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Christmas Aunts

Kate Gannett Wells

The possession of relatives at ranks next to a grandmother indeed, at Christmas time, is very desirable, provided they give you the things you want; for there are three factors in giving—the gift itself, the personal regard of the giver, and the appreciation of the one who receives. Appropriateness constitutes its charm, as to give without affection is a bore, and to receive from one you dislike is hideous.

Now, Christmas aunts, as a link between parents who ought to give something and acquaintances who need not, seem to fulfill these conditions. Generally, they know what is wanted and have a pride in their young relations, who are not unwilling to be grateful to them. These "Old Maids" of our homes could have been married if they wanted to be (any man or woman can be if either wishes). The afterglow of tender romance always enshrines them, though they may lead lonely lives. Their range extends from the poor woman whose home is her trunk to the wealthy lady whose house is a shelter for others. Yet both have in their hearts the Christmas feeling.

Single life may often be best, but in regard to marriage, it is not the frequency of divorce that is the trouble, but the self-love, inordinate self-respect, and ambition of married life that most needs correction. Don't pity yourself, don't cherish vain imaginings, don't expect to get more than one-third of what you want (which usually is one-half more than you deserve), are as good rules for married as for single life.

As civilization increases, people naturally will find more difficulty in getting suited to each other. As the spirit of religion grows, people will ask more from themselves than from each other, and in that asking will find as much fullness of joy and of service in being single as in being married, save that the true companionship of marriage with its children is a multiplied joy.

It is character that makes the Christmas aunt what she is. She may give you a bit of ribbon or a rope of pearls. In either case, it is her way of giving which makes her Christmasy. She may be old-fashioned, or of the modern committee type of hustler, or of tea-gown grace and suavity; but through all the variations runs an adorable motherliness. This it is which made the power of Mrs. Mary A. Livermore, and still creates the charm and resourcefulness of Mrs. Julia Ward Howe.

Even if a Christmas aunt advises, scolds, praises, or bosses her young people, she yet has an hereditary pride in them, for they belong to her side of the family. It is this belonging to somebody else besides your parents which is so dear. The mere fact that parents ought to care for those whom they have brought into the world gives to aunts an investiture of free royalty. They care for you just because they need not. Even if aunts have children of their own, they do not lose their prerogatives of grace to others, while the unmarried aunt—Christmas aunts know all of this.

One of them, a wealthy married woman, sent to her nephew, who had a hard time to get along, a check, saying: "You do for me; I give to you. Doing and giving are alike family ties." Another aunt of the penurious, unmarried type sent to her niece a single carnation lying on a pair of garters she had knit, and the niece thought of the many solitary hours in which the yarn had been knitted, and of the many economies, lovingly practiced, by means of which the flower had been purchased. Still another aunt and a niece, to whom fortune had alike been kind, gave each other gifts of equal value, and they were quits.

Yet there is a certain phase of Christmas giving that is more sentimental than strengthening—the exchange of thoughts which are supposed to have either religious or literary value. Such expressions may soothe the nervous or occupy the amateur, self-conscious poser to herself of superficial culture; yet such sentiments are very different from the praise of honest affection. But many of us have not yet got rid of the old notion that praise is dangerous. It may be when it is false; but, when true, it is an incentive to further effort. It is so much better to praise another while she is living than after she has died. All the same, exchange of "thoughts," literary or otherwise, may be an invigorating process; and may those who enjoy it continue its pastime! But do not let the "thoughts" be tinged with self-pity, for courage and common sense help us to bear the ills of life that beset us from one Christmas to another.

Soft shadows, downward stealing,
Absorb the amber light,
And, like a benediction,
Comes on the holy night.

We never can say too often how grateful we are for "The Christmas Fact." What would our daily life have been if the first Christmas had not been born! Keeping now the truth of that fact, we pour around it the service of our daily lives. Never too poor, too lonely, too sick, to be useful to somebody! Thank God for His Christmas gift of lowly usefulness! Thanks to Him also for Christmas aunts, for He has set the world in families.

Yet the trouble is that, as we do not want Christmas to come but once a year, with all its array of presents to get and to be answered, which makes the day a heavy burden, we must carry along its spirit, from month to month and hour to hour, in perpetual giving and receiving of service.



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