

What Shall I Buy?

'What are you going to do now, Edith?' asked Ned Wright, looking up lazily from his arm chair by the fire; 'why, you were out the whole morning!'

'Except when I was making pies, and custards and turnovers, and jellies for your delectation to-morrow,' said Edith, brandishing her purse in his face, 'that's what I'm going for, sir. I do think buying Christmas presents is the jolliest time in the year.'

'Not so good as receiving them,' said Ned roughly; 'at least I don't think so. I say, Edie, what should you like to receive best of anything to-morrow?'

'A penny pencil,' she called back gaily as she opened the front door, and she laughed as she ran down the path to think that she

watched the shops, already lighted up grandly, and the streams of eager people.

'Christmas is a very happy time,' soliloquized Edith. Then her eyes fell on a queer figure. . . . A little bundled-up girl, with a big broom cuddled in her arms stood on the pavement trying to blow some warmth into her small blue hands. She was small and so unlike the rest of the bustling crowd that she attracted the attention of all the car full of people.

'How inhuman some mothers are,' remarked one lady.

'Poor little mite!' said another, 'she's nearly frozen.'

'You may be sure what she earns will go into drink,' said another. 'Cruel, is it not?'

'What's your name, little girl? Aren't you very cold?' asked Edith as a preliminary.

The little girl smiled up at her. 'Not so very considering,' she answered, with an odd grown-up air, adding confidently, 'I'm Rhoda!'

'Why are you sweeping the snow?' inquired Edith. 'You are such a small girl, you know. Is there not somebody else at home?'

'I'm going to earn,' said Rhoda, sturdily. 'I've got three pennies. There's mother, she's got a baby, such a little one, and mother cried because Dick (he's my brother) broke his leg sliding on Saturday, and she said there wouldn't be anything for Christmas. Perhaps I'll get sixpence, and won't she be surprised!'

'Well, here's a penny,' said Edith, smiling, 'Where's your father? Does he not work?'

Rhoda looked at her a little reproachfully.

'He's got influenza, and the doctor said he would die if he went out in the cold.' Her voice faltered for the first time, and Edith patted her shoulder reassuringly. Then she slipped threepence into her little hand and turned away. A moment later she returned, 'Where do you live?' she asked,

'Six, Leslie Row,' said Rhoda, who was again wielding her broom with energy. 'Thank you ever so for that threepence.'

Edith went somewhat slowly back to the shops. Her plans had undergone a change; there was another name to add to her list, but her money had not increased. If little brave Rhoda's father and mother were to share her Christmas gifts, somebody else must go short. Could she leave any one else out? Ralph? she had always given him some little remembrance since they were children together. The servants? Certainly not. No! She would spend a little less on everybody's presents, and thus save something.

So she entered upon her shopping at last; but at the outset she met with an unforeseen difficulty.

The tea-cosy for her mother was a sweet thing at the price she had originally intended; but a cheaper one was hideous.

It was the same with her father's spectacle case, and Ned's knife, and Ralph's cuff-links.

If she was to save something for the little sweeper's family, it must be by the tremendous self-denial of giving a cheaper present than she generally did.

She left the shop and stood outside another considering. Could she? Should she? Yes, she could and would. Mother would be pleased with any little gift; and what did it matter if the others thought her mean?'

So Edith gained the victory over herself, found a pretty and cheaper cosy, bought a less elaborate spectacle-case, a less pretentious set of links, and a knife with three blades, instead of four, and so on; and at last set out to find Leslie Row with a happy heart and several shillings still in her purse.

Somehow Rhoda's home was just what she had pictured it. So clean, so bare, so chilly, with its handful of fire and its frail father, and wan mother and tiny baby. But cheery, sturdy little Rhoda was there too. Once more Edith went on a Christmas shopping with Rhoda's little hand in hers, but this time it was to the grocer's and the coal dealer's and the baker's and the butcher's; and when her purse was empty there were glad faces and whispered thanks to God in little Rhoda's home.

'We are going to have a Christmas,' were the words Edith heard Rhoda say as she



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had seen through Master Ned's little ruse.

'All right, my dear,' said Ned, to himself, 'you shall have it, and something else, for all you are so sharp.'

Meanwhile, Edith had reached the tram-line, taken her seat, and was being carried into the neighboring town of Croyland.

Now was the time to make a list of the presents she wanted, and soon she was scribbling away with a pencil stump on the back of an envelope.

Father, Mother, Nellie, Minnie, Ned and baby, Arthur, the servants and Ralph Warren. Yes, that was all, and she peered in her purse, and counted the contents, so much for this, so much for that, all very satisfactory.

As they began to enter the town, she

Somehow Edith felt as if she must stand up for that absent mother.

'The child looks clean and well cared for,' she said with flashing eyes. 'Perhaps the poor mother is sick, and the father looking for work. They don't all drink.'

There was a moment's silence, then somebody laughed, and the tram stopped, and Edith alighted with burning cheeks.

The car had carried them out of sight of the little cold child sweeper, but Edith felt impelled to go back. 'I'll just give her a penny,' she thought.

The child was again trying to warm her hands when Edith reached her side. On a nearer acquaintance she did not look unhappy, and her blue eyes had a bright gleam of determination in them.