A. Forel; with an Introduction by Doctor Saleeby,"¹ about which I made some well-meaning but emphatic criticism in this column some weeks ago. As I think I made sufficiently clear, I consider Professor A. Forel's book an unreasonable book, and in parts an absurd book. But I really do not think it so frightfully funny that it is specially suitable to be read aloud amid roars of happy Christmas laughter by the family when gathered round the Yule log. It would not have occurred to me; even if I had admired the Forel philosophy, to describe a book called "Sexual Ethics" as falling under the special head of "Books Suitable for Christmas Presents." Nor does another book, admirable for all I know, but bearing the title of "Our Criminal Fellow-Citizens," strike me as being a sympathetic substitute for crackers or mince-pies. I can even imagine that the suitable Christmas book which is here mentioned under the title of "The Scientific Basis of Socialism"² might pall upon a children's party before the end of Christmas Eve, and might even be deserted in favour of honey-pots or charades. I am not making an unfair selection from this list of breezy and convivial books; they are all like that in one way or another. There is a book on Tolstoy; but surely nobody could possibly want to hear about Tolstoy on Christmas Day; I would as soon hear about Mrs. Eddy. There is a book by Mr. Belfort Bax; but I am sure that that able and distinguished gentleman would be highly disgusted if anyone ventured to tell him that he was suitable for Christmas. There is a book on Mr. Bernard Shaw. There is a book by Mr. Bernard Shaw. But Mr. Shaw does not like Father Christmas at all; and I am sure that, with all Mr. Shaw's admirable qualities, Father Christmas does not like him.

I confess that I took these chance headings with the mere feeling that Christmas did not fit in very well with these books; but when I come to think of the matter seriously, I think it can be safely said that what is wrong with all those books is that they do not fit in with Christmas. There is nothing really wrong with those books except that they do not fit in with Christmas. There is nothing really wrong with the whole modern world except that it does not fit in with Christmas. The modern world will have to fit in with Christmas or die. Those who will not rejoice in the end of the year must be condemned to lament it. We must accept the New Year as a new fact; we must be born again. No kind of culture or literary experience can save him who entirely refuses this cold bath of winter ecstasy. No poetry can be appreciated by him who cannot appreciate the mottoes in the crackers. No log-rolling can rescue him who will not roll the Yule log. Christmas is like death and child-birth—a test of our simple virtue; and there is no other such test left in this land to-day.

But, for the sake of such frivolous criticism as seems appropriate to the occasion, let me simply take as examples those advertisements in order. Let us consider, for the benefit of those who like such books as I have named, why Christmas seems to have nothing to do with them. And let us consider, for the benefit of those who like Christmas, why Christmas seems to be ludicrously soiled by the mere mention of such books. The reason is really very simple: it is that on every one of these points the philosophy of the books is inferior to the philosophy of Christmas.

Take, for instance, our friend Forel and his "Sexual Ethics." Now, what is wrong with Forel's sexual ethics is quite simply this: that they are not tall enough to reach up to the mistletoe. The two first facts which a healthy boy or girl feels about sex are these: first that it is beautiful and then that it is dangerous. While all the philosophical Forels go floundering about in a world of words, saying that this is wrong if it disturbs your digestion, or that that is right if it does not disturb your great-grandchild, all plain, pleasure-loving people have an absolutely clean instinct in the matter. Mankind declares this with one deafening voice: that sex may be ecstatic so long as it is also restricted. It is not necessary even that the restriction should be reasonable; it is necessary that it should restrict. That is the beginning of all purity; and purity is the beginning of all passion. In other words, the creation of conditions for love, or even for flirting, is the first common-sense of Society. In other words, there is more serious philosophy in the sprig of mistletoe than in the whole of "Sexual Ethics."

Take again the next topic I mentioned, the jolly Christmas book called "Our Criminal Fellow-Citizens." What is it that really makes almost any upstanding human being, with his heart in the right place and supplying blood to his brain-what is that makes such a man instinctively despise and deride the whole science of criminology? On consideration, I incline to think that it is not merely the obvious stupidity of criminologists. It is not only because they say that Robespierre was hard and fierce because he had a retreating skull, while Charles Peace³ was hard and fierce because he had a projecting one. It is something ultimately crazy in the whole criminologist position; and it cannot be better expressed than by saying that one cannot feel like that at Christmas. All Christmas feasts, all Christmas freaks, are founded on human equality: at least, upon what is now called equality of opportunity. Nobody is inordinately proud of having got a golden-haired doll out of a branpie, for everyone feels that it might have gone to another. No one is despised for failing to snatch the best raisins at snap-dragon,⁴ because all the children are fundamentally frightened of the blue fire. And that is a much truer picture of our general condition towards crime and innocence than anything that I can hope to read in the book called "Our Criminal Fellow-Citizens." At this moment men (like myself) who know perfectly well that they might under temptation commit murder or forgery, are talking polysyllabic nonsense about the odd shape which a man's head must be before he thinks of murder, and the strange spatulate fingers a man must have before he can manage to forge. But one feels this rubbish -less at Christmas, because it is full of charity.

I could extend the same test to all the other cases I have mentioned if I had space to do it. What is wrong with the "Scientific Basis of Socialism" is simply that it is a scientific basis. The real basis of life is not scientific; the strongest basis of life is sentimental. People are not economically obliged to live. Anybody can die for nothing. People romantically desire to live—especially at Christmas. And, when all is said and done, the great case against those great men, Shaw and Tolstoy, is that when men desire most to live they desire least to read them.

1 See December 12, 1908, footnote 1.

2 Henry M. Bernard's *The Scientific Basis of Socialism: Two Essays in Evolution* was published

in 1908.

3 Charles Peace (1832-1879), an English criminal and murderer.

4 Snapdragon is a game in which the players snatch raisins or chestnuts, etc., from burning brandy and quickly eat them