

THE HOLLY CORSAGE

By RUTH C. IKERMAN
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When the program chairman handed me the corsage of holly tied with a red satin ribbon I remarked, "This should surely put me in a mood to get ready for Christmas." For the bright red berries were fat enough to tempt even a robin, and they contrasted beautifully with the shiny green leaves.

But even as we pinned it to the lapel of my suit jacket, the thorn of the holly stuck beneath my fingernail.

All afternoon that thorn rankled, until by the time I got home, I had forgotten all about the beauty of the corsage. When I finally had the thorn out, I thought wryly that here was a parable of Christmas. There is a thorn in the Christmas corsage. We dread all the shopping and chores and get caught up in the brambles of commercialism. But there is also beauty. What can we do most to make sure that we keep the beauty uppermost?

Well, the first thing I do is to get my bearings and remind myself of the exact ideals of that first Christmas. Indeed, at the program where I received the corsage, I had read the Bible story. This has been my custom for several years, whenever I have been asked to conduct Christmas devotions — simply to read the Bible accounts. How often has a busy clubwoman or church leader said to me later, "I relaxed while you read, and determined I would not get so involved in the extras this year that I forgot the essentials."

"Fear not," the angel said, and yet a look at the faces of any group preparing to celebrate Christmas shows how greatly they are burdened with petty fears. How often at store counters the expression is heard, "But I'm afraid he won't like this."

When I shopped one day with a friend, I found that she was "afraid" not only of the likes and dislikes of the people on her list, but of the fact that her own bank account wouldn't stand for the gift she preferred, and that she couldn't wrap a package as well as the trained professionals in the store.

At lunch she turned to me and said, "What would you do with such a list?"

I said bluntly, "I'd do exactly what you want to do—tear it up and throw it away. Then I would just plain, common, ordinary, stop being afraid. You are in a positive panic for fear you are going to do the wrong thing."

"I mean, what would you really do?" she asked.

"Apparently everybody on your list already has anything you can buy for them in the stores," I said. "Such people would get from me a batch of my homemade fudge, cut in big chunks and put in a plain white carton you can pick up at any stationery store and tied with a plain red ribbon. Or maybe I'd just bake a loaf of bread."

"Horrified," she said, "Would you really dare do that? I'd certainly be afraid it would look too homemade."

Well, she may be right and I may be entirely wrong. But if the time comes when I cannot have fun making a platter of fudge or baking a loaf of bread for a friend in the simple cleanliness of my own home kitchen, then perhaps I have allowed myself to accumulate the wrong kind of friends. If I cannot give something of my own skill or awkwardness, then I am not worthy to take my place in the long Christmas procession of those who have followed the wise men bringing their gifts. For each brought of his own substance, as I see the story.

Nor do I hear that the shepherds took time to go home and change their clothes and dress up in fine array. "What are you going to wear to the Christmas party?" is heard not alone in dormitories of schools and colleges these days, but in homes where mothers and aunts decide they must have a complete new holiday outfit. The fashion scramble at Christmas has become almost as much of a commercialized spree as the familiar Easter orgy.

A certain mother of my acquaintance sighed loudly in my presence last season and said, "I had so hoped my husband and I could get away for a week or so, soon after the first of the year. He has been so tired and he never really got over that attack of flu. But we certainly can't go now."

When I asked if Christmas had upset the budget so badly, she said, "Oh, no, not just Christmas. I had planned for that. But our daughter is home from school and I had not expected to have to buy all the special clothing, but she says she has to have it."

The "it" included a cashmere sweater, new pumps, a velvet afternoon dress. Velvet, it seemed, was an absolute "must" at her school just then. Yet when I saw the daughter arrive at a Christmas

reception wearing the new velvet dress, there was such a look of discontent on her face that the dress might as well have hung on a shop window dummy.

For my friend's sake I thought perhaps I should walk across the room to wish the student a happy holiday at home. But I stopped enroute when I heard a merry greeting from the church's music scholarship recipient. She wore her plaid school skirt and a fresh white blouse. But being young and "in the know" she too wore velvet: a yard or narrow black velvet ribbon tied in a bow at the neck of her blouse. Closer inspection showed that it had a little border of bright red sequins. When I tried to tell her how lovely it was she said, "I dreamed it up myself this afternoon; I'm glad you like it."

In her eyes was the sparkling anticipation of a child waiting for Christmas, for she had done her part toward making herself as attractive as she could with what she had, in preparation for the holiday festivities. Her wishes had not taken from someone else's needs.

