

The Inglenook.

The Transformation of a Birthday Box.

BY ELIZABETH PRICE.

"Agnes, what are we going to send Mildred for her birthday this year?" asked Kate Neal glancing up from her needle-work. Agnes laid down her magazine and yawned listlessly. "The same things we send, every year I suppose," she replied indifferently. "There are my last summer shirt waists, and your old cloth skirt that she can freshen up with a new binding and a darn or two. I suppose I might send her my new slippers. They are too good to give away, but they hurt me unmercifully."

Ruth Sewell looked up curiously. "Forgive my inquisitiveness, but whatever are you girls talking about?" she asked.

Agnes colored a little and laughed. "Birthday gifts, of course. Didn't you recognize the species?"

"Not quite," confessed the visitor.

"Probably you've never been the recipient of a box like the one we are planning—hence your ignorance. Mildred would know it at a glance—wouldn't she Kate?"

"She ought to. She's received them twice a year for three years—not always on birthdays, my dear, she only boasts one for each twelve months. The others go at Christmas—and each box imitates its predecessor with admirable degree of accuracy. Shirt waists and skirts in summer and heavier things in winter."

"You see, Ruth, Kate merely asked the question with which my absorbing story was interrupted awhile ago, to broach the subject and help me to remember that the articles have to be sorted and packed. She knew the programme from start to finish."

"Well, pardon my obtuseness, but why is thus thusly? Who is Mildred, may I ask, and whence the necessity of semi-annual second hand gifts?"

"To be sure, Ruth. How stupid of us to forget that you didn't know Mildred. She is our cousin once removed, is about our age and size, and is an orphan in fact she has no relatives but our family. She is clerk or book-keeper or something in a store in the city, but she doesn't get much pay. She isn't very strong or she could doubtless do better for herself, but as it is she only makes ends meet by strict economy."

It's really a shame, for she is a nice girl and she had a hard life always. We feel very sorry for her," and Agnes settled herself back comfortably in her easy chair and picked up her magazine again.

Not so Ruth. There was a new expression on her face as she glanced about the luxurious room with its ease-loving occupants, and she sat very straight as she asked, "Don't you ever send her anything but your cast-off clothes?"

Kate laid down her embroidery frame with an air of injured innocence. "Ruth, how blunt you are. They aren't really 'cast-off.' They are nice garments and only require making over to make them almost like new. She doesn't need to dress in the latest style—that would be quite out of place for a person in her circumstances. We never send her old finery—just plain substantial things—things that are useful and not foolish frippery."

Ruth Sewell did not reply, but a round red spot burned in either cheek, and the toe of her dainty shoe tapped the carpet nervously. Agnes watched her a moment amusedly, then remarked, "You might as well say it, Ruth. You are too transparent to hide your internal disturbances, and it is evident that something in the foregoing explanation hasn't suited your ladyship. Explain, my dear, I insist."

"May I? And won't you think me very rude?" The girlish face was full of animation as Ruth lifted it toward her friends and began. "It seems such a pity to me, to think of a young girl working so hard for bare necessities and getting nothing for Christmas and birthday, but useful things. Why, Kate, don't you know girls love their 'foolish frippery' a great deal more than gingham aprons and sensible calico gowns? My new white chiffon hat is a 'foolish frippery' if anything ever was, for its beauty will vanish with the first hint of dampness, and it cost a lot, too. But I would not trade it off for all the useful sweeping caps and sunbonnets in town. How useful is your pink tissue dress, that one could almost tear by looking at it hard? Or Agnes' lace parasol that doesn't keep even the sun out of her eyes and would disappear like a snow flake before a shower of rain? But the dress and the parasol and the hat are dainty and sweet, and we love them because we are girls, and it's our right to love such things."

"Think of being condemned altogether to last year's shirt waists and left-over gowns that never get made new probably, because a busy person hasn't the time to do them."

