

CHRISTMAS SURPRISES

By ADELIA BELLE BEARD

A SURPRISE of some kind, unlooked for and complete, seems a necessary part of the celebration of our Christmas festival; and though we are more or less conservative in observing certain time honored customs, Christmas would not be Christmas without them. The undercurrent of stimulating excitement, mystery, and secrecy that envelops all our Christmas preparations is a part of the delightful Christmas atmosphere, and unless the nature of a gift, or the manner of giving, is unexpected, the recipient loses half the pleasure it is intended to confer.

Many of the good old customs are not adapted to our modern American houses, but the Christmas tree still holds its own. It twinkles and glows and bears its fruit in the modest homes of the poor as well as in the luxurious palaces of the rich, and the little tree (Fig. 1) makes a most charming surprise for the Christmas dinner table. It adapts itself to the desired conditions by combining all the elements of the traditional Christmas tree with its added one of unexpectedness; for it conceals a climax to the dinner festivities undreamed of by those gathered round the table, who look upon it merely as a pretty and appropriate Christmas center piece. That its complete success may be assured, make the little tree yourself and keep it a secret from everyone. It will require only a few hours' work with the sweet smelling evergreen, and there is nothing at all difficult about it.

For the foundation of the tree you will need a large sheet of rather light weight cardboard. The short edge of the cardboard will probably measure about twenty-two inches. Measure the same distance on the long edge, rule a line across the sheet, and cut along the line. This will give a twenty-two inch square. Of this square make a cornucopia by drawing the two diagonal corners together and bringing the cardboard into a point at the upper corner. Let one edge overlap the other and pin in place, as shown in Fig. 2. Now cut off the point at the bottom and trim the edge until you have a perfect cone that stands squarely on its base (Fig. 3). Sew the overlapped edges firmly together to make them perfectly secure, and take out the pins. Use the largest size darning needle and soft cotton string for this and for sewing on the evergreens.

If you live in the country or even in the suburbs of a city, your evergreens will probably be close at hand and easily accessible; and the gathering and bringing in of the greens will be a part of your private celebration; for with their balsamic breath the spirit of Christmas enters the house.

Cut a number of small branches of fir or spruce and break them into still smaller branches and twigs. Stick a twig in the small hole at the top of the cone for the apex of your tree, the point from which the Christmas star always shines. Use small twigs at first, and sew them all around the top (Fig. 3). You will have to pass the needle entirely through the cone at the point and until you reach the part where the opening is large enough for your hand to be thrust inside. Do not try to make the sides of the twigs and branches overlap, but crowd them together so that their fingers will stand out.

Finishing the Tree

WHEN the first row is sewed in place, put another row below with the tops reaching high enough to completely hide the cardboard. Larger branches may be used for the next row, and those twelve inches long for the middle of the tree; but at the base, as at the top, the twigs should not be more than six inches in length. You will find that sewing the evergreen on the cone is much like sewing trimming on a hat. It is not done by rule, but the stitches are put where they are needed, and, on the inside, they are long or short and taken in any direction found necessary to accomplish the purpose.

When the cone is completely covered with the evergreen, the result is a perfect little tree, looking so natural and lifelike that no one will suspect it did not come direct from Mother Nature's hands.

Have ready, done up in soft parcels, a number of small gifts, each marked with the name of the person for whom it is intended. Let the wrappings be quite thick and soft, so that a fall will not



harm the most fragile article.

Cut from white cardboard a circular disk a trifle larger than the base of the cone; then turn the tree upside down and, while you hold it near the top with one hand, with the other drop the parcels in the cone. Fit the disk over the bottom of the cone and hold it in place while you turn the tree right side up. Set the tree, now filled with the little gifts, in the center of the table and deftly slide your hand from beneath without displacing the disk. Of course, the cloth must be on the table before you place your tree, for after the gifts

are stored inside it cannot be easily moved. Make the little Christmas tree as gay as possible with tinsel, glass balls, and shining ornaments, but omit the candles. The glittering decorations reflect the lights in the room and on the table and make the tree brilliant enough without lighted candles. Strings of raisins, nuts, and popcorn, as well as small oranges and apples, will look appropriate and tempting. These, with little bags of fine candies to be served with the coffee, will give an apparent meaning to the ornamental tree without suggesting a hidden secret.

