

Better Late Than Never

I MEET FATHER CHRISTMAS

stop believing in Father Christmas till he was old enough to see the meaning behind the Father Christmas symbol. In that case there's something to take the place of the thing lost. That's why it seems to me such a bad thing for a child to lose his belief when he's too young to see the essential reality. In that case there undoubtedly is a sense of disillusionment."

The Sceptics Don't Increase

"Do you find that now there are fewer children who believe in Father Christmas than there were when you first started, fourteen years ago?"

"As far as I can judge there's been little increase of scepticism in children since I've taken on the job of Father Christmas. At all events I don't get many unbelievers coming to consult me. There was a little snook of a five-year-old in the other day, though. I could see him peering at me hard, trying to get a rise out of me. Or perhaps he was just trying to see where the whiskers were glued on."

"I should have thought that a number of the more sophisticated children who were anxious not to disillusion their parents, would have come in to tell you (in their parents' hearing) just what they wanted. Don't you get many like that?"

"Very few. The children who come to me either believe in Santa Claus and feel confident that I actually come down the chimney to bring them what they ask for, or they are dubious but think there may be something in the yarn after all, and that it's best to be on the safe side. Like the old woman who used to curtsy every time the Devil's name was mentioned"

"A Bit Awkward Sometimes"

"Do the children often ask for impossible things like launches or motor cars?"

"Not often. They seem to have the idea that Santa Claus can't do much better than their parents can at birthdays. It's a bit awkward sometimes, of course. When I see a child coming in with his parents I try to sum up the family circumstances. If the parents seem only moderately well off I explain to the kiddy that I'm afraid I can't give him a tricycle as I've already given away all the ones I had. In the same way if he asks for a pony and I find he lives in the centre of town, I explain that I won't be able to find a pony small enough for his back-yard."

"You must have had some awkward moments this year with both import restrictions and a war on?"

"Yes, bicycles are the chief trouble. I found myself going into long explanations about the Government needing

them. But there were still one or two dissatisfied children. 'You promised me one last year, Father Christmas, and I still haven't got it. Don't you think you'd better get a leg on?' or 'You told me last Christmas that if I was a good girl all this year you might rake one up this time. What's happened to it?' And there's a shortage of things like Meccano, too. I've been consulted by a number of boys who've tried every shop in town and then come to try Father Christmas as a last resort. Rather a pity I couldn't work a miracle and produce them a set each. I might have won a lot back into the believers' fold."

Boys And Girls The Same

"Have you noticed any particular trend in the demand for toys?"

"Since the war naturally a lot more children have been asking me for toy battleships and tanks and guns than before the war. Aeroplanes, of course, have always been popular. But one thing that surprised me when I first started playing Father Christmas was that there is comparatively little difference between what boys want and what girls want. Up to five or six they both want the same things. After that the demand for dolls and their requirements is more or less female. But little girls from five to ten are just as interested in mechanical toys and model aeroplanes as boys are. And there's a universal and very insistent demand from all ages and sexes for tricycles, bicycles, and kiddy cars. Far too insistent for the peace of mind of either Father Christmas or the parents."

"I'll Take The Lot"

"What is the correct approach to Father Christmas? With a demand or a request?"

"It's usually a request. To the true believer Father Christmas is in the nature of a supernatural being. Familiarity may lead you to approach him as a friend, but you certainly wouldn't trifle with him. In any case you have too much to lose. And at first meeting he's apt to be rather terrifying with all those whiskers. It's often rather difficult to get a small child to come near at all, and often the small child is too shy to talk. In that case it's up to Father Christmas to suggest some of the things she might like, and he'll probably be rewarded with a vigorous nod before she retreats again into Mother's skirt. But I remember one young lady of four who was so taken aback by my appearance that she was temporarily robbed of expression. I pointed to various things round me—a doll, a teddy, a balloon, a box of bricks—and at last she was sufficiently recovered to gasp 'Thanks, Father Christmas, I'll take the lot.' I was thankful for her parents' sake that I hadn't surrounded myself with bicycles and dolls' prams."

—M.B.



"YOU see I was young myself once—" said Father Christmas.

Since it is difficult to imagine Father Christmas as anything but venerable and bewhiskered I had better explain that I was speaking merely to one of Father Christmas's stand-ins, an acquaintance of mine who for the last fourteen Christmases has played Father Christmas at one of the big city stores.

"—and I remember all the fun I used to get out of having my stocking filled every year with the right things, thanks to Father Christmas. So now I'm doing my bit to keep children believing in him."

"Then you think children should believe in Father Christmas?"

"Yes, at any rate till they're nine or ten. The obvious reason of course is that if they stopped believing in Father Christmas I'd lose my job. But that wouldn't worry me now. I've retired. However, every year they come to me and ask me to take the job on just for this year, and every year I tell myself that it's for the last time. But I shall probably be playing Santa Claus again next year. I get a lot of fun out of it. But I think it's a shame for the children if their parents don't encourage them to believe in Father Christmas. I brought up all my children to do so."

"If they had asked you whether Father Christmas was true what would you have said?"

"I'd have tried to avoid giving them a direct answer."

"You don't think then that finding out for themselves later on would destroy the children's faith in you?"

"It never seemed to in the case of my own children. I think the important thing for the parent is to see that when the child loses his belief in anything like fairies or Father Christmas there is some other belief to take its place. I wouldn't encourage a child to



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