

DO YOU SHOP EARLY AT CHRISTMAS?

I HAVE always regarded with some amusement the signs on shop windows and at the head of advertisements urging people to "shop early this Christmas". I have never "shopped early this Christmas". In fact, looking back over past Christmases I am forced to confess that I have shown a marked indifference to seasonal propaganda. Is everybody's Christmas shopping as disorganised as my own, I wonder? From my window I watch family groups sauntering past with baskets.

A child's gaze rivets itself on the on-coming shop window. In time the mother's slow but inevitable progress carries it past. The child, head turned over shoulder, still looks at the window, then jerks his head abruptly away to fasten on the next window. The mother does not notice the child, she gazes straight ahead, purpose in her eye. Will this purpose waver before she reaches the predestined shop? Is it fear of this which provides her with metaphysical blinkers?

According to Plan

I determine to go down into the streets, to mingle with the present-seeking crowds, to find out, if possible, whether for the average woman Christmas shopping proceeds, like strategic withdrawals, in accordance with a pre-arranged plan; or whether the average female shopper is a creature of impulse, drifting from shop to shop as the mood takes her.

My first contact is with a bustling middle-aged body. Her basket is already almost full of parcels, but the day's shopping is evidently not yet finished. I bustle along beside her.

"Christmas shopping?" she queries. "Got no time for that yet. It's early days."

"Not much more than a week," I remind her.

"Can't think about that just yet. Got to take all this stuff along to our Bring and Buy Sale. For Comforts for the Forces, you know."

She hurries on.

The Shift Principle

Next a mother and small boy. "Do you shop early?" I ask.

"For all the really important things, yes." Her voice sinks to a conspiratorial whisper. "I got Timothy's scooter months ago, but we're just going round to look at scooters now. I'll try to steer him towards one like the one I've got him."

"And what about your other presents? Do you plan those or leave them to impulse?"

"Impulse, I suppose. I wander round the shops and see something and think 'Ah, yes, that would do beautifully for Aunt Jean'. So I buy it and when I get it home realise that it won't do for Aunt Jean at all—that I really bought it because I liked it myself. So I keep it. Which is highly satisfactory, until it comes to Christmas Eve and I realise I still haven't got anything for Aunt Jean."

"What if the realisation comes after closing time on Christmas Eve?"

Her voice sinks again. "Well, one can usually wangle things. You've heard of the shift principle?"

"Yes," I admitted, "I've even on occasions used it myself."

"Well, fortunately most of my relatives send their Christmas presents early.

That means it's always possible to do some re-arranging."

A kindred spirit, I reflect. "Just one last question. Are you going to give National Savings Certificates this Christmas?"

She ponders for a while. "I think the children would be rather disappointed if they found them in their Christmas stockings. But it's an idea for Aunt Jean."

"Cold-Blooded and Egotistical"

At lunchtime I sit next to a casual acquaintance who, strangely enough, carries no shopping basket.

"Have you done your Christmas shopping already?" I ask.

"Yes", she smiles.

"How wonderful! Wasn't Christmas shopping rather a problem with fewer things to choose from and everything so expensive?"

"No. Had my photo. taken—the gift only you can give—and distributed two dozen copies in sizes corresponding to nearness and dearness of relatives and friends."

Cold-blooded and egotistical, I decide—but a good idea. I inquire at one or two photographers, but they are booked up till February. Anyway, it is cold-blooded, and egotistical.

"It's Perfectly Simple"

I have yet to find my systematic Christmas shopper. Waiting at the tram stop is a woman whose well-filled basket and air of quiet confidence lead me to believe that she is a satisfied, if not necessarily, a satisfying, Christmas shopper. I am quite right.

"I always make out my Christmas list quite early in the year," she says. "Then I pick up things all through the year—it's perfectly simple if you do things systematically. And I have a pet scheme of my own. You see I think the big mistake most people make is in giving suitable presents. I think the presents people like getting are the unsuitable ones. For example, instead of giving your grandmother a hot water bottle cover you give her a compact, and you immediately make her feel years younger."

An idea worth applying, I decide. In my mind's eye I see my Christmas list already compiled:

Grandfather: *Hawaiian Beach Shirt.*

Uncle Fred: *Year's subscription to "Film Pictorial".*

Aunt Eva: *Black lace negligée.*

Then I remember that this trio at any rate is provided for. I have a week ago sent each a Christmas card, with a follow-up letter dragging in several references to the Austerity Campaign in Australia. I buy a dozen more Christmas cards on the way home.

I still do not know what I set out to learn—whether the average woman is a Systematic Shopper or an Impulse Buyer. But the important thing, as Socrates said, is to Know Thyself. I am an Impulse Buyer.

—M.I.

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