

## GIFTS AT CHRISTMAS-TIDE

By Elisabeth Robinson Scovil

**T**HE observance of Christmas by means of gifts becomes more widespread every year. To many a house-mother it means days of anxious thought and hours of careful planning and contriving to satisfy the ever-increasing demands of the children and the expectations of the band of relatives, friends and servants whom she wishes to remember. It is becoming a grave question whether the burden is not growing so heavy that some means must be devised to lighten it to prevent its being thrown off altogether. It would indeed be a pity if this graceful and beautiful custom were to vanish, crushed out of existence by its own superabundant weight. To all generous souls the delight of giving far exceeds the pleasure of receiving. To be able to express in some visible and tangible form the love they feel gives them a deep satisfaction which no material gain to themselves can equal. The desire to give of ourselves, our time, our substance to others in loving service is an instinct firmly implanted in human nature, a spark of the divine that shows our kinship with the stars. A thick crust of selfishness must form before this is entirely smothered. Even in souls utterly given over to the worship of self it exists in a perverted form. It is not wholly self-interest that makes them wish to reward others for favors done or service rendered. When any one places us under an obligation our first impulse is to do something in return. Words seem too feeble to express all that we feel, something more substantial is required to show our appreciation of the kindness that has benefited us. If the opportunity is denied there is an unsatisfied feeling as if something were wanting to complete the full measure of our gratitude.

It is, perhaps, partly this feeling which has tended to carry our Christmas giving beyond due bounds. That it has exceeded, and is exceeding, its just proportions no one will deny who has given the subject any serious thought. Many resent the exaction who have not the courage to withstand it. With our national proneness to run into extremes we are converting what was a simple, natural expression of affection into an oppressive tax, unwelcome alike to giver and receiver. Persons with small means and many friends dread the return of this happy season because it brings with it an outlay that they cannot afford and yet believe they cannot avoid. It requires a great deal of moral firmness to refuse to do as one's neighbors do at the risk of being thought close and mean. The truth is our neighbors stand in the same fear of us that we do of them, and if we have the courage to assert our convictions of what is just and right, and act up to them, they will be only too glad to follow our good example, relieved to find that after all we think as they do. When we cannot give presents without trenching on the money we should devote to other purposes it is time that we put a stop to them. It is not long since the exchange of gifts was confined to the immediate family and very near friends, now every year the circle widens. Acquaintances send one another costly trifles which too often only provoke the inquiry whether each has received full value in return. What should be, and is supposed to be, a token of love is with too many degraded into a mere matter of barter, so much for so much, and each a little indignant if the best of the bargain has not fallen to her share.

**T**HE reform must begin with women. We are the greatest sinners in this respect because, as a general rule, it is we who regulate the expenditure of the family income. The scale of living in the household is usually adjusted in accordance with our idea of what is proper and befitting our position. Men sometimes have a spasm of extravagance and buy a handsome present which we consider far more expensive than was necessary or desirable, but it is always done to please and gratify some special friend. They do not waste money as we do in numberless little gifts, each small in itself yet the total cost reaching a sum that is by no means insignificant.

Must we then deny ourselves the pleasure of remembering those dear to us and refrain from any substantial expression of our regard for them lest we should run into excess? Not at all. We have to steer between selfishness and extravagance. The wise woman decides in her own mind how much she can afford to spend, and on whom she will bestow her gifts, and then resolutely refuses to be tempted beyond the limit she has assigned herself.

It is astonishing to those who never have tried the experiment how much can be accomplished with small means plus care and thought and patient labor.

Lowell, with the insight of the poet who sees clearly the spiritual law in the natural world, has told us,

"The gift without the giver is bare."

In our offerings to our friends we should try to put into them something of ourselves. If they are our own productions, the creation of our brains or our fingers, so much the better. We are not all skillful enough to be able to give of our handiwork, or clever enough to lay claim to having originated the tribute we bring. We can all add immeasurably to the value of our gifts by choosing them with special reference to the tastes and wishes and needs of the recipients. A shoe-bag that is positively required to fill a space on a closet door, and hold the shoes that have a habit of being lost when they are wanted in a hurry, will give more real comfort and satisfaction to a busy woman than a bracelet which she would only have an opportunity to wear at long intervals.

**S**OMETIMES a dainty trifle that the house-mother would not have time to make for herself, and yet which she longs to have to aid in the adornment of her home, will be more acceptable than a present of greater intrinsic value for her own personal use. Bits of delicate embroidery, a table centre, a set of doilies, a tea-cloth, or a pretty toilet set will give a young housekeeper as much pleasure as if her friend had expended many times their cost in the effort to gratify her without meeting her wants.

Evidences of loving care for ourselves always touch our hearts. To know that we have been specially thought of and planned for sends a warm glow of gratitude and responsive affection through us that nothing else can call forth. With what tenderness we regard the gifts of the children when first they begin to manifest their love for us by independent offerings. They may be almost ludicrously inappropriate—if they are the work of the little hands they are sure to be full of imperfections—but such as they are we would not exchange them for the most finished productions of skilled workmen.

