Gesundheit, Teacher!

By Audrey Corn

Our teachers must have caught a lot of colds because we always gave them handkerchiefs for Christmas. I went to school in Brooklyn, N.Y., in the 1940s, and when I was in the fourth grade, I thought about giving my teacher something different. *But what*?

Hankies were the perfect gift. Mama said a person could never have too many. Ladies and gentlemen need a fresh one every day. Size didn't matter. And Woolworth's stocked a huge variety at prices a kid could afford.

Price was very important to me in the fourth grade. I looked through all the 10-cent handkerchiefs at Woolworth's and chose two of the prettiest ones for Teacher.

I can still see the pile of presents on my teacher's desk: 21 look-alike flat boxes, one slightly deeper box from Millie, and one small, oblong package from Ernie.

Teacher tried to conduct our regular lessons, but we were too excited to concentrate. We wiggled in our seats and our eyes kept straying to the gifts on Teacher's desk.

Teacher finally relented. "We'll finish our arithmetic problems after recess. Let's open my presents now."

Loud cheers erupted, and for once, Teacher didn't tell us to simmer down. She picked up the top package and read the gift card aloud. Then she unwrapped her present.

"Handkerchiefs!" Teacher exclaimed in delight. "I was just saying last night that I ought to ask Santa for some new ones!"

Ask Santa. We were sophisticated fourth-graders! We laughed uproariously to show that we understood the joke.

Teacher opened the second flat box. "My goodness, handkerchiefs with my initial on them!" she cried.

She opened the third package. "Embossed white-on-white handkerchiefs! How elegant! A person can never have too many handkerchiefs," she confided.

Mama's exact words.

On and on Teacher went. Halfway through the stack, Teacher removed the wrapping from Millie's deeper box. "Why Millicent, how did you know that I needed writing paper? Thank you."

Next came Ernie's small, oblong package. "Lavender cologne. My very favorite! Thank you, Ernest."

Then it was back to the flat boxes. Teacher's enthusiasm never waned. Each of us felt that she truly appreciated our present.

Nobody stopped to consider what teachers *did* with their December avalanche of handkerchiefs. Maybe teaching colleges taught a special course called Handkerchief Disposal.

In fourth grade, I discovered what one creative teacher did with *her* handkerchiefs. My teacher wore her red wool dress on the first day back after Christmas vacation. But it was the pretty scarf around her shoulders that caught our attention.

"You sewed our handkerchiefs into a scarf!" Joseph cried.

Teacher smiled. "Do you like it?" A loud chorus of yeses rocked the room.

The scarf was not our only surprise. Teacher had used Millicent's stationery to write a personal thank-you to each pupil. Our letters were lightly scented with Ernie's lavender cologne.

That day, after school, I told Mama about the scarf. "I'm glad we gave Teacher so many handkerchiefs," I said. "She needed lots of them to make her scarf."

"I told you a lady can never have too many handkerchiefs," Mama replied.

I knew Mama was right. She usually was, back in the Good Old Days. ❖

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From Good Old Days Specials Magazine, January 2006, vol. 33, No. 1, Copyright © 2006 Good Old Days Specials Magazine