

Ruth Silcock

Christmas Shopping

Christmas. Two sisters shop together.
They always do. They always have.
They always meet at ten, and wave
And smile and rush and kiss and hug.
Both make complaints against the weather,
While each feels warm and safe and snug.

Then side by side, through crowds and snow,
Heads down, bags clutched, they push and shove.
Angels swing in the air above,
Stars clank on lamp-posts, banners beat
High over Selfridge's. Below
The sisters quarter Oxford Street.

From shop to shop, from store to store,
They pass through fashions, linen, toys,
Bedding, hats, carpets, men's wear, boys'—
Blazers, pyjamas, socks and ties.
The elder sister likes this floor.
The younger sister stops and sighs.

The younger sister's list is long,
For parents, husband, colleagues, friends.
She ticks and thinks and counts and spends
And asks Louise to hurry up.
Louise, the elder, stands among
Boys' sports, holding a football cup.

It always happens, every year,
When twelve has struck yet nothing's done,
When Jane (the younger) wants to run
Past counters, pluck up presents, pack
Her shopping-bag with Christmas cheer—
That Louise dawdles, drags, hangs back

To finger racks of flannel-suits,
To test a cricket-bat, to try
How school-caps look, to knot a tie,
To study badges, price a box
Of braces, measure football-boots
And touch the woollen football socks.

So, every year, they compromise.
Jane leads the way and clears her lists.
Then they eat lunch, while Jane insists
That now Louise's turn has come.
They swallow coffee and mince pies,
Then head for boys' wear, tea and home.

Loaded with packets, parcels, rolls
Of wrapping-paper for each gift,
They reach the lobby, take the lift
Down to the second floor, the racks
Of flannel suits. Louise patrols
Past jeans and shorts and anoraks:

She is a guard on sentry-go,
A scout, a fag, a midshipman:
Alert, a look-out quick to scan
Wide oceans; pilot, athlete, cox;
Wing, half-back, full-back, forward—so
Warm in striped white and scarlet socks.

Jane reads the paper, files her nails,
Does her accounts, takes off her shoes,
Remembers trains, pretends to choose
Shirts for a nephew, gazes out
At Oxford Street where sleety gales
Whirl stars and angels round about.

Louise cannot make up her mind.
She never has. She never will.
She hesitates forever. Chill
Mirrors of ageing women show
She is too late. But Jane is kind.
"Tea-time", she says, "before we go."

They always separate at five,
But first they have their Christmas tea.
With buttered fingers, they agree
How nice it's been. It always is.
Nothing must change. While they're alive
Each keeps the other safe by this.

LETTERS

“Anthrax Bomb”

JULIAN LEWIS' article “Churchill and the ‘Anthrax Bomb’” [ENCOUNTER, February 1982] was well done. I was not surprised that it was not taken seriously by the British General Staff or Churchill. Even today with after 40 years of research worldwide, it is no more attractive.

I wish to point out that *Brucella* never was considered as a possible BW [Bacteriological Warfare] agent. The organism is subject to change when grown in large batches. I produced with *Brucella antigen* for three years, and hardly a fortnight passed that a rough phase (non-pathogenic) would appear.

Enclosed is a list of Zoonoses all of which had been looked at as possible BW agents. None are acceptable. Likewise, I know of no human disease agents, except possibly Myco-tuberculosis, that would be considered in BW. If one considers BW impact on animal industries, then there are many possibilities. In the past 30 years, I have visited laboratories in Europe, USSR, and Asia where related research has been going on. I have never had much enthusiasm for BW.

Let's keep the record clean.

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Ronald Knox's “RC” Disc

A. N. WILSON (ENCOUNTER, February, p. 68) quotes the late Ronald Knox as saying in a sermon: “When we get to heaven, St Peter will not ask us whether we have been good or bad; merely whether we have RC stamped on our identity disc.”

It is true that Knox said in an address to Catholic undergraduates (*The Hidden Stream*, 1952, p. 132; reprinted in *University and Anglican Sermons*, 1963, p. 242): “All the identity discs in heaven are surcharged RC.” But he certainly did not mean either (1) that a Catholic who died in his sins would go to heaven, or (2) that no non-Catholic, however virtuous, would do so.

The first of these propositions could hardly be held by any orthodox Christian (what about Judas?), and certainly not by an old-fashioned Catholic. As to the second, in the same address—it is entitled “Salvation outside the Church”—Knox explained his meaning that the Catholic church was the *appointed* channel of salvation but that those outside might, if in good faith, be saved as what he called “Catholics without knowing it.” He wrote similarly in chapter XVIII of *The Belief of Catholics* (1927) and chapters XXVIII and XXX of *Difficulties* (1932, 2nd ed., 1952), an exchange of arguments about Catholicism between himself and Arnold Lunn. In the latter chapter occurs the sentence:

“We can only suppose that God judges with infinite tenderness the opportunities, the temptations, the natural disadvantages, the motives, the struggles, of every soul that has ever lived.”

I suggest that the record should be put straight for the sake of Knox's memory and of what Mr Wilson calls the “stern old religion” of fifty years ago.

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Adorno in New York

IN HIS review of Elizabeth Young-Buehl's book Mr Maurice Cranston states (ENCOUNTER, December 1982, p. 59) that in the 1970s Hannah Arendt “joined the faculty of the New School of Social Research in New York, ironically an offshoot of the Frankfurt Institute brought to America by her old enemy, T. W. Adorno.” This statement contains several mistakes.

The New School for Social Research was founded by Alvin Johnson and opened its door to students in the spring of 1919 when Adorno was 16 years old. Hannah Arendt did not join the faculty of the New School, an institution for adult education, but the Graduate Faculty of the New School. It was founded by Alvin Johnson as the so-called “University-in-Exile” in 1933 before the Frankfurt Institute was given a haven by Columbia University. Adorno moved from London to New York in February 1938 upon the invitation of Max Horkheimer, the director of the Frankfurt Institute.

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Educational Follies

ESMOND WRIGHT's timely reminder (“Our Schools: A Tragic Split,” ENCOUNTER, January) of the excesses being practised in some American public school systems—and his lament for the collapse of standards here and the virtual destruction of the British grammar schools—will have interested anyone who is concerned about the state of our schools.

Certainly we can ill afford to ape on this side of the Atlantic the excessive concern for pupils' rights that he mentions. Too much damage has been done here already by trendy doctrinaires, who have exhibited a hysterical concern for so-called egalitarianism, combined with an insidious worship of anti-intellectualism, that has dragged down standards and driven many thoughtful and often better qualified pedagogues from the classrooms in despair. At the same time excessive libertarian zeal has undermined discipline; while the romantic notion that every pupil is happier and more successful doing as he or she pleases has almost put an end to traditional structured, purposeful learning.