



ON THE ART OF GIVING PRESENTS.

EVERYTHING can be done in a right way or in a wrong way. And, perhaps, nothing better displays taste and tact, or the absence of those qualities, than the giving of gifts. A gift may be so bestowed, and of such a nature, as to be a positive insult, and yet of that bitterest kind which cannot be openly resented. Other gifts are like the white elephant which the kings of Siam

used to send to those whom they wished to ruin: they impose so many duties, and so many costs, that they do indeed "make a burden of a pleasure."

We may best find out what a gift should be, by asking ourselves what it is intended to represent. A gift is, presumably, an outward and visible expression of love, in some of its diversities of gratitude, goodwill, or sheer kindness.

Of all gifts, one rule may be laid down: that the more strongly the element of personal individuality is retained, the greater the grace of the giver, and the greater the pleasure of the receiver. The gift should not be what anybody might give to anybody else. The gift which is the product of the giver is the most gracious of all, being, as it were, a part of our friend's very life. But all gifts cannot be wholly this, and yet each should gain some impress from the loving hand which bestows. The card-case, the hand-bag, or the album must have come from "a shop," but a thoughtful special order stamps the monogram, the crest, or the address, by which henceforth they are separated from their tribe, and dedicated to one sole use.

Merely money cost is an element which must be always kept out of sight in the giving of presents. Costly gifts may be given sometimes: it is right they should be, but any gift, be it worth sixpence or a hundred pounds, should have cost something besides money. It should have cost thought, contrivance, search. And here one may give a hint that when a present is a bought one, particular care should be taken that any possible trace of its price be removed. Trade tickets are stuck on in all sorts of places.

Very slight gifts win a wonderful grace when they gratify some wish or fancy, perhaps heedlessly expressed months before, or when they fall in with the requirements of some taste or pursuit, especially if it be one scarcely acknowledged by its owner, or when they show that our friend has thought of us when far away, and surrounded with many excitements and distractions.

The gifts of gratitude should be carefully guarded from any suspicious semblance of payment. Has

anybody done us a service? Nothing is more natural than that we should like to offer some recognition of the benefit conferred on us. Thanks are all very well, but the more thankful a man is, the less is his heart satisfied by mere verbal thanksgiving. But he must restrain his ardour: he must not rush, as it were, to pay off his benefactor, as if the weight of his kindness was too burdensome to be borne. He must quietly await some birthday or festival. Even then, he must not attempt to clear his score at once. As gratitude is a debt which can never be paid, it is folly to pain your friend by appearing desperately anxious to discharge it. Let your first gift of gratitude be quite below the value of the favour it recognises. But repeat it again and again. Let it be repeated, if you think fit, twenty years after the event.

If a gift should pass from the poor to the rich, it should never cost money. If it does, it will make the rich friend feel like a robber. He can get all that money gets; give him something that only costs love. Give him your little sketch, your netted purse, your prettily-marked handkerchief. And the gift from the rich friend to the poor friend should not be oppressively golden. The more costly it is, the more strongly must the individuality of love be imprinted on it.

Foremost among the gifts of goodwill stand wedding presents. Now, of course, the suitability of these must greatly depend on the means and rank of the bride and bridegroom. Still a few general rules may save many awkward mistakes and some heart-burnings. Wedding gifts should be of a substantial and permanent character. Those from mutual friends may well take the form of household adornments, pictures of all kinds, pretty china, or ornamental plate. The bride's relatives and special friends may indulge in gifts of dainty napery, and clever domestic contrivances: they are thus, as it were, helping her to enrich the home her bridegroom has called her to, and so testifying their appreciation of the match. But the bridegroom's family and connections will do well to avoid this delicate ground. They cannot do better than bestow some personal ornament on the bride. The new home is, so to speak, founded by their son, and it behoves them to give his choice her welcome to it. His eyes are lovingly turned on her: let them decorate her for his gaze, and so incorporate themselves in his spousal love and pride. Never mind whether the gift be a little watch, a lace collar, a silk apron, a pebble brooch, or a diamond necklace, a Mecklin veil, or a golden bracelet. Either will serve well as a token of welcome and sympathy, which shall set a pleasant impress on the young heart when it is peculiarly soft, sensitive, and shrinking.

There are too many people who act on quite another principle. We are not going to say a word against mothers-in-law. They have their trials and their "natural feelings" as well as other people. And just because they have these, they should be wise in time. If they desire their son's comfort, they should not act as if

the young wife needed to be taught both that it ought to be considered and how that should be done. The advice of one who has given her daughter-in-law something which made her lovely in her husband's eyes, and won his praise, is far more likely to be sought than the sour monitions of her who presented a cookery-book or a washing-machine. It is a great pity that those occasions which should be the very "love-feasts" of our existence are so often perverted into opportunities for peevishness or egotism, sometimes to develop into an alienation and a bitterness that no after-tears can quite wash away.

