



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

A Hint for Next Christmas

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There has been some talk lately of the standardization of golf balls, but a more urgent reform is the standardization of Christmas presents. It is no good putting this matter off; let us take it in hand now, so that we shall be in time for next Christmas.

My crusade is on behalf of those who spend their Christmas away from home. Last year I returned (with great difficulty) from such an adventure and I am more convinced than ever that Christmas presents should conform to a certain standard of size. My own little offerings were thoughtfully chosen. A match-box, a lace handkerchief or two, a cigarette-holder, a pencil and note-book, Gems from Wilcox, and so on; such gifts not only bring pleasure (let us hope) to the recipient, but take up a negligible amount of room in one's bag, and add hardly anything to the weight of it. Of course, if your fellow-visitor says to you, "How sweet of you to give me such a darling little handkerchief--it's just what I wanted--how ever did you think of it?" you do not reply, "Well, it was a choice between that and a hundredweight of coal, and I'll give you two guesses why I chose the handkerchief." No; you smile modestly and say, "As soon as I saw it, I felt somehow that it was yours"; after which you are almost in a position to ask your host casually where he keeps the mistletoe.

But it is almost a certainty that the presents you receive will not have been chosen with such care. Probably the young son of the house has been going in for carpentry lately, and in return for your tie-pin he gives you a wardrobe of his own manufacture. You thank him heartily, you praise its figure, but all the time you are wishing that it had chosen some other occasion. Your host gives you a statuette or a large engraving; somebody else turns up with a large brass candle-stick. It is all very gratifying, but you have got to get back to London somehow, and, thankful though you are not to have received the boar-hound or parrot-in-cage which seemed at one time to be threatening, you cannot help wishing that the limits of size for a Christmas present had been decreed by some authority who was familiar with the look of your dressing-case.

Obviously, too, there should be a standard value for a certain type of Christmas present. One may give what one will to one's own family or particular friends; that is all right. But in a Christmas house-party there is a pleasant interchange of parcels, of which the string and the brown paper and the kindly thought are the

really important ingredients, and the gift inside is nothing more than an excuse for these things. It is embarrassing for you if Jones has apologized for his brown paper with a hundred cigars, and you have only excused yourself with twenty-five cigarettes; perhaps still more embarrassing if it is you who have lost so heavily on the exchange. An understanding that the contents were to be worth five shillings exactly would avoid this embarrassment.

And now I am reminded of the ingenuity of a friend of mine, William by name, who arrived at a large country house for Christmas without any present in his bag. He had expected neither to give nor to receive anything, but to his horror he discovered on the 24th that everybody was preparing a Christmas present for him, and that it was taken for granted that he would require a little privacy and brown paper on Christmas Eve for the purpose of addressing his own offerings to others. He had wild thoughts of telegraphing to London for something to be sent down, and spoke to other members of the house-party in order to discover what sort of presents would be suitable.

"What are you giving our host P" he asked one of them.

"Mary and I are giving him a book," said John, referring to his wife.

William then approached the youngest son of the house, and discovered that he and his next brother Dick were sharing in this, that, and the other. When he had heard this, William retired to his room and thought profoundly. He was the first down to breakfast on Christmas morning. All the places at the table were piled high with presents. He looked at John's place. The top parcel said, "To John and Mary from Charles." William took out his fountain-pen and added a couple of words to the inscription. It then read, "To John and Mary from Charles and William," and in William's opinion looked just as effective as before. He moved on to the next place. "To Angela from Father," said the top parcel. "And William," wrote William. At his hostess' place he hesitated for a moment. The first present there was for "Darling Mother, from her loving children." It did not seem that an "and William" was quite suitable. But his hostess was not to be deprived of William's kindly thought; twenty seconds later the handkerchiefs "from John and Mary and William" expressed all the nice things which he was feeling for her. He passed on to the next place....

It is, of course, impossible to thank every donor of a joint gift; one simply thanks the first person whose eye one happens to catch. Sometimes William's eye was caught, sometimes not. But he was spared all embarrassment; and I can recommend his solution of the problem with perfect confidence to those who may be in a similar predicament next Christmas.

