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Angel Unawares: A Story of Christmas Eve



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ANGEL UNAWARES

IF Angel Odell hadn't had a French nursery governess, and if that French governess hadn't suddenly recognized her lost lover in a wounded French sergeant on the sea-front, the Valois story would have been a Christmas tragedy instead of – what it turned out to be. This was strange, because neither the little American girl nor her governess nor her governess's lover had ever heard of the Valois family, nor had the Valois family heard of them. But most things that happen are strange, if seen from every point of view.

At first, when Mademoiselle Rose gave a little scream and rushed away from her charge to a good-looking soldier with his arm in a sling, Angel stood still, extremely interested. Her mother did not know about the lost lover. One need not tell all one's heart secrets to one's employer on being engaged at a Paris agency! But Mademoiselle cried in the night sometimes and gazed at a photograph, so Angel (whose bed was in the same room) had asked questions safer to answer than leave unanswered. When she saw the meeting she quickly put two and two together in her intelligent, seven-year-old brain.

"That's Claude," said the child to herself. "So he's alive, after all. My goodness *me!* what a nice Christmas present for Mademoiselle! I'm glad it's after lunch instead of before, though, for I *was* hungry, and I expect she'll want to talk to him a long time. I suppose she'll introduce him to me and we'll all three walk up and down."

Instead of walking, however, Mademoiselle and her Christmas present sat down on one of the seats placed at regular intervals along the Mentone sea front. Apparently Mademoiselle forgot Angel's existence, and "Claude" had not observed it. The child stood neglected until she was tired and very bored. Then, too polite to interrupt (a succession of nursery governesses of several nations had instructed her never to interrupt), she decided to go home.

"Home" was a hotel; and Mrs. Odell, Angel, and Mademoiselle had arrived only the day before from Paris, Mademoiselle had been in Mentone before (that was one reason for engaging her), but Angel and her mother never had. Angel's father was one of several brilliant young men in the American Embassy, where he was well content for himself, but found the idea of bombs on heads he loved bad for his nerves; accordingly, wife and child had been sent to safety in the south of France, somewhat against the former's will. At the moment, Elinor Odell was getting off letters, meaning to go out later and buy Christmas toys. So it happened that, just as Angel was wondering which turn to take, Angel's mother was writing: "Mademoiselle is young and pretty, but as trustworthy as if she were a *hundred*. She never loses sight of the Angel-Imp for an instant."

The Angel-Imp in question wished that streets going inland from the Promenade du Midi didn't look so much alike. They all seemed to have rivers or gardens running up the middle, and pointed blue mountains at the back, except the ones farther along, where the shops were. Angel remembered a bridge. She thought the right turn was near. Yes, that must be the street! You walked along that for a while, and then you had to turn again. You passed villas with gardens.

By and by Angel forgot to look for landmarks; there were so many things which amused her: children riding on donkeys led by brown old women in funny hats like toadstools; a flock of very white sheep with long, silky hair, being driven by a fur-coated boy into an olive wood; bands of soldiers black as jet, wearing queer red caps on their woolly heads. It was all so interesting and exciting that when Angel remembered herself she was not quite sure she knew where she was.

This would have been rather frightening if the realization hadn't come just outside the half-open gates of a garden lovely as fairy-land. It had been winter in Paris. Here it was summer; yet tomorrow was going to be Christmas. Angel could not understand. The thing was like a dream, and held her fascinated. She was an imaginative child, and it thrilled her to say to herself, "Maybe this garden is fairyland!" Although, of course, the common-sense side of her answered, "Pooh! You know very well, you silly, there's no such place."

Anyhow, the garden *looked* like fairyland. It was exactly what fairyland ought to be; and even mother (who was a grown-up, though father often called her "child") said that no really nice person would swear there weren't any fairies in the world.

Hundreds and maybe thousands of orange and lemon trees made a sparkling green roof for a carpet of purple-blue violets, white carnations, and roses of every shade from palest coral pink to deepest crimson. The flowers grew in the midst of young grass which the sun, shining through tree-branches, lit with the vivid green of emeralds. It shone also on the countless globes of the oranges and lemons, making them glow like lighted lamps of pale topaz and transparent red-gold among the dark-green leaves.

"Fairy Christmas trees!" thought Angel Odell. And it seemed to her that the invisible hand of an equally invisible fairy clutched her dress and began to pull her through the open gateway. After all, why should the gates be open if people were not expected to walk into the garden?

"I don't care. I *will* go in, whether it's fairyland or not," Angel decided.

Nothing else seemed important except the garden and what might happen to her there when she had once got past the gates. Not Mademoiselle Rose, not her Claude, not going home to the hotel, and not even seeing mother.

Angel let the unseen hand guide her through the gates, and on the other side the mysterious beauty of the garden was more thrilling than ever, because it was all around her and under her feet and over her head. The road looked as if no wagons ever went over it, though it was wide enough for them to pass. It was golden-brown in patches, but was overgrown with a film of green, almost like lace. The orange-trees were planted so that they made long, straight aisles shut in at the far end with a misty curtain of blue. Down each aisle a narrow, gold-brown path ran between the flowers; and, fascinated, the child from another land began slowly to follow one of the ways. A vague fancy stole through her mind that the silence and heavy perfume of