

**DUNCAN
NORMAN**

CHRISTMAS
EVE AT
SWAMP'S END

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Christmas Eve at Swamp's End

THE WISTFUL HEART

IT was long after noon in the far, big, white Northwest. Day was on the wing. Christmas Eve splendidly impended – thank God for unspoiled childish faith and joys of children everywhere! Christmas Eve was fairly within view and welcoming hail, at last, in the thickening eastern shadows. Long Day at its close. Day in a perturbation of blessed unselfishness. Day with its tasks of love not half accomplished. And Day near done! Bedtime coming round the world on the jump. Nine o'clock leaping from longitude to longitude. Night, impatient and determined, chasing all the children of the world in drowsy expectation to sleep – making a clean sweep of 'em, every one, with her soft, wide broom of dusk. "Nine o'clock? Shoo! Off you go! To-morrow's on the way. Soon – oh, soon! To-morrow's here when you fall asleep. Said 'em already, have you? Not another word from either of you. Not a whisper, ye grinning rascals! Cuddle down, little people of Christ's heart and leading. Snuggle close – closer yet, my children – that your arms may grow used to this loving. Another kiss from mother? Blessed Ones! A billion more, for nights and mornings, for all day long of all the years, waiting here on mother's lips. And now to sleep. Christmas *is* to-morrow. Hush! To-morrow. Yes; to-morrow. Go t' sleep! Go t' sleep!" And upon the flying heels of Night – but still far over seas from the blustering white Northwest where Pattie Batch was waiting at Swamp's End in the woods – the new Day, with jolly countenance, broad, rosy and delighted, was somewhere approaching, in a gale of childish laughter, blithely calling in its westward sweep to all Christian children to awaken to their peculiar and eternal joy.

It was Christmas weather in the big woods: a Christmas temperature like frozen steel – thirty below in the clearing of Swamp's End – and a rollicking wind, careering over the pines, and the swirling dust of snow in the metallic air. A cold, crisp crackling world! A Christmas land, too: a vast expanse of Christmas colour, from the Canadian line to the Big River – great, grave, green pines, white earth and a blood-red sunset! The low log-cabins of the lumber camps were smothered in snow; they were fringed with pendant ice at the eaves, and banked high with drifts, and all window-frosted. The trails were thigh deep and drifting. The pines – their great fall imminent, now – flaunted long, black arms in the gale; they creaked, they swished, they droned, they crackled with frost. It was coming on dusk. The deeper reaches of the forest were already dark. Horses and teamsters, sawyers, road-monkeys, axemen, swampers, punk-hunters and all, floundered from the bush, white with dry snow, icicled and frosted like a Christmas cake, to the roaring bunk-house fires, to a voracious employment at the cooks' long tables, and to an expanding festival jollity. Town? Sure! Swamp's End for Christmas – the lights and companionship of the bedraggled shanty lumber-town in the clearing of Swamp's End! Swamp's End for Gingerbread Jenkins! Swamp's End for Billy the Beast! Swamp's End – and the roaring hilarity thereof – for man and boy, straw-boss and cookee, of the lumber-jacks! Presently the dim trails from the Cant-hook cutting, from the Bottle River camps, from Snook's landing and the Yellow Tail works, poured the boys into town – a lusty, hilarious crew, like loosed school-boys on a lark, giving over, now, to the only distractions, it seemed – and John Fairmeadow maintained it – which the great world provided in the forests.

