
XII—A Christmas Examination

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WITH every revolving year—and the poets and the physicists agree that they do revolve—I am struck with the strange inconsistency of the words “Christmas Examination.” Here on the one hand is Christmas, good, glad, old season with its holly berries and its lighted candles and its little children dancing in a world of magic round a glittering tree; Christmas with its fabled Santa Claus defying our modern civilization by squeezing his way down the galvanized iron pipe of a gas grate; Christmas with the sleigh-bells all a-jingle, with bright snow in the streets, with the church-bells ringing on a week day and such a crisp gladness in the air that even the angular faces of university professors are softened out into something approaching human kindness.

Here, I say, on the one hand is Christmas.

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And here on the other hand are Examinations with their sleepless nights and their fevered days, with crazy questions and crooked answers, set with the calculating cruelty of the inquisitor, answered with the patient resignation of the martyr, or with the fanatical frenzy of the devotee who has swallowed his instructor's text book and gone crazy over it ; Examinations with their hideous percentages, their insulting distinctions of rank, and paid for, in cold fees, with money enough to spread a Christmas banquet for the whole university.

Here is Christmas and here are the Examinations. And the two won't go together.

We can't alter Christmas. We've had it nearly two thousand years now. In a changing world its lights glimmer through the falling snow as a quiet beacon on things that alter not. It stands there fixed as a very saturnalia of good deeds, a reckless outbreak of licensed benevolence, with its loosened pocket books and smiling faces, just to show us on one day of the year what we might be on the other three hundred and sixty-four—stands a moment and then passes, leaving

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us to button about us again our little suit of protective selfishness with nothing but a memory to keep us warm inside.

Christmas we cannot alter. But the Examinations, we can. Why not? Why will not some theorist in education tell us how we can infuse into the Christmas examinations something of the spirit of the season that gives them birth? Can we not break down something of these rigid regulations that every candidate reads shuddering in the printed instructions on his examination book? Can we not so estimate our percentages and frame our questions? . . .

And when I had written thus far the whole idea of the thing broke upon me with the floodlight of discovery. Of course, nothing simpler; I reached out my hand and drew to me the hideous code of the examination regulations. I read it over with a shudder. Is it possible that for fifty years this university has tolerated such a flat violation of every rule of Christmas behaviour? I saw at once how, not only the regulations, but the very examination papers themselves ought to be so altered that the old

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malicious spirit might be driven right out of them and Christmas come to its own again even in an examination hall.

Here is the way it is done :—

REGULATIONS FOR CHRISTMAS EXAMINATIONS

1. Candidates are permitted, nay they are encouraged, to enter the examination hall half an hour after the examination has begun, and to leave it, re-enter it, walk across it, jump across it, roll round in it, lie down in it, tear their clothes, mutilate their books and, generally, to make themselves thoroughly and completely at home at the expense of the University.

2. Candidates are not only permitted to ask questions of the presiding examiner, but they may, if they like, talk to him, sing to him, hum grand opera to him in whole or in part, use his fountain pen, borrow his money, and, if need be, for the sake of order, request him to leave the hall. But remember that the presiding examiner is like yourself—a very human being and, if you had the advantage of knowing him outside the classroom, you would find him at this

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time of year one of the jolliest creatures conceivable.

If you could see him, presiding over the little candidates around the Christmas tree in his own house you would almost forgive him that silly dignity which he assumes to cover his natural humanity.

3. Speaking or communicating with every other candidate, male or female, is of course the privilege of every student and the use of the megaphone and gramophone shall in no way be curtailed or abridged.

4. Students may either make use of the books, papers and memoranda provided by the examiner, or may bring in their own memorandums, vademecums and conundrums, together with such dictographs, gramophones, linotypes, stethoscopes, or any other aids to memory that they may see fit to use.

5. The plea of accident or forgetfulness will, of course, be immediately received in the same spirit as given.

6. Five per cent will be accepted as a satisfactory standard, but all students failing to

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obtain it may be, and most certainly will be, specially exempted from further effort by a vote of the Board of Governors.

So much for the regulations. But, of course, still more can be accomplished if the examiners will only frame their questions to suit the gentle kindness of the season. I should not wish to show in any great detail how this is to be accomplished. That would be trespassing on the work of departments other than our own. But I may be allowed to point the pathway of reform, by proposing a few specimen questions in representative subjects.

CHRISTMAS EXAMINATION IN CLASSICS

1. Who was Themistocles? (Note in italics): If you can't think it out for yourself, he was a great Roman general, or Greek, or something. The examiner doesn't know much about it himself, but Lord bless you, at this time of year he doesn't care any more than you do.

2. Translate the accompanying passages, or don't bother to, just as you happen to feel about it. After all you must remember that ability to

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translate a lot of Latin verses is a poor test of what you really are worth.

3. Pick out all the verbs in the above and parse them, or, if you don't feel like picking them out, leave them sticking where they are. Remember that they've been there for two thousand years already.

There! That's the way the Christmas examination in Classics is to be conducted. And in the same fashion one might try to soften down the mathematical examination into something like this:—

EXAMINATION IN MATHEMATICS

1. Solve the following equations—but if you can't solve them, my dear boy, don't worry about it. Take them home to father as a Christmas present and tell him to solve them. It's his business anyway, not yours. He pays the fees and if he can't solve the equations, why your family must stand the loss of them. And, anyway, people ought not to mind the loss of a few equations at Christmas time.

There! That's enough for the Mathematical

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examination. And as for the rest, you can easily see how they ought to be framed.

But just wait a minute before we come to the end. There would remain one examination, just one, that I think every student ought to pass at this season, though he may forget it if he will, as all the kind things of Christmas are forgotten all too soon. I should call it, for want of another name, an Examination in Christmas Kindliness, and I warn you that nothing but a hundred per cent in it can be accepted for a pass. So here it is.

EXAMINATION IN CHRISTMAS KINDLINES

1. Is the University such a bad place after all?
2. Don't you think that perhaps after all the professors and the faculty and the examiners and all the rest of the crabbed machinery of your daily toil is something striving for your good? Dip deep your pen in your Christmas ink, my boy, and overstate the truth for your soul's good.
3. Are you not going some day, when your college years are long since past, and when the

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poor fretful thing that is called practical life has caught you in its toils, and carries you onwards towards your last Christmas—are you not going to look back at them through the soft haze of recollection, as to the memory of a shaded caravansary in a long and weary pilgrimage?