There is a minor sort of Christmas present about which also a few words must be said; I refer to the Christmas card.



The Christmas card habit is a very pleasant one, but it, too, needs to be disciplined. I doubt if many people understand its proper function. This is partly the result of our bringing up; as children we were allowed (quite rightly) to run wild in the Christmas card shop, with one of two results. Either we still run wild, or else the reaction has set in and we avoid the Christmas card shop altogether. We convey our printed wishes for a happy Christmas to everybody or to nobody. This is a mistake. In our middle-age we should discriminate.

The child does not need to discriminate. It has two shillings in the hand and about twenty-four relations. Even in my time two shillings did not go far among twenty-four people. But though presents were out of the question, one could get twenty-four really beautiful Christmas cards for the money, and if some of them were ha'penny ones, then one could afford real snow on a threepenny one for the most important uncle, meaning by "most important," perhaps (but I have forgotten now), the one most likely to be generous in return. Of the fun of choosing those twenty-four cards I need not now speak, nor of the best method of seeing to it that somebody else paid for the necessary twenty-four stamps. But certainly one took more trouble in suiting the tastes of those who were to receive the cards than the richest and most leisured grown-up would take in selecting a diamond necklace for his wife's stocking or motor-cars for his sons-in-law. It was not only a question of snow, but also of the words in which the old, old wish was expressed. If the aunt who was known to be fond of poetry did not get something suitable from Eliza Cook, one might regard her Christmas as ruined. How could one grudge the trouble necessary to make her Christmas really happy for her? One might even explore the fourpenny box.

But in middle-age--by which I mean anything over twenty and under ninety--one knows too many people. One cannot give them a Christmas card each; there is not enough powdered glass to go round. One has to discriminate, and the way in which most of us discriminate is either to send no cards to anybody or else to send them to the first twenty or fifty or hundred of our friends (according to our

income and energy) whose names come into our minds. Such cards are meaningless; but if we sent our Christmas cards to the right people, we could make the simple words upon them mean something very much more than a mere wish that the recipient's Christmas shall be "merry" (which it will be anyhow, if he likes merriness) and his New Year "bright" (which, let us hope, it will not be).

"A merry Christmas," with an old church in the background and a robin in the foreground, surrounded by a wreath of holly-leaves. It might mean so much. What I feel that it ought to mean is something like this:--

"You live at Potters Bar and I live at Petersham. Of course, if we did happen to meet at the Marble Arch one day, it would be awfully jolly, and we could go and have lunch together somewhere, and talk about old times. But our lives have drifted apart since those old days. It is partly the fault of the train-service, no doubt. Glad as I should be to see you, I don't like to ask you to come all the way to Petersham to dinner, and if you asked me to Potters Bar--well, I should come, but it would be something of a struggle, and I thank you for not asking me. Besides, we have made different friends now, and our tastes are different. After we had talked about the old days, I doubt if we should have much to say to each other. Each of us would think the other a bit of a bore, and our wives would wonder why we had ever been friends at Liverpool. But don't think I have forgotten you. I just send this card to let you know that I am still alive, still at the same address, and that I still remember you. No need, if we ever do meet, or if we ever want each other's help, to begin by saying: 'I suppose you have quite forgotten those old days at Liverpool.' We have neither of us forgotten; and so let us send to each other, once a year, a sign that we have not forgotten, and that once upon a time we were friends. 'A merry Christmas to you.'"

That is what a Christmas card should say. It is absurd to say this to a man or woman whom one is perpetually ringing up on the telephone; to somebody whom one met last week or with whom one is dining the week after; to a man whom one may run across at the club on almost any day, or a woman whom one knows to shop daily at the same stores as oneself. It is absurd to say it to a correspondent to whom one often writes. Let us reserve our cards for the old friends who have dropped out of our lives, and let them reserve their cards for us.

But, of course, we must have kept their addresses; otherwise we have to print our cards publicly--as I am doing now. "Old friends will please accept this, the only intimation."

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