



IS CHARITY WORTH WHILE?

By Ruth Ashmore



WOMAN recently said to me, "I wonder, after all, is charity worth while?" She was a bright, kind-hearted woman who had given her money, her energy and her time to one particular charity, only to learn one morning of the mistakes made by the workers in the special charitable work in which she was taking much interest. She was surprised and shocked to read in her morning paper that the treasurer, whose husband was a clerk in a small business house, was living on a fashionable street and intended sailing for Europe the next day. "Oh," she said, "does charity pay? I have believed in this work, I have tried to help it, and now my name, as well as that of many other innocent women, has been dragged into a newspaper scandal. The treasurer is probably not a bad woman, but she did not know how to keep her accounts; there was a great deal of money coming in, and there was nobody to overlook her books. Well, I don't want to judge her; still, with this result, I must ask is charity worth while?"

It started me to thinking. I cannot find the answer to my friend's question, but it made me wonder what charity really is. It is said that charity is long-suffering. Then surely charity must be forgiving, and charity must be considerate. The world, or rather the great cities in it, have many hospitals for the sick and for the sick poor; have homes for those who have made mistakes in life; have schools that are intended to take the young boy and young girl and keep them from the paths of wickedness, teach each one of them some honest trade, and put each one on that straight way which leads to happiness. Now, you and I would be horrified if we were told that we were uncharitable. Let us talk it over together. Let us try and conclude which is the right and which is the wrong, where charity begins and where it ends, and, best of all, how we can teach ourselves to be charitable in the best way. Even in virtues there is a right and a wrong way, for a virtue improperly practiced may come very near to being a vice. Let us think out the rights and the wrongs of it, and, first of all, where does charity begin? Charity and duty must go hand in hand. That which is a generous gift from you may be a wrong action on my part—indeed, almost a theft, if I have allowed myself to forget where my duty, inexorable duty, lies.

WHERE IT SHOULD BEGIN

AT home, always. Whether it be the charity that is expressed by words or by gifts. Look among those of your own kin and see who stands in need. Possibly there may be no one about you who is hungry, who needs clothes, or who requires money, but I doubt this. In almost every family there is some one member who cannot take care of him or her self. Perhaps it is an old lady; perhaps it is an old gentleman; perhaps it is a young girl who, eager to earn her living, needs a helping hand from those of her own name, so that she may get the training that will give her an opportunity to be a worker. Have you thought out whether there is one among your own who is in want of something? You are comfortable, well dressed, and well fed; it is possible that you may have to give up a bonnet or a gown to assist that one who needs help, but surely there is no charity in your soul if you refuse it. It always seems to me as if God Himself were pleased when out of the little that we have we deny ourselves, to help those who are old and can no longer help themselves.

But then in life there is much beside the charitable act. There is the charitable word and the charitable look. Learn to give, especially to your own, in such a way that the gift may not be a burden to the recipient, nor make the one who receives less happy than the one who gives. It is true all the world over that the men of a household should care for those who need, but I am sorry to say that in almost every instance there is some one to be helped because of age and illness, and it is oftener the woman than the man who gives the help needed.

A charitable work for a mother is to teach her sons the duty they owe to the women of the family. If necessary, shame them into realizing that it is the men to whom the old, the struggling and the poor should turn, and from whom they should not go away empty-handed. Teach your sons the difference between careless giving and spending and the generosity of duty.

ARE MEN TO BLAME?

FOR some unknown reason American men have not been made to fully comprehend the obligations of kindred, and they seem to think that if they care for their wives and their children they have done all that is necessary, forgetting that to let one suffer who bears the same name is a shame unto the man who calls himself honorable. If, in every family, those who need to be helped were cared for by their own, the great hospitals would have fewer patients, and the homes for the aged and the poor would be almost, if not entirely, empty. Charity begins at home, but should it be allowed to end there? That depends—depends on whether, when you have done your duty to those of your own household, you can afford to give of your money and your time to those in the outside world.

THE LUXURY OF CHARITY

IT gives you a great deal of pleasure to see your name with Mrs. Millionaire and Mrs. Blue-Blood on one of the committees supposed to do the work of some great charity. Possibly the charity is a hospital; possibly a home for sick children, or possibly it is one of the less useful and more sentimental efforts to help the poor. To put your name on this list costs you anything from ten to five hundred dollars a year. Yet the other day when word came to you that one of your maids had shown symptoms of pneumonia, you sent for an ambulance and had her taken to what you called one of the "common hospitals," because you didn't think she was the sort of patient you cared to send to that immaculate hospital where jelly and chicken were every-day delicacies. Was that charity? You do not confess it to yourself, but you would like to send with your card somebody who was once well known, and who had gone through all the grades of poverty until nothing was left but the hospital. You would like a flourish of trumpets and the noise of drums to usher in the object of your kindness. And you call that charity. When an old aunt of yours, shabby, poor, who lives out her last days in the hall bedroom of a boarding-house, comes to see you, you send her luncheon up on a tray, and speak very low before the servants, inasmuch, as you explain to your oldest daughter, "It isn't well to let the servants know that we have any poor relations." And yet you might have made that poor relation very happy by giving her a drive and a merry dinner as its finish. You feel very comfortable when, during dinner, you are called out to see a wretched creature who knows the world so well that he does not tell you the truth. He says he has heard you are a very kind lady, and a very beautiful lady, and a very generous lady. And your heart warms toward him, and you put a bank note in his hand on which, the chances are, he will have the doubtful pleasure of becoming intoxicated. Do I advise you to go through a lot of red tape before you help anybody? No. But I do advise you to give the beggar at your door something to eat if he is hungry, a warm corner if he is cold, and to have one of the men of your household arrange for a place for him to sleep if there is no roof to cover him, but I cannot advise you to give money to the strange man asking for money—not work—and who is diplomatic enough to flatter you as if he were socially your equal.

