

Lessons from the Christmas Woman

—By MARGARET SPENCER



TELL you we ought to cut it out this year," said the hard-up husband.

The Christmas woman put both hands on his shoulders. "We can't cut out Christmas, dear," she told him, gently. "But that five dollars which my brother gave me on my birthday is going to cover every cent I spend. They'll be just little remembrances."

"That's it," he answered, impatiently.

"You'll keep it up, one way or another, and at the last minute I'll feel mean if I don't get into the game and squander a lot of money on presents."

He closed the door and went away. By the time he had boarded the car for town he knew that she was right. But the Christmas woman didn't know that he was thinking this.

She was busy in her own room, where, on a work table, lay a white shirt waist pattern stamped with a graceful design for embroidering. She had bought it for 50 cents, marked down from one dollar because it was the last. Her plan was to transfer its design to other pieces of cloth which she had in the house and so evolve three shirt waists, stamped for embroidering, to bestow on the three nieces, who liked to embroider. And all for 50 cents!

But the Christmas woman had just begun work, trying bravely to forget the hard-up husband's last words, when she was called downstairs to see the perfectly discouraged person, whose plan was after this fashion: "Oh, dear! It's nothing to me how many 'shopping days' there are to Christmas. I can't buy a thing."

"But, my dear," said the Christmas woman, "think what you can make out of that luxurious box of pieces you showed me the other day!"

Thereupon she poured forth many suggestions about aprons and holders and shoe bags and top collars—enough to inspire a church bazaar.

"Oh, yes, but everything you make costs a little for ribbon or something," the perfectly discouraged person concluded, at the end of her depressing call. "I wish Christmas was past!"

Then she went straight home, pulled out her box of pieces, pondered over the Christmas woman's suggestions, schemed out a plan for saving a little money here and there, and then fell to work on her Christmas presents with new courage.

But that Christmas woman didn't know this.

She was getting at her own work again. This time she worked for fully five minutes undisturbed, then another visitor claimed her—this time the tired-to-death woman, who couldn't get away from her teething baby to go shopping, or to take one stitch on Christmas presents.

"Give me your list, and I'll shop for you," the Christmas woman volunteered.

"Mercy! I couldn't possibly tell what I want without seeing things," the tired-to-death woman protested.

Not until she was well on her way down the street did she realize that, with a little planning, she might shop by proxy after all. The idea, once it had penetrated her mind, pleased her so much that she was smiling like a really rested woman when she reached home and sat down to make out her list.

But the Christmas woman didn't know this.

"Have I called you downstairs when you were doing something important?" the dead-broke girl was asking of the Christmas woman by that time. "I'm sorry if I have, but I had to tell you my troubles. I'm in debt up to my ears. I haven't any right to give Christmas presents this year. I'm going to be cross until December 26."

"Oh, no!" the Christmas woman protested. "Why, keeping cheery is one kind of giving! And at least you can write Christmas letters."

"Why, who cares for those?" was the cynical answer.

Yet an hour later, at her desk, the dead-broke girl was busily writing Christmas letters, filling them with borrowed sweetness and humming a happy tune as the words flowed from her pen.

But the Christmas woman didn't know this.

She had gone back to her room for the third time—to find her work table empty. In vain she searched for the shirt-waist cloth.

"Bridget," she called at last, "have you taken anything out of my room?"

Bridget was washing the windows. "Only the clean rags for polishin' the glass, mum," she answered. "You said they'd be on your table."

"Oh!" she began, but at sight of Bridget's sorry face she caught herself. "Never mind, Bridget," she added. "Don't feel bad about it."

"Feel bad! Me?" echoed the astonished girl. The look in her eyes was full of admiration. "Sure, now, this is the first place I ever worked where the lady didn't get cross before Christmas!"

This time the Christmas woman knew.

With great gladness, because she had carried the message to one heart, she said, softly:

"Oh, but, Bridget, what do three little presents matter? It's joy that we must give!"



Lo, now is come our joyfullst time,
Let every man be jolly;
Each room with Ivy leaves is drest,
And every post with Holly.
Without the door let Sorrow lie,
And if for cold he hap to die,
We'll bury him in a Christmas Pye,
And evermore be merry.

ALL of the evergreen plants have long been considered symbolic of immortality, of rebirth. Hence they, and they alone, are appropriate decorations for the Christmas season, which was originally a celebration, under the disguise of various national religious forms, of the turning of the sun at the winter solstice, and the consequent renewal of life on the earth.

When Constantine was converted, he seized upon every underlying likeness, however remote, between the old faith and the new. Every familiar symbol that might be stretched to fit the strange faith; every old custom that would help to reconcile his lately, and sometimes forcibly, converted people to their unaccustomed belief, was adopted and re-explained. And the return of the sun, bringing life and light to the winter-bound earth, became the prototype of the coming of the Son of Man, bringing life and light to the soul of the sin-bound world. So that at first all the heathen observances were retained as far as possible, and merely given a new meaning.