Gifts between friends should be frank and friendly. Sometimes a little mystery enhances the pleasure they give; but sometimes any mystery is very cruel and misleading. Often, affection can offer no more delicate tribute than a recognition of a love greater than its own. Nothing can please the betrothed maiden more than a frame for her lover's portrait, or a photograph of his birth-place; and the happy married couple are delighted with some keepsake from the scene of their courting-days.

Gifts to children should be always of articles which give them something to do. They like these best, and they are real boons also to mothers and nurses. Give the little girl a work-box; perhaps it will carry down your name to her children long after your very grave is forgotten. Give the boy a writing-case, well stocked, and then send him a letter asking him some question! What a lot of pleasure you will have added at the cost of a postage-stamp! God bless the little children! As the singing birds live on what can be scarcely missed, so these little ones gather up their pleasures from events which we wearily call "bores." You will never bore a child by giving it something to do, though you may easily bore it by talking to it, or even by kissing it.

That touch of individuality, which should be so carefully kept in view in all personal gifts, should not be forgotten in testimonials, though there it must have a wider range, and be representative of a locality or a society. A testimonial should always bear some direct relation to the place and the people rendering it. Do not buy a French clock to give your minister or your doctor when he is leaving your village among the wilds, or your smoky manufacturing town. Your city, or at least your county, must have some specialty, whether it be granite or coal-port china, jet or cutlery. A testimonial need not be always a "show" thing. Whatever it be, a pretty and unobtrusive illuminated presentation plate is always enough to bear public witness to it. By giving the particular product or manufacture of your district to him whom you wish to honour, you make the very stones cry out in his praise.

As far as in you lies, avoid conventionality in your gifts. Who has not heard of the young married couple perplexed between five pairs of hand-screens, three biscuit-boxes, and four cruet-stands? Also, in gifts intended for household use, strive to realise the surroundings they will have. Do not compel your friends to put your present out of sight, or else to re-

furnish a room for its display. Do not give a blue work-table where the carpets and hangings are green, nor a scarlet tea-cosy where the tea-china is pink. Some people's gifts always seem to fall so harmoniously into place. Do you suppose that is through the mysterious "luck" to which less fortunate folk are too apt to attribute the successes of their friends? Rather it is the result of a quick and considerate observation.

In the matter of gifts, that particular shade of affection which is commonly understood by the word "love" is very peculiar. It delights in second-hand articles. It likes books inscribed, not with its own name, but with the name of the beloved. It prefers the purse from which the dear fingers have already worn the gloss. Its choicest treasures are precisely those things which, as advertisements say, are of "no value to anybody but the owner." Who does not know that the sweetest romance of life haunts old envelopes, bits of ribbon, and shabby memorandum-books, such as strange hands would toss over as utterly incomprehensible rubbish?

And now let us fitly close by a word concerning those pathetic things—gifts of remembrance. They should be something easily portable, so that they need never be left behind or become burdensome. And, however small their value, let these be specially permanent in sort. The type of an enduring though vanished love should not easily wear out. If it is likely to do so, then it will be probably not used, but laid aside in lavender. And, indeed, human nature has always a strange shrinking from a too familiar use of its sacred symbols. Most women, when they die in old age, leave their wedding-dresses almost as fresh as on their bridal morning. Their granddaughters get them "made up," and wear them out at school fêtes and kettledrums. So with jewels, so with lace, so with all sorts of graceful personalities; they are generally used up and worn out by those who have no inner eyes for the halo of love about them, no perception of anything but their intrinsic beauty and use. Is it "nonsensical" to spare and save gifts given for our service? When they are gone, shall we not have something else to supply their place? Ah, but "man does not live by bread alone;" and some gifts have a value which no other possessions can have. When the aged widow wraps herself in the soft shawl given her long ago by the husband of her youth, does she feel no warmth but that of its fleeciness? Will the elderly spinster surrender the old prayer-book, left her by her dead lover, for the newest church service, hot-pressed and ivory-bound? Ah! hairs grow grey while hearts keep green, and the eternal youth within us sees and feels its eternal love still bright and warm, where blinder eyes can note but dust and ashes!

Thus we may see that the "giving of gifts" is no light matter. They are threads caught up into our web of life to strengthen or to warp its texture. Let our gifts be like ourselves, and like our ways of life and thought, and then they will be at once worthy of us and of our future, whatever it may be, and dear to those who love us, and who will see in them for ever a type of their friend and of his friendship.