WHAT SHALL YOU DO?

LIVE a life of charity. Neither by look, word nor action cause one human being suffering. There are so many ways of being uncharitable. There is the ignorant girl, and when I say ignorant I mean ignorant of the ways and customs of the world in which you live, to whom a kind word means much, but about whom you jest, in whom you find no end of fun, and toward whom you take a position of contempt. Then you show a lack of charity to those who are close to you. If you are a daughter at home you are uncharitable if you are thoughtless of the comfort of your mother, if you are sullen to your father, and if you find nothing that is good in your brothers. It is possible that you are a busy girl in the workaday world, and that you are too quick in criticising the work of another. You are eager to obtain the position of another, and you are eager to speak in a way that you think clever, which those about you call sarcastic, and which those who know the truth call mean, and which, in truth, is uncharitable. A good quotation for daily use is "Kind words are more than coronets."

FIRST BE JUST

VERY often the working-girl is kind, too kind. One came to me the other day, and with tears in her eyes said, "I have lost a friend, and one I liked very much, but she thought nothing of borrowing money from me and never returning it, and at last I had to tell her that I could lend her no more. Now, she is angry, and though it sounds mean for me to refer to it, she hasn't returned my money and yet she speaks of me in the most unkind way." My busy friend, you made a mistake. Until you can afford it you must not lend your money. The universal borrower is, after all, only an impolite beggar who takes your money as a gift without thanking you for it. And, surely, there is no charity in this. To lend a friend the money with which to buy a spring bonnet when one needs it to send home to make up one's part of that which is required, is merely a luxury, not a charity—not a kindness, simply a folly.

THE WORKER IN THE FIELD

SHE who has much wealth denies herself nothing when she gives of her plenty, but she who has little in money and much time can give such wealth of kindness that if it were placed in the scale with the gold given by the richer woman the coin would go up as light as a feather. To help those who need it is what you want to do. Perhaps it is with your needle, and, during the hour that might otherwise be dedicated to some special pleasure, you can work away to make clothes for those who need, or for those who are in the hospitals and require fresh garments. If you are a busy housekeeper, a careful one, and yet one who can spare something from your cupboard, there is charity in arranging what you have to give, so that it may be palatable; and there is more charity in teaching the recipient how to cook the food given her so that it may taste good and be nourishing. There are no people so extravagant as the poor, but it is the extravagance of ignorance. Somebody's maid spends ten dollars to get a cape because the coat bought in the autumn is out of fashion, while her mistress wears one that has been out of fashion for two years. The wife of a working-man throws away meat and vegetables, out of which a French cook would make a dainty dish. And the very poor seem to know nothing about the art of mending or remaking clothes. The women too often idle the day away; the children are in rags, and the thought of mending a frock never seems to enter the poor mother's head. Now, do you see what you can do? You can teach somebody how to make the most out of the least. You need not go into the slums to do it. The work of charity is nearly always close to your hand. Do I mean that you are never to give to the wonderful homes for the poor? To the great hospitals for the sick? Certainly not. But what you give in absolute money is, after all, but little, while what you may give in absolute example, what you may teach by kindly words is a very great deal. There is no worth to the money unless you have denied yourself something. The lesson taught by the story of the widow's mite is the great lesson of charity, and means, oh, how much it does mean!

THE END OF THE SERMON

BUT, after all, what we want to do, you and I, is to fill our lives with charity so that to whomever there may come need we can give help. The help may express itself in material things; it may be in the sympathy of kindly words, or it may be spoken only by the pressure of the hand. There is no charity in having your name on the list of generous givers while some one near to you stays within doors because her coat is shabby, or because her clothing is not sufficiently warm. There is no charity in the giving of much money if you have been harsh and cruel to some one who deserved your consideration, and have made that one heart feel that there is nothing in the world but bitterness. There is no charity in your being willing to write checks that represent much money when you are quick to speak the unkind word, or to show to those who are around you a heart eaten up by pride, and lips that utter no words save those of scorn. All the gold in the world will count as nothing unless your charity is like that which was taught to the world nearly two thousand years ago. It meant that to feed the hungry, take care of the sick, to forgive the sinner, and to help, always in the best way, whoever asks for help was Christ's charity. That is the charity, my friend, that you and I want to try to imitate. Begin by being charitable with your lips, by being charitable in your thoughts, and, as far as possible, by being charitable in your acts. And if, of your little store there can only be offered a few pence, you may be certain that they will be reckoned by God Himself as greater than the many millions given by those who are so unwise as to think that charity means only the giving of the least of all things—money. And remember always the saying of Saint Paul, "And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity."

EDITOR'S NOTE—Miss Ashmore's answers to her correspondents, under the title of "Side-Talks with Girls," will be found on page 27 of this issue of the JOURNAL.