

The Heart of Christmas

(Mrs. Joseph D. Burrell, in 'New York Observer'.)

Margaret sat before the blazing fire in the library, tired out. She had been shopping all day and was weary from the noise and press of the crowds. Her bundles lay piled on the sofa near by, and as she rested she reviewed their contents. 'There's mother's ivory brush,' she commented. 'That monogram is beautifully carved, and I am sure she will be delighted with it. For father, there's the set of books that he wanted; for Harry, there are the skates and the leather boxes for his bureau, and for Midget, the big doll and the dishes. I wonder if it pays to get that child such pretty things, when she breaks them so quickly? But Christmas comes but once a year, and I love to please the child. And there are the things for the girls; for Betty the set of veil pins, and for Helen the brass book stand; and the presents for the servants are not here yet. That's all, and I think I've done pretty well, and not been extravagant, but—' she shrugged up her shoulders ruefully—'I've spent all of my next month's allowance, every cent of it! Just then the door opened, and Margaret's mother came in.

'Tired out?' she inquired. 'Well, I don't wonder. The crowds are dreadful this year, even as far ahead of Christmas as this. Have you finished all your shopping?'

'Yes, I have everything, I think,' said Margaret. 'But, mother, I've had to draw all my January money from the bank. I had to pay for my tailor suit in November, and that with the hat from madame's took part of the December money, and my furs and the dinner dress took the rest, so I simply had to draw on my future. Father won't like it.'

Mrs. Allison looked grave. The girl was young and attractive, and had always had the same pretty things the other girls had had, and she had grown into the way of spending more on them each year from her generous allowance, until it was practically all spent on herself. But before she could speak the door again opened, and Margaret's two especial friends came in. They greeted Mrs. Allison warmly, and then turned to her. 'You've been shopping all day, you extravagant girl,' said one. 'What a pile of parcels! Did you get lovely things?'

'Sweet!' said Margaret enthusiastically. 'I can't very well open everything, for you know perfectly well your own things are in that heap. It's no use pretending after all these years, is it? But if mother will kindly go and see what Midget wants, I'll show you some others.'

Mrs. Allison rose smiling. 'I'm getting accustomed to removing myself,' she said cheerfully. 'Harry and Midget have kept me going from one room to another all day. I am sure my stocking must be going to overflow.'

The girls unfastened the parcels given them and exclaimed over the carved ivory brush, the set of books and the other pretty things.

'You have such good taste in choosing,' said Helen, the girl with what was known as Fortunatus's purse. 'I spend twice as much as you do on my things and get celluloid and plated silver and pressed glass

for my money. Even Betty, who calls herself poor, somehow gets lovely things. How do you do it, I'd like to know? Witchcraft, I call it.' The girls laughed together. Then Betty said slowly:

'I'm feeling guilty enough over the few little things I've bought, anyway. I feel as though I'd stolen the money. You see I've just come from a committee meeting of the missionary society and heard something I cannot forget.' Margaret sighed.

'That society again,' she said discontentedly. 'You are getting simply morbid, Betty. I would not have believed after all you have done for it this year, you would let it spoil your Christmas. What is it now?'

'Well, girls, it is something new. Some one, a stranger, came and talked to us about arranging a meeting for Christmas Eve, each one to bring a gift to Christ, because it is his birthday. He said that in America alone probably a hundred million dollars were spent each year in Christmas gifts, and of that scarcely one cent was given to him. And then he quoted the words of the Bible about the Wise Men: "They fell down and worshipped him; and when they had opened their treasure they presented him gifts; gold, and frankincense and myrrh." He said we had changed all that. We no longer give him Christmas gifts, but one another, and while we say we do it in remembrance of him, it is really an exchange of so much which takes no account of him at all.

'I tell you, girls, it made me unhappy. It is so true. All our lives we have given each other and all our friends, freely, and doled out little sums from time to time during the year to the cause he loved best; we gave them grudgingly enough too, sometimes, and wished we dared refuse. Haven't we gone often to missionary meeting and dropped dimes into the plate and gone home to spend dollars on ourselves? And at Christmas time of all seasons, to forget him and his special cause, the spreading of the "good news" the angels sang about. Oh, my Christmas is spoiled, I tell you.'

The girls sat silent. 'They offered him gifts!' The words rang in their ears. They were all three Christians, church members, and loyal helpers in all good works. They believed in missions and had always given to them, as they had thought conscientiously. But how little the sum was after all, compared to what they had spent on themselves! And now, at Christmas time, they had remembered every one they loved—except Christ, their best Friend, whose day it was. They had no gift for him.

By and by Helen rose. 'It's late,' she said, 'I must go home. I've nothing to say, for I'm ashamed, except that it's all true, and next year I won't let myself be cheated out of my Christmas as I have this year.'

After they had gone, Margaret sat still by the fire thinking. Could she still manage to give some present to Christ on his birthday? It would mean the strictest economy all the rest of the winter, if she did, and she knew her father would certainly be seriously vexed, if she ran still further in debt to the allowance he gave her on the understanding she would keep strictly within it. If she could get the

money in spite of this she would have to curtail the price of the wedding present she must give, the new gown she really needed for teas, and the little trip she had planned for the early spring.

Mr. Allison was at least nominally a Christian man, but his life was spent in making money, and he expected his wife and children to do their duty and his as well, in church work and giving. He gave Mrs. Allison a bill for the collection for missions when the time came around, or if he was not too tired to go to church, he put it in the plate himself. But he had no such interest in these things that Margaret felt she could not talk the matter over with him. Still, that evening she sat down by him and confessed her unwise and too lavish expenditures and her indebtedness to herself for more money than she was entitled to for some time. And then she said coaxingly:

'Now, father, don't you think I deserve some reward for being honest in at least telling you all this? And "won't you please excuse me and forgive me," as Midget says, "and trust me a little more?" I do want something for a very especial Christmas present, and if you will give me something from my February money, just as much as you will let me have, I'll promise to economize tremendously and keep within my allowance all the rest of the year.'

Mr. Allison thought the matter over carefully. She had certainly been extravagant and had managed her money very badly. He was tempted to refuse her request. Still, it was the Christmas time, and he did not like to be too hard upon her. Perhaps the economy she would have to practice would do her good, and if she promised to keep within limits the rest of the year, the experiment would pay. So he drew out a ten dollar bill and gave it to her.

'You may have so much, Margaret,' he said, 'so much and no more; and I expect you to do better after this.'

The girl smiled a little sadly as she took the money. 'I will indeed manage a great, great deal better after this, father,' she said as she thanked him. When the missionary meeting came on Christmas Eve, Margaret was present, and gave the treasurer an envelope marked 'A Christmas Gift for Missions.'

She felt her heart a little lighter, but still her happy day was marred by the remembrance of the tardy gift that she had made to Christ.

As the new year opened, Margaret's quickened conscience made her more than usually faithful in the society of which she was a member. She accepted an office and was faithful to it. She began to read in the little library just put into the church, and with growing interest. The life and death of Good in Africa, the brilliant career and tragic end of Hannington, the history of the Martyr Isle, the story of China of late years, the Siege of Peking, the heroism of the missionaries and the even more wonderful heroism of the native converts, all filled her with pity and wonder, while the books about the women of India stirred her with unspeakable horror and indignation. Nothing she had ever read seemed to her so marvellous