

## THE LADIES' HOME JOURNAL

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## AT HOME WITH THE EDITOR



WITH our lengthening seasons Christmas is at our doors almost before we are aware of it. There was a time when Nature seemed to lead up to it more than she does now. Hot weather stopped when August ended. The

last of September brought us the first frost; October days were radiant with winter promise; Thanksgiving Day gave us lakes and ponds frozen over for skating, and by the time Christmas came the earth was wrapped in her most gorgeous mantle of snow and ice. Now, we dread the regulation "warm wave" of September more than the torrid "dog-days" of August; October is what September used to be; skating at Thanksgiving is almost unheard of, and to see snow on the ground at Christmas betokens an unusually early winter. Christmas now comes at a bound. We are scarcely through with the summer before we realize that it is Thanksgiving, and that we are only four weeks from Christmas-tide and the opening of a new year.

PERHAPS it is that Nature is in part responsible for the changed observance of Christmas. For it is an unfortunate fact that Christmas does not mean in these days what it did forty or fifty years ago. The day remains the same. Its significance is as tender and beautiful as ever; its lessons are as love-freighted as when they were given to the world on that first Christmas Day in the stable at Bethlehem. It is not the day that has changed. Christmas has ever been the same and always will be. It is we who have become other than were our parents and grandparents before us. The old has been pushed out of the way for the new. The cheerful yule-log has given way to the cheerless steam radiator; the candles have been snuffed out by the incandescent lights. "Kris Kringle" has become "Santa Claus." The simple token given in loving remembrance of the lessons of the day has become the elaborate present without a meaning. Pessimistic, some one will say. No, my friend, not at all. I was born in the latter half of this century, and I belong to it heart and soul. But, then, I need not necessarily approve of everything that this latter half of the century has done and is doing. And, for one thing, I do not think that the present tendency in Christmas observance and gift-making is going to insure us a happier Christmas Day in the future. Too many of us are losing the true spirit of Christmas.

YOU know, and I know, that to thousands of us Christmas has become a season of the year the coming of which we actually dread. Years ago our forefathers looked forward to it with delight. They thought of it months before. We do, too, only in a different spirit. Our main idea of the coming of Christmas nowadays seems to be what it is going to cost us. Christmas-giving, once regulated by the heart, is in great danger of being very soon almost entirely regulated by the means—if it has not already reached that deplorable state. We have made an actual business of Christmas-giving. Formerly it was considered a pleasure to give; now we sit down and think out our presents as a matter of duty. We have to give; we consider it an obligation to give so-and-so a certain present at Christmas. Not that we want to do so; we simply feel that we must. "She will give me something, and, of course, I must give her something," is the way we coldly calculate the matter. And then when we receive the present the first thought, in nine cases out of ten, is whether we have received as much as we gave. If we have not we feel provoked at our own generosity, and coolly make a mental conclusion that next year we will give less.

NOW, this is, in hard, cold words, just about what Christmas-giving has come to and means nowadays. Holiday presents have become each year more and more expensive while the actual giving is getting less and less hearty. We bewail the worry of planning gifts, and get ourselves irritable and sick in the necessary shopping and purchasing. And hundreds, yes thousands of us, give a sigh of relief when Christmas has passed, and are ready to confess that we are "so glad it is all over for another year." And why? Simply because of one thing: we are actuated by the wrong feeling. The whole system of our living is becoming one grand mass of foolish ostentation, and our present mode of Christmas-giving is the outgrowth of it. We feel that we cannot afford to give a simple present; we must give something expensive, something that will make an appearance and show. This is felt by the recipient, and next year, to hold her own, she feels that she must return something equally costly. The following year this must again be outdone, and so it goes, each year adding to the expense, and less to the true spirit of the giving. We all try to outdo each other, and we are proud when we are told afterward that our present was the most beautiful of all that were received. Now, as a matter of fact, the most expensive things we can buy are generally the most useless, particularly when we go into the realm of ornamentation. Surely these are not the times to lock up hundreds and thousands of dollars in ornaments as useless as oftentimes they are ugly. Of the useful we can scarce have too much; of the useless a little goeth a very long way. Presents with a purpose are presents indeed, but how few we see nowadays. With a great host of people it does not seem to matter so much whether a present is appropriate, or whether it will prove acceptable to the recipient, so long as it is costly and "makes a show." We too often lay others under obligations which it is impossible for them to meet without embarrassment.