At the Christmas festival, the ivy and holly still made a summer screen of the stone walls, as in ancient Germany they had turned the huge halls at mid-winter, to bowers of greenery, wherein the sylvan sprites, who dwelt in summer among the forest trees, might pass the frozen months without too much discomfort. An echo from Scandinavia is still heard in the saying current among the peasants of the old world that if any bit of holiday decoration is left in the house after Candlemas day (February 2), a troop of little devils will enter and sit, one on each withered leaf, every one bringing its own small curse upon the house. These little devils are merely the old forest sprites, detained against their will by their undestroyed winter refuge and fretting to return to the awakening woods of spring.

The churches were still green with Christmas garlands in those early days, and ablaze with candles, as the temples of Saturn had always been during the corresponding Roman festival of the Saturnalia. But, as Polydore Vergil remarks, "Trymnyng the temples with hangyngs, floures, boughes and garlandes, was taken of the heathen people, which decked their idols and houses in suche array." And as time went on, and it became no more necessary to make concessions that would help reconcile the people to their changed faith, these "heathen" customs became distasteful to the church. One of the early councils forbids men longer "to deck up their houses with lawrell, yvie, and greene boughes, as we used to doe at the Christmase season."

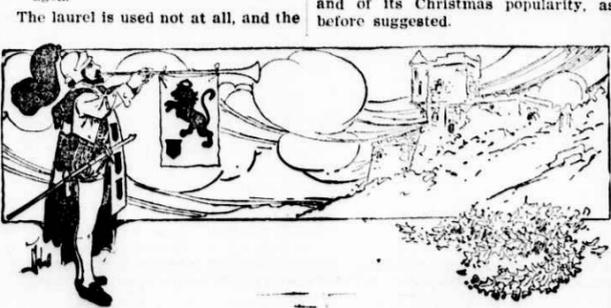
This command was observed in the temples, but in the baronial halls the old customs lived on; lived down their questionable past; won again the toleration of the priests who had sternly banished them, and to-day all the evergreens again are admitted to the strictest church, so that we again can say at Christmas,

"Now with bright Holly all the temples
With Ivy green, and sacred Mistletoe."

The "Early Calendar of English Flowers," an old poem wherein each month is recognized by its appropriate plant symbol, ends with these lines:

Soon the evergreen Laurell alone is
When Catherine crowns all learned
The Ivy and Hollie berries are scene,
And Yule log and Wassail come round
again.

The laurel is used not at all, and the



Ivy but little, in American decorations at Christmas, since both plants are exceedingly rare here. But in England the use of the ivy at least is universal, and the references to it in Christmas song and story alone would fill a small volume.

Besides its claim to appropriateness for the Christmas season which it holds in common with other evergreens, it has two especially strong recommendations of its own. On account of its habit of clinging strongly to its supporting tree or wall, it is a popular symbol of friendship and fidelity, and as such, an excellent decoration for the season of good will and universal brotherhood. And it was, in Roman days, sacred to Bacchus, who, when a baby, was hidden by his aunt, Ino, among its leaves, to save him from Juno's destructive wrath.

Prynne says:
At Christmas men do always Ivy get,
And in each corner of the house it set;
But why do they then use that Bacchus
wood?
Because they mean then Bacchus-like to
feed.

This satirical explanation was but too true in the earlier days, when Christmas lasted for weeks, and was given over to a revelry almost wholly heathen in character.

To-day, in America, the Christmas decorations almost exclusively are of holly, which, for all its popularity, is less consecrated by legend than any other holiday greenery. To be sure we make a sparing use of the mistletoe, which, from the ancient Druidical meaning of purity given to its wax-white berries, and from its use by them in the marriage rite, has come to give a charter for kissing as "broad as the wind." And we have added the bitter-sweet, which has no traditional significance whatever, is not an evergreen, and is to be tolerated merely for its beauty's sake, and for the slight suggestion it gives of the holly berry.

Our American holly is said to be less beautiful than the European plant, having leaves of a duller green. But, making all allowances for possible disadvantages, it still is a remarkably beautiful tree. And as a symbol of the immortality which it is the season's special mission to teach, it surely has no rival. The leaves remain on the branches for three years, losing their hold only when they are pushed off at last by the growing buds of spring.

Throughout England, so little is its supremacy disputed, that it is popularly known as "Christmas," just as the hawthorn is called "The May."

Its name has been a matter of considerable interest. Theophrastus and other Greek authors named the plant Agria; that is, wild, or of the fields. The Romans formed from this the word Agrifolium and called it also Aquifolium, from actum, sharp, and folium, a leaf. Bauhin and Loureiro first named it Ilex, from the resemblance of its leaves to those of the Quercus Ilex, a species of oak which was the true Ilex of Virgil. Linnaeus adopted the name Ilex for the genus, and preserved the name Aquifolium for the most anciently known species.

Our popular name, holly, probably is a corruption of the word holy, as Turner in his herbal calls it holy, and holy tree. The thorny foliage, and the berries like drops of bright blood, could scarcely fail to remind a Christian of the crown of thorns, and this, together with the universal use of the plant in the churches at Christmas easily would account for the name.

In Germany it is known as Christdorn. The Danish name is Christorn and the Swedish Christorn. The same name, Christ's thorn, is found in some parts of England. But as no legend connects the holly with the crown of thorns, this name, universal among the Germanic peoples, must be merely the result of its appearance and of its Christmas popularity, as before suggested.

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	\$ 101,435.21