"I'm afraid I'm very wicked and disagreeable and all sorts of undesirable things, but I'm certain sure I should never be inspired to deep gratitude by an exclusively 'useful' birthday box, and—and—I wouldn't be guilty of giving to somebody else what it would break my own heart to receive." The red spot had spread quite over the soft cheeks, and the long lashes dropped above them, as Ruth studied the emerald on her fingers if she had never seen it before.

Kate looked offended, but Agnes laughed again and said, "Come, Ruth, don't act so guilty. We invited the lecture—and we got it." Then Kate spoke with much dignity: "My dear girl, don't you see that one must allow for the difference in circumstances?"

"No, I must say I don't, beyond a certain extent. A girl's a girl for a' that (with apologies to Burns), and she is never a girl but once, and then only for a few years. Later on, the useful things might satisfy, and no doubt they would be gratefully received even now if they were put in order and then supplemented with other trinkets that are not an absolute necessity."

"Put in order!" For pity's sake, Ruth, would you have us turn seamstress this hot weather? Why, we hire our own sewing done; it's not likely we'll do such things for other people."

"Of course it's not my affair, and I don't wish to meddle. However, I do suppose, from what you have said, that the sewing could be done here as comfortably and conveniently as at the other end of the journey. It is barely possible that we have as much time

and strength as your cousin, and it might even be the case that your sewing room is as cool as hers. For my part, I'd enjoy nothing better than helping to get a box ready for that girl such as I'd like to send my sister if I had one."

"Let's do it!" exclaimed Agnes impulsively. "I never thought about it before—more shame to me, I suppose—but it would interest us and maybe do Mildred good. What do you say, Kate?"

"I say that Ruth is a youthful enthusiast who oughtn't to be encouraged, because there is no knowing to what length such people eventually go. Nevertheless, for the novelty of the thing, I am willing to help you children out this once, though the result will probably be to spoil Mildred so she'll never thank us for our old clothes again."

"Very well grandmother. We children will take the consequences and take the blame," and Agnes tossed her much-abused magazine into a corner and sat up for instructions.

Ruth in spite of her dimples, was decidedly practical, and her friends soon entered into her plans with a zest that delighted her. Mrs. Neal gladly came to their assistance when work bade fair to overwhelm them, and by dint of energy and perseverance, the box was ready to ship on time.

"I wish I could see her face when she unpacks it," said Agnes, writing the address.

"So do I. She's never had such a surprise in her life, I'll venture to say," and Kate picked up the hammer which had nailed the lid on.

"It's the sweetest thing we ever did in all our useless lives, girls," declared Ruth with conviction. "And unless I am mistaken, it will do us as much good as anybody else."

"I feel so differently from what I usually do," confessed Kate. Ordinarily, Mildred's box is a regular bug-bear to me, and I postpone its preparation to the last minute. To-day it has been a real pleasure. I'm not sure but I've enjoyed it enough to make the experiment a habit."

"Bravo, sister mine. I'm with you. Let's do it" and Agnes put out her hand to seal the compact.

"I don't make rash promises," said Kate cautiously. "We'll wait and see."

Away in her cheerless boarding-house, Mildred Ray toiled up the steep stairs to her hot little room at the top. She was very weary and her courage had almost failed—brave though she usually was. To-day was her birthday—an anniversary she dreaded in her loneliness. There was no one to care how she spent it or to give her loving wishes.

To be sure, there would likely be the box from Cousin John Neal's family, and it was very kind of them to remember her and take the trouble to pack and send it. But she wondered drearily where the strength would come from to do the sewing that would be necessary. Her room was so hot, and she had no machine.

The outcome would probably be—as it had generally been before—that she would be obliged to use the garments as they were. "I cannot help it," she said to herself. "I try my hardest, but I can't accomplish more than my work in the store. I am so tired all the time, it seems to me I shall never be rested."

The hot air of her room smote her stiflingly as she opened the door. She hurried to open the window, then turned to look at