THERE are perhaps no two surer indications of our breeding than the way in which we dress and the manner in which we show our regard for our friends. In both we show at once what we really are. Everything we wear, and the way in which we wear it, is an indication of our inner characters, and the same is true of our present-giving. Just as the simplest gowns are worn by the women of the gentlest birth and the best manners so the simplest presents bespeak our best friends. The value of a present should never lie in its quality, and it never does with the nicest people. A showy present betokens the showy person, just as the showy gown bespeaks the woman devoid of taste or character. The only way in which some people can show that they have more money than we have is in the way they dress themselves, and the presents they bestow upon those whose acquaintance they desire to cultivate. The true woman, the woman whose friendship will wear well and prove a perpetual pleasure, never measures her regard by the presents she bestows. She gives from her heart and not from her purse. The best present is that which enters into a life with the truest wisdom and the greatest pleasure, no matter what its value may be. Good taste and judgment are looked for in a present far more by the right kind of people than is its actual cost. I think that if we have one great lesson to learn in this country it is contained in the truth that good taste can overcome the simplest expense, and that the largest expenditure cannot hide bad taste. A present selected with taste is a pleasure; one selected only for its monetary value is often an embarrassment. The truth is often forced upon us nowadays that it would be far better if some people never gave presents. Ostentation is never so much out of place as when applied to a holiday gift.

I WRITE of this growing evil—because it is nothing more nor less—of giving Christmas presents in the manner I have indicated, because I know what a strain this Christmas-giving has become upon hundreds of incomes. Nor is it the few who are guilty; all of us, to a greater or less extent, have added to the present tendency. Each one of us, at holiday-time, gives presents purely from an obligatory sense, from the spirit that we owe somebody something. We have made Christmas altogether too much of a time for discharging personal obligations, instead of a festival of the heart pure and simple. The birth of Christ was never intended as an occasion other than of love and heart-offering. I have said before on this page, and I repeat it, that, as a people, I think we are in great danger of running this matter of Christmas-giving into the ground. We are overdoing it now, and it is high time to stop. The notion that presents must be costly in order to be appreciated is taking hold of too many of us. And if, in the opening paragraphs of these comments, I gave a sigh for the Christmas of bygone days, it was because I realized that such a precaution would have been unnecessary then. Now it is necessary, and highly so, too. What was once a beautiful custom is being placed on a commercial basis. We expect so much, and we feel we should give so much in return. This is wrong; it would be wrong in any country on the globe, but it is particularly inappropriate to our nation.

THE great family life of America does not represent opulence. If it stands for anything it stands for comfort, but not for plenty. We can all afford to recognize the Christ-like spirit of Christmas, which teaches us to remember by some loving token those nearest and dearest to us. But only the few can afford to follow the present method of extravagant and senseless giving. Generosity is a synonym the world over for the American; but true generosity is of the heart and of the heart alone. If one has been more fortunate than the other in the acquirement of means, and the will is present, then, I say, by all means give largely and widely. But let such giving be measured only by true feeling and that spirit manifested as it can be, so that others, less fortunate of means, shall not feel that they are obliged to do what really they cannot afford to do. It will not harm us if, in this respect, we go back a little to the times that are past. No one then heard all this talk about the duty of giving at holiday-time. People gave because it was a pleasure to give; they liked to give, and they gave what they could. A Christmas present then meant more than it does now, in that its only association was the day and the spirit of the giver. Times were simpler, it is true, and wants were fewer. But if we have progressed, and presents are possible to-day which were out of the reach of our forefathers, the spirit can at least remain the same. We need not depart from principles as we grow. We should adhere the closer to them if anything.

THE most difficult foreign criticism of our people to meet is the one so often laid at our doors: the American love of display. I say it is difficult to meet because it is, unfortunately, all too true. Ardent advocates of our institutions meet the criticism by the statement that as a nation we are young, and what is true of us has been true of all countries in their earlier development. This may be so, but I think it is time we were getting over it. As it is, the love of display which governs so many of our people indicates itself upon almost every occasion. We are showy in our homes, in the very manner in which we build, and then furnish. We are showy in our entertainments; we are showy at our weddings; we are showy even at our funerals. In only one thing are we rapidly overcoming our love of display: in our manner of dress, and certainly the reform is a welcome one. In this, vulgarity of display has been relegated to a certain class. But in other things we have yet to overcome the love of show. And if we were to begin the work of modification with our present-making we would do well—present-giving at weddings just as well as at Christmas. As things are now, gift-making is approaching the impossible with those of moderate incomes, and the problem becomes serious even to one of comfortable means, where a large circle of friends has to be remembered. The drain is a heavy one, and it is made with the poorest possible grace. All this is not only morally wrong, but it is un-American. Lavish display can very well be reserved for monarchies, but the citizens of a republic should be free from it. If the democracy of a republic means anything it means simplicity. Too many of us shout ourselves hoarse at being Americans without the slightest knowledge of what the word means. The charge that as a nation we are common and vulgar arises from no other element in our lives so much as it does from this love of display. To be showy is always the mark of vulgarity; it is never born of nor associated with good breeding.

