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## Is Christmas What It Was?

IT must have been a Christmas or two ago. My brother was eight and I was six, and I imagine the hours we spent standing in the bookshop just looking would add up to two or three days. It took a great deal of deciding—Cole's *Funny Picture Book* (which we always called *Cole's Book Arcade*, because of the labelled picture of the arcade under the rainbow at the top), or a pack of *Happy Families* for our Christmas box to our father. In the end, it was *Cole's Book Arcade*, and we all had years and years of pleasure out of it; and funnily enough *They gave us Happy Families*.

That must have been one of the best Christmases, the *Cole's Book Arcade* Christmas. You know how it was: coloured paper, coloured string, secret visits to the summer house by the unobserved route through the raspberry canes, mother and father not to go in the nursery, David and I not to go in the study, inexplicable jokes ignored at mealtimes, urgent conversations, and even tears because of a scolding for not coming in to go to bed in daylight (Injustice; we couldn't mention that we'd been making that beautiful knife-box for mother; she'll be sorry when she finds out). Stockings to hang up, supper to leave with a note for Father Christmas, carrots for his reindeer. . . .

WHAT are you doing for Christmas?

Oh, staying at home, my dear! What else can you do these days? No petrol, no one to take you anywhere anyway, everything rationed. . . .

But the children?

Oh, they go off swimming. I simply never see them. They don't believe in any of this Father Christmas nonsense.

I OVERHEARD it in the bus; Christmas, 1943 style, I thought. But I was wrong. I had forgotten the thousands of mothers and fathers and aunts and uncles and sisters and brothers who remember their fourth, fifth, sixth, ninth, tenth, eleventh Christmases as I remember mine. And I had forgotten the Professional Aunts.

Miss R. is chief Professional Aunt—it was she who introduced me to the title. We had lunch together one day last week.

"Do you mind if we hurry?" she said. "I want to rush up to X. and Y's. I hear they've got balloons."

"Balloons?" I said.

"Yes, you know, coloured balloons to hang on the Christmas tree."

"Oh, yes! Lovely colours. Penny balloons in pink, yellow, green, blue, mauve, red, orange and white, and two-penny ones in gold and silver."

"Balloons? Yes. Fourpence, eightpence and a shilling," the girl said. Red and yellow. No. No other colours.

"I'll have a dozen of each," Miss R. said. "That's what comes of being a Professional Aunt."

"But you've only got two sisters," I said, "you can't possibly have so many—"

"Oh, yes I have. I've got 11 nephews and 13 nieces—only four of my own actually; the others are my friends' children."

So Miss R. makes them a Christmas tree in the lilac in the garden every year, and on that Christmas tree she



*Madly shopping for soap. . .*

hangs 24 thises and 24 thats, 24 so-and-so's and 24 such-and-suches; and if she buys 12 thises and 12 thats, she has to make sure of the equal face value of thissness and thattness; if she decorates with red and green streamers, she has to make sure they're all the same length; if she makes some silver bells (as she does, flat ones out of cardboard cut to the shape and covered both sides with silver paper), she has to make 24, all the same size; and on the great day itself she has the job of not guessing the answers to 24 puzzles, thus making the puzzles equally hard, and admiring the colour of 24 hats out of the 24 crackers she prays will prove of equal value.

Professional Aunt. See what I mean?

ARE you doing much about Christmas presents this year?

A: No. I've got Christmas down to a fine art after long practice. I give all the girls a box of soap each (3/-), and all the men a pocket diary (1/6), and all the children a card game or a handkerchief, depending on how many there are—one child, a handkerchief; two or more children, a card game (1/3 or 2/6). Oh, Christmas is easy!

B: Christmas presents? With six brothers and one sister? I give my sister a set of underwear and wish my brothers a merry Christmas.

C: I always begin buying next year's Christmas presents as soon as the shops open after the Christmas holidays. You can shop in comfort then, and often things have been reduced to reasonable prices. The only trouble is that by the time December comes round again, I find I've either given away or used almost everything I bought and the children have done for the toys. That's how I came to be madly shopping for soap last week. . . .

D: Last year we thought we'd have an austerity Christmas, my sisters and I. So we got presents for the children, but none for each other. But our husbands were all away in the Services, and when Christmas Day came, we all felt so flat we swore we'd never do it again. So this year it's going to be stockings hung up, presents on the breakfast table, crackers to pull, and the bigger the muddle of bright paper about the place the better. A jolly Christmas again.

BRIGHT wrapping paper, crackers to pull, bulging stockings on the foot of the bed, terrific noise much too early in the morning, dressing a Christmas tree, even a little one, wearing silly hats at silly angles, breaking nuts, untying bright string round brighter parcels. . . Christmas as it was.

—J.