Unveiling the Mystery

THE right time to unveil the mystery will arrive when dessert has been removed. At this moment rise to the occasion, say a few appropriate words about the value of gifts that come from the heart—even from the heart of a tree—then with one hand grasp the tree near the top, lift it up high, and let the gifts come falling and tumbling out, to the delighted astonishment of all.

There are other ways of preparing surprises for the table which, though not so effective as the tree, will yet add much to the merriment of the Christmas dinner.

One method is to have inexpensive and absurdly inappropriate little gifts served at unexpected times throughout the meal. Only two or three persons should receive gifts at the same time, and each gift must be served in a different manner; for the fun will lie in the fact that no one will know for whom or from where the next surprise will come.

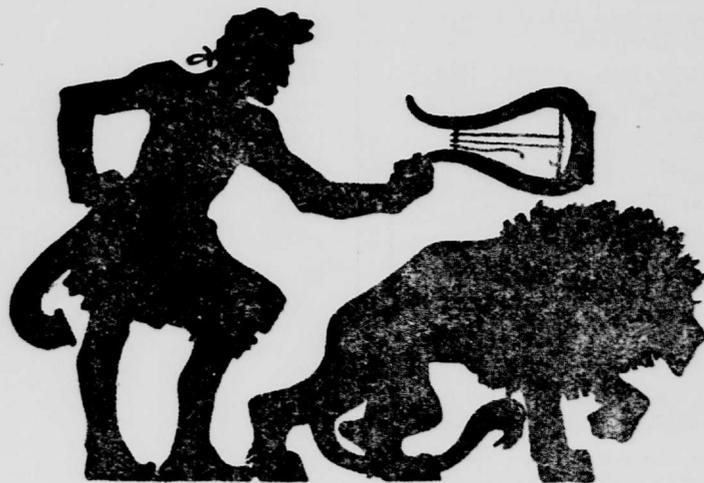
The first two may appear with the first course. If this is soup, serve with it small rolls folded in the napkins. Cut one of the rolls carefully in half and remove the soft bread inside, leaving only the crust. Into the hollow roll put a little gift wrapped in tissue paper; fit the two halves of the crust together and over the joint paste a strip of light brown tissue paper. The paper will show little if any, and the roll will be broken as the other rolls are, but out of this one will fall a little ribbon bearded parcel. Of course, everyone will eagerly examine his own roll in hope of finding a hidden treasure; but none will be found, for Fortune must not repeat herself. The next gift may be discovered in a saltcellar buried beneath a thin layer of salt.

If oyster patties are on your menu, reserve one patty shell for a surprise box. Tuck your gift inside the shell, put on top a round pasteboard cover that will just fit the opening, and on the cover drop an oyster or two to make it appear like the others. Serve this patty with the rest, and let the person to whose share it falls discover its secret.

English walnut shells make fine hiding places for very small gifts. Crack a nut so that the shell separates in halves and remove the kernel. Wrap a trinket in a soft roll of cotton, put it into the shell, and glue the two halves of the shell together. The nut will have to be cracked like any other before the little gift is found.

Among the candies, wrapped in fringed tissue paper like sugar kisses, several small trinkets may be hidden; in fact, every course of the dinner will suggest something different in which to conceal a gift, and you will enjoy using your own ingenuity in devising new receptacles. It does not matter how or in what places you hide the gifts, as long as you keep them dry and clean and not actually mixed with the things that are provided to be eaten.

A pretty surprise for your dinner guests, to be given at the end of the meal, will be appropriate and personal little messages of love and good will written on cards and passed around on a tray, each person selecting the one that bears his own name.



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