Pattie Batch might have been aware of this – the log shack was on the edge of town – had not the window-panes been coated thick with Christmas frost. She might have heard rough laughter passing by – the Bottle River trail ran right past the door – had not the big Christmas wind snored in the stove, and fearsomely rattled the door, and shaken the cabin, and swept howling on. But she never in the world would have attended. Not in that emergency! She would not, for anything, have peeped

out of the windows, in perfectly proper curiosity, to watch the Bottle River jacks flounder into town. Not she! Pattie Batch was busy. Pattie Batch was so desperately employed that her swift little fingers demanded all the attention that the most alert, the brightest, the very most bewitching gray eyes in the whole wide world could bestow upon anything whatsoever. Christmas Eve, you see: Day done. Something of soft fawn-skin engaged her, it seemed, with white patches matched and arranged with marvellous exactitude: something made for warmth in the wind – something of small fashion, but long and indubitably capacious – something with a hood. A little cloak, possibly: I don't know. But I am sure that it could envelop, that it could boil or roast, that it could fairly smother – a baby! It was lined with golden-brown, crackling silk, which Pattie Batch's mother had left in her trunk, upon her last departure, poor woman! from the sordid world of Swamp's End to regions which were now become in Pattie Batch's loving vision Places of Light. And it was upon this treasured cloth that Pattie Batch's flashing needle was working like mad in the lamplight. A Christmas sacrifice: it was labour of love and the gift of treasure.

Pattie Batch was lovely. Everybody knew it; and there's no denying it. Grief had not left her wan and apathetic. She had been "a little man." She had been so much of a little man that she was now much more of a little woman than ever she had been before. In respect to her bewitching endearments, there's no mincing matters, at all. It would shame a man to 'hem and haw and qualify. She was adorable. Beauty of youth and heart of tenderness: a quaint little womanly child of seventeen – gowned, now, in a black dress, long-skirted, to be sure! of her mother's old-fashioned wearing. Gray eyes, wide, dark-lashed, sun-sparkling and shadowy, and willful dark hair, a sweetly tilted little nose, a boyish, masterful way, coquettish twinkles, dimples in most perilous places, rosy cheeks, a tender little figure, an aristocratic toss to her head: why, indeed – the catalogue of her charms has no end to it! Courage to boot, too – as though youth and loveliness were not sufficient endowment – and uncompromising honesty with herself and all the world. She took in washing from the camps: there was nothing else to do, with Gray Billy Batch lost in Rattle Water, and now decently stowed away by the Reverend John Fairmeadow. It was lonely in Gray Billy Batch's cabin, now, of course; it was sometimes almost intolerably so – and ghostly, too, with echoes of long-past footsteps and memories of soft motherly words. Pattie Batch, however, a practical little person, knew in her own mind, you must be informed, exactly how to still the haunting echoes and transform the memories into blessed companions of her busy, gentle solitude; but she had not as yet managed the solution.

Pattie Batch wanted a baby. Companionship, of course, would be a mere by-product of a baby's presence in the cabin; the real wealth and advantage would be a glowing satisfaction in the baby. At any rate, Pattie Batch wanted one: she always had – and she simply couldn't help it. Babies, however, were not numerous at Swamp's End; in point of fact, there was only one – a perfectly adorable infant, it must be understood, a suitable child, and worthy, in every respect, of being heartily desired by any woman – which unhappily belonged to the bartender who lived with Pale Peter of the Red Elephant saloon. No use asking for *that* baby! Not outright. It could be borrowed, however. Pattie Batch *had* borrowed it; she had borrowed it frequently, of late, and had mysteriously measured it with a calculating eye, and had estimated, and scowled in doubt, and scratched her head, and pursed her sweet red lips, and had secretly spanned the baby, from chin to toe and across the back, with an industriously inquiring thumb and little finger. But a borrowed baby, it seems, is of no use whatsoever; the satisfaction is said to be temporary – nothing more – and to leave a sense of vacant arms and a stinging aggravation of envy. So what Pattie Batch wanted was a baby to *keep* – a baby she could call her own and cherish against meddling – a baby that should be so rosy and fat and curly, so neat and white, so scrubbed and highly polished from crown to toe-nails, that every mother in the land, beholding, would promptly expire on the spot of amazement, incredulity and sheer jealousy.

There were babies at Elegant Corners – a frowzy, listless mud-hole of the woods, near by. They were all possessed by one mother, too. The last comer had appeared in the fall of the year;

and Pattie Batch – when the great news came down to Swamp's End – had instantly taken the trail for Elegant Corners.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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