It seemed to me then that the group had chosen this scholarship girl wisely. For here was a young woman who would manage in her generation to keep alive the true spirit of Christmas, wherever she happened to live, in whatever financial circumstances. Her eyes were on the beauty even though she had to realistically face financial facts.

The other girl was trying only to keep up with the young Joneses. What would it take to show her the beauty possible in sacrificing her desires for the happiness of the family? I hoped it would not take the loss of the tired father.

Our celebration of the beauty of Christmas must begin within the home, once it has been born in our own individual hearts. Sometimes we ourselves are guilty of shoving the holly thorn deep. One of the cruelest jabs we make at the holiday time is in failing to appreciate the gift which is offered to us in love and generosity.

How well I remember the noon last year when at the landing on the staircase in a leading department store, I happened to encounter one of the respected businessmen of our city. He was coming out of the women's section with a big package under his arm and I made the obvious pleasantry, "Fancy meeting you here." He put his fingers to his lips and said, "I'm Santa's little boy for sure. It's for my wife." And he tucked the big package securely under his arm.

Well, even an amateur detective would know that the box had to contain either a coat or a robe. On Christmas morning as I donned my own new "television coat," I wondered fleetingly what has happened beside the tree in that other home.

A few days afterward I arrived at a committee meeting in time to find out. The wife was saying that she was surely disgusted this Christmas with her husband's choice of fabric, color, and design. She had been first at the store on the morning after Christmas to return his gift. Looking at her petulant face, I remembered the boyish smile of her husband who had given up a noon hour to go shopping.

How different was the attitude of another woman I met through community projects. A little brown wren, she seemed to me, always dressed in a brown suit and hat with matching gloves and shoes. So when I saw her at a basketball game soon after Christmas wearing a bright red sport coat, I had to look twice to make sure it was indeed this same friend. When she wore it to a January board meeting, I made it a point to tell her how nice she looked in this becoming shade.

She turned to me and made almost a speech: I wish I had found about red years ago. I was raised by my grandmother, you know, after my parents were killed, and she thought colors were sinful, and I suppose they would have been a lot more work for her to launder at my age. My husband and sons know how I nearly froze to death at the night football games this year, and how much I wanted a new heavy coat, and the three of them picked this coat out for me for Christmas. Honestly, when I opened their box, I was horrified. But I knew I would somehow have to wear it someplace. Fortunately, they interpreted my silence as being overcome by its beauty, and I was glad because anything I would have said just then would have hurt them."

Then she concluded with a word of wisdom, "I guess those who love us sometimes know better than we know ourselves."

She was right, and without Christmas we might never have a

chance to come to know ourselves. Perhaps by the very remarks and attitudes we take toward spending at Christmas, we reveal how we have come to let money have such an important place in our own lives. Sometimes we feel that we would like to get away from it all, and even say, "I'm not going to give any gifts at all this year."

The year I made such a statement I was brought back to reality sharply by the comment of a young teenage friend. Flashing an impudent grin he said, "Just who do you think you are anyway? I'm not sure just how old you are, but it's a cinch Christmas is a lot older and was here first."

He was right and I made a mental note to try to find a better chamois for the battered car he was polishing. Christmas was indeed

here ahead of any of us, and will be here after all of us are gone.

Ceasing to celebrate Christmas seems a bid for more attention instead of less. A friend was telling me how she took at his word a rich relative who declared he didn't want anybody spending money on his one year, and so she passed him by. The result? He flew into a rage about how none of his family loved him any longer.

In any group there is one member who says self-righteously, "I don't want to bother my friends and relatives this year into having to think of me. I'm going to take myself out of all this Christmas racket." Some of us found it hard to keep straight faces when one such individual made this pious remark. For through all the year she had been a self-centered individual,

calling on us for transportation, taking our time listening to her complaints and imaginary ills. What she was really saying, as any psychiatrist would tell her, was that the time had come when even this once a year she did not want to have to be bothered about thinking of anybody else.

It takes an attitude of consideration for others and forgetfulness of self really to appreciate and enjoy Christmas. When the thorn of self gets in the way, the beauty of service in behalf of others is completely choked out. And the wonderful memories of Christmas almost always center around some individual or group who had consideration for others.

Who does not have blessed memories of some sainted member of the local church who did not mind if

the youth group came over and made popcorn balls on the Saturday afternoon before Christmas? Not until this very year did it occur to me that we must have left messy (Continued on page four)

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