

renewed life. It may have been the glad surprise, the sudden awaking in the bright presence of a real, live Christmas-tree; it may have been the shock of joy that followed the knocking and the shouts at door and window, or the more generous living that came into the little house near Plymouth. Certain it was, that Roger began to mend in many ways, to grow satisfied with bleak New England wind and weather, and to rejoice the heart of all the Olcotts by his glad presence with them.

WALTON'S CHRISTMAS GIFT.

BY I. SMITHSON.

Herbert Walton was too kind-hearted to be a woman-hater, yet not sufficiently shallow to be dubbed "a ladies' man." He had never been remarkable for timidity, and had now reached an age at which bashfulness would have been unbecoming, not to say ridiculous, and yet he had been vainly longing, for more than a year, to speak his mind to a woman. "None but the brave deserve the fair," was a maxim to the truth of which, in its widest sense, he was fully alive. His dilemma was not that of Miss Standish, for it had never occurred to him that shot from the mouth of a canon is less terrific than a point-blank No from the mouth of a woman; in fact, it was not cowardice of any kind that kept him silent. It was simply a keen appreciation of the wisdom of "letting well alone."

A refusal from Ruth Fairleigh would be too natural, he thought, to be overwhelming, but he would not risk its consequence, for he knew that having heard his offer Ruth could never be the same to him again. Try as she might, she would not be able to greet him as gladly, talk to him as artlessly, and listen as sympathetically as she now did, and he felt that without her ready interest and boundless trust he would not care to live. And so he cogitated and hesitated, now hoping, now fearing. Meanwhile the young woman read his mind, and almost at the same instant arrived at the decision that, as far as she was concerned, Herbert Walton was the only man on earth. "A light-complected young lady, Sir, with her heart in her hand," a gypsy would have told him, if he had but thought to consult one in the matter, and surely the ministrations of a third person were needed between these two.

Mr. Walton had known Ruth's father and brother (who were now dead), for a long time. Mrs. Fairleigh often consulted him on various matters, while her two little grandsons doted on him. It was natural, therefore, that he should feel very much at home in the Fairleigh household, and the little boys aforesaid always hailed his coming with delight, considering him the most sensible of all "grown-ups." They had, from time immemorial, that is, as long as they could remember, insisted that it was right and proper for Mr. Walton, who had no little boys of his own, to hang a pair of socks with their stockings at the fire-side on Christmas Eve, and by this means he annually became the happy possessor of pop-corn balls and gum-drops, startling water-color views and portraits from the brush of Hal and Teddy, and other desirable articles on which to regale himself, or with which to decorate his bachelor-home. It was, moreover, a time-honored custom every year for him to help Aunt Ruth dress the Christmas tree, when the two children were in bed.

Years passed in this agreeable manner, and Ruth, not being given to look into futurity, was happy and content. Not so Mr. Walton, for he reflected upon the danger of delay; his looking-glass told him, that his grey hairs were becoming more and more conspicuous, and that to a casual observer, any one of the men whom Ruth occasionally met would seem better suited than he to aspire to her hand. Many of these individuals indeed, were crude and callow youths in his opinion, while they looked on him as a confirmed old bachelor and something of a bore. There was one observer, however, who was not a casual one, and who, although Mr. Walton was unaware of the fact, was his champion and admirer. This was a maiden-lady of unknown age, who lived in a house opposite Mrs. Fairleigh's, and who, having a great deal of time at her disposal, was wont to spend a

large portion of it at the front window studying her neighbour's movements.

It chanced one snowy afternoon, on the day before Christmas, that Miss Wilkins calling on Mrs. and Miss Fairleigh prolonged her visit to an unusual hour, so that while she was descending on the necessity of saying "good-bye," Mr. Walton was turning the corner of the street. He was not feeling particularly cheerful, for the approach of Christmas always brought to him a sense of loneliness and discontent. Christmas-trees and presents, and enthusiastic little nephews were very well in their way, but they could not be expected to stop the march of time. As he rang the bell of Mr. Fairleigh's house, a shout of joy arose within, and two lithe little figures in knickerbockers bounded along the hall and threw open the front door. The new-comer was laden with parcels, his shoulders, beard and eyebrows were covered with snow, and his face glowing with cold. The boys ushered him into the fire-lit drawing-room to "show Santa Claus" to the ladies, and Ruth rose, smiling, to welcome him, thinking how nice he looked. As soon as the usual greetings were over, Hal perched on Mr. Walton's knee and broached the subject of Christmas-stockings, and the gentleman put his finger on his lips, then patted his own pocket smilingly. Upon this, Miss Wilkins, who had recently been entertained with an account of the usual Christmas-eve proceedings, began to put on her furs, remarking as she did so, "I am sure these two young men are anxious to begin their preparations." Then she turned to Ruth and said in a lower but very audible tone,

"I know what would be the most acceptable gift you could put into the stockings of one of your friends."

Unsuspectingly, the girl asked, "What is that?"

"Yourself, dear!" said Miss Wilkins.

Ruth gasped, and studied the carpet, wondering if Mr. Walton heard.