SOME of us like to complain of this world, and the spot we are destined to occupy in it. Things are not just as we want them, nor as we feel they should be for us. But we overlook the fact that the particular spot in this world which we are given to occupy is, and will be precisely as we choose to make it. Whether we do right or wrong, whether we are happy or otherwise, depends very largely, if not entirely, on ourselves. Each of us makes his or her own surroundings. We have all experienced the feeling of brightness which a sunshiny woman brings with her wherever she goes. She may have just as many worries to bear, just as many heart-breaks to endure, just as many anxieties to carry, but she overcomes them largely by a bright and sunny disposition. At all events, she does not show them and make others unhappy. In nine cases out of ten our mood will be reflected in some one else. Few people, however burdened, can resist a hearty laugh, a joyous smile that lights up a face and seems to make a soul radiant. A laughing face is one of the most contagious things in life, and spreads its germs far and wide. We are not all capable of laughing in the face of trouble or adversity. But we can, at least, make an attempt, and even if the laugh lacks the ring of heartiness it is infinitely better than the frown or sigh. Any kind of a laugh or smile is better than a sorrowful look or an anxious face. People flee from a person who always looks sad.

I SPEAK thus of the possibilities that can be found in laughter and in as sunny a disposition as we can create, because I am so anxious that this Christmas shall be a happy one with each one of my readers. The holidays to many are often the saddest days of the year; the absent seem to be so much more absent then. It is not easy sometimes to feel joyful; the sigh seems so much more ready than the smile. Adversity seems so cruel, affliction so keen, ingratitude so brutal. But still we owe it as a duty to ourselves and to others to be joyful even amid sorrow or hardships. The future that lies before us depends much upon what we make of the present. A heart is made far stronger by the look of encouragement, the stimulant of a hopeful love, than by any other medium. A bright home is a greater stimulant than aught else. To look hopefully into a new year has often insured success. Where even spiritual consolation has been known to fail the bright face, the hopeful love and the cheerful word of a good woman have redeemed many a man from utter hopelessness.

AND so, whatever may be our circumstances, let us endeavor to make this Christmas Day as merry and joyful to ourselves and those around us as possible. If absent ones are thought of let them be remembered with gladness. If reverses and sorrows have come with the year just ending let us bury them on Christmas eve. To the discouraged let us be a healthful and life-giving stimulant, ever mindful of the power of a sunny and buoyant example. Let us make our crosses seem as light as possible to those who love us. Let frowns be buried in smiles just for a day—the merriest, happiest day of all the year. Try the panacea of laughter upon the sick—better than all the medicines ever invented. Wherever there exists sorrow let us try, even if we can do ever so little, to wipe it away for the day. If ingratitude has come to us let us believe that there must exist a cause of which we know not. If the spirit of unforgiveness has come to any of us let the Christmas joy soften our hearts. In mercy think of our enemies, never forgetful of the fact that life is too short to harbor ill-feelings. No matter what we have borne during the year, or what we feel we may be called upon to bear during the year to come, let us be merry on this anniversary of the natal day of that Christ who will mend every wrong, who will set all things right, though His ways are not our ways and His blessings are slow in their coming. And whatever may be our own trials let us not for a moment show them to the children of our homes. Christmas is their day. If it be not for us it is cruel to take it from them. Before them, at least, let us carry the smile; let us be young again if but for a day, renewing our youth in the games and romps we can all give to the little hearts which came from our hearts. And in the innocent pleasures of childhood, perhaps, we shall forget the world, and the hard side of our lives. Then, perchance, will the lesson come home to us that whatever our trials, whatever our crosses, we are kings and queens of happiness in the possession of home and children. For wherever true love exists and reigns there will always be happiness. The happiest hearts are never far off from a home filled with the love of a good wife and the merry laughter of children. And may those two greatest elements of life be found in every home into which these words shall penetrate, carrying with them the merriest and gladdest of Christmas greetings from a heart which, if it could, would bring joy to every being in the universe.