**G**OOD taste and thoughtfulness and money together can almost work miracles when they are brought to bear in this matter of presents. When a woman has generosity, common sense and the means to carry out her plans, she can bring happiness into many less fortunate lives without causing any embarrassment or painful sense of obligation. There are numberless women with artistic tastes and a love for the beautiful, with a keen appetite for literature and art whose limited incomes forbid their gratification. The new book, the picture or the cast, is as unattainable to them as if they had been removed to another planet. It is at Christmas that those who are blessed with this world's goods can supply some of these wants and help to fill a vacuum of whose extent they little dream. A subscription to a favorite periodical will bring a recurring pleasure for a whole year to a quiet country home or a lonely life where events are few. There are persons far removed from the very poor whom we pity, and whose material wants we try to supply, who are fully as deserving of sympathy and help as they. The struggle for mere subsistence is so intense it swallows up all that they can bring to it, there is no margin left for luxuries, and yet to some minds these are necessities almost equally with daily bread.

**M**ANY of us thoughtlessly spend money on gifts to those who have already such an abundance that they hardly know where to bestow our remembrances, and have to displace others to make room for them. Before doing that this Christmas let us ask ourselves seriously whether there is not a better way. Why not send a few words of affectionate greeting to those whom we desire to remember, and who already have enough and to spare of substantial possessions? They may be accompanied by a few flowers, or a spray of holly and mistletoe as an emblem of the season. Then the money which we would have expended in adding to their store of superfluities let us devote to bringing sunshine into shaded places. Twenty-five dollars sent to a woman who never has a penny to spare for indulgences for the children or herself, will bring such a flood of happiness into her narrow life, will give her scope for such joyous planning, as only those can know who have experienced it.

**I**N the thoughts of every mother gifts for the children are uppermost at this time of giving, which is especially the children's own. As soon as they are old enough to understand the difference between mine and thine they should be taught practically the joy and blessedness of giving. When the tiny fingers begin to fashion little articles of ornament or use, as they do so early in the kindergarten, or under careful home training, they have the material for gifts of their own making. The pride and delight which a child takes in being able to say, "I made this myself," makes one feel that they are deprived of a legitimate source of pleasure, a part of their birthright, if they are denied the opportunity. All children have generous impulses, some, of course, in a far larger measure than others, but in all they should be cultivated and stimulated, never repressed. The mother has room for the exercise of much wisdom in choosing the presents to be made to them. Far too much money is wasted every Christmas in purchasing toys which are played with for a few hours or days, then broken and cast aside. If this expenditure were indulged in solely by persons who could well afford to be extravagant it would be had enough, but they are not the only thoughtless ones. Those with small means, who have to refrain from buying many things they would like to possess, will throw money away on some fragile plaything that they know will not long endure the rough treatment it is sure to receive. We must remember that children do not see things from our standpoint. A beautifully-finished toy appeals to us by its ingenious construction or its excellent workmanship. These fine points are lost on the child of three or four to whom it is given. His untrained eye does not perceive nor comprehend the details which have charmed us. To him it is only something to be played with after his own fashion, and when careless usage speedily reduces it to a wreck he contemptuously tosses it away or grieves over its altered condition, according to his disposition.

**E**ITHER very strong or very inexpensive toys are the most suitable for little children. As they grow older and can be taught to care for them they may be entrusted with more delicate and costly ones.

We all know playthings that have been handed down from one generation to another and still delight the grandchildren of their original possessors. I have in mind a white china lamb that belonged to one who was a little child nearly a hundred years ago. She did not stay in this world long enough to outgrow her childish treasure. It was given to another sister of the same name who succeeded her, and when she, too, passed away, to a third, whose daughter still has it as one of her most valued possessions. Time has incrustated it with associations and made what was an insignificant trifle a relic of inestimable worth to those who understand them. A substantial doll's house will give untold pleasure to a family of girls, who will extract from it some of the bliss of real housekeeping, and learn much that is useful in managing it. Some children are naturally careful and it requires little effort to make them take care of their belongings. Others seem incorrigibly careless and wasteful; they show the spendthrift disposition even in early childhood. These need judicious training and it will in time bear fruit, although to the discouraged mother the task often seems hopeless.

**T**HE soul of gifts is love; they are only tokens of something else, the inward feeling of which they are the outward expression. If no affection goes with them they are a mockery far better withheld. It is the thought of the great love which on Christmas Day brought to the world the gift of a Redeemer that gives meaning to our presenting them at this time. If we kept this before us it would make us hesitate to offer frivolous mementoes of a passing fancy having no root in our hearts.

If there is a joy in giving there is also, in a lesser degree, a pleasure in receiving. It is this pleasure the recipient is very apt not to express, or at least not to express in full measure, and so defraud the giver of a part of his rightful gratification.

Expression is, in a large degree, a matter of disposition. Frank, outspoken persons without shyness or self-consciousness, say naturally what is uppermost in their minds. They may not feel more gratitude than others who cannot put their feelings into words but certainly they are far more satisfactory recipients of gifts. When one has spent time and thought in preparing what one hopes will be a pleasant surprise to one's friend, to have it received with a tepid "thank you," no surprise manifested, no pleasure shown, is apt to make one feel a sense of blank discouragement that prevents the effort from being repeated.

On Christmas morning there should be no lack of loving words of appreciation, of smiles of gratitude and warm, hearty thanks for the love that has so bountifully remembered us.

EDITOR'S NOTE—Miss Scovil's former column of "Mothers' Corner," which is now treated under the title of "Suggestions for Mothers," will be found on page 36 of this issue of the JOURNAL.