The old maid added, as she rose from her chair, "And this is leap year." Mr. Walton was talking to Mrs. Fairleigh and the boys, and seemed to be completely absorbed in them, but yet there was a merry twinkle in his eyes, Ruth thought, as Miss Wilkins took her leave. However, he said nothing, and at ten that night the great work of the season began. The little tree was set out on a table to be dressed, but before very long it was discovered that more candles were needed. In spite of protestations, Mr. Walton insisted that he must go out and buy some. "I shall not be gone a very long while," he said, and then glancing at Ruth, he exclaimed: "I am afraid you are tired out; you have been doing too much shopping lately. Sit down and rest while I am away." He wheeled an arm-chair to the fire, and she sat down obediently. "Look," he added, "you can amuse yourself by filling the stockings. Here they are, and here are the toys and sugar-plums. Don't move till I come back, dear." He hesitated a little at the last word and laid his hand on her soft dark hair, his eyes met hers for an instant, and he was gone. Mrs. Fairleigh, after repeating Mr. Walton's injunction, left the room also, and then Ruth put her feet on the fender, rested an elbow on her knee, and with her soft chin in her hand, looked into the fire as searchingly as if it held a state secret. Her thoughts kept recurring to that ridiculous remark of Miss Wilkins.

"His Christmas present—and this is leap year," she said to herself, and her brows knitted thoughtfully. "Shall I or shall I not?" There was a smile, half mischievous, half defiant, on her lips as she turned over the hosiery in her lap, picked up the stockings which belonged to her little nephews, and set to work to fill them with toys and candies. When they were ready, she hung them in their appointed places at the fire-side.

After a minute's pause she took up Mr. Walton's socks, surveyed them critically for a moment, and looked questionably at the fire. It was blazing up merrily, and seemed to encourage her. She glanced half nervously around the room, then stooped and slowly drew on the socks over her slippers. Then she tucked her feet under her chair, and, leaning back comfortably, began to discuss an important matter with herself. During the past few years she had seen and heard a great

deal of Mr. Herbert Walton, so that now, when she asked her thoughts whether they had had time to consider and criticize him duly, the answer was emphatically affirmative. The next question put to her imaginary audience—whether she had ever seen, or heard of, or read of a man so worthy of her love and trust—met with a unanimous No!—which reply, truth to tell, was a foregone conclusion, as she was in the habit of organizing this sort of Mental Investigation Committee for the consideration of this very subject. The proceeding, however, was quite a superfluous one; for, being a woman, Miss Ruth was accustomed in all weighty matters, to decide first and reflect after.

Next she fell to meditating on Mr. Walton's many good qualities (of which patient waiting was not the least in her estimation); and having exhausted the catalogue of many virtues, she recalled the earnest, wistful look which she had just seen, or fancied, in his kind gray eyes, and she told herself that it was cruel and selfish of her "to keep the best man under the sun so many years from his due." Now, fortunately, she had an opportunity to make him full amends, and what could be more simple or more delightful than her plan! A little sacrifice of pride on her part would make him happy, and surely he deserved as much happiness as she could give him. She had put herself into his Christmas socks, and he would understand that she was his Christmas present. While she was thus meditating, the room grew warmer and the hour more late; and Ruth, though quite unconscious of the fact, was falling asleep, the arm-chair was comfortable, her heart was light, and for some time she slept soundly and dreamlessly. Then, very gradually, she became aware of the wind's howling wildly and rattling the window shutters, but she did not open her eyes until the front door slammed. The fire was nearly out, and the room growing cold. Ruth sat up, shivered, yawned, and tried to collect her senses. Suddenly she heard Mr. Walton's deep voice in the hall, and for the first time in her life the sound filled her with dismay instead of joy. She glanced down at her feet.

The thought of her simple and delightful plan flashed through her mind, and it seemed that the fact of her having "slept on the matter" had materially changed its aspect. Gone was all her desire for self-abnegation, every trace of philanthropy, of gratitude, of penitence, had left her, and she was conscious of but one thought—a frantic determination to get out of the room, or out of the socks immediately. She started up wildly, but it was too late; the door-knob turned, and Mr. Walton was before her. She sank into her seat, and would have snatched off the socks, but had only time to tuck her feet under the chair before he was at her side. He said something about the candles he had bought, but the room swam before her eyes, and he, astonished at her panic, asked what the matter was. "My head aches; the room is so warm," she said at last, with more tact than veracity. Her face was flushed, and her eyes cast down, the lashes trembling nervously. Mr. Walton was puzzled, and while he glanced around the room thoughtfully, Ruth became the victim of an agonizing doubt. Would he guess what she had done; and what would he, oh, what could he think of her! She wished that her mother would but come in and talk to him, that the lamp would explode, or an earthquake begin, or anything at all to create a diversion. Then she made a frantic effort to draw her feet out of the socks, and as at the same moment Mr. Walton's gaze chanced to rest on a long mirror opposite, he saw his property reflected in the glass. The next instant he recalled the remark of the friendly spinster. A bashful man would have been overpowered by the discovery and let slip his opportunity; a shallow and selfish one might have displayed amusement at the situation, and thereby lost his cause. But Mr. Walton, being neither, merely laid his hand on Ruth's and called her by her name. She knew by the tone of his voice, that all was over with her, and being completely overwhelmed by the summary chastisement with which her little sophistry was visited, she burst into tears, and had not nerve sufficient to remonstrate when he clasped his arms about her gently and called her his own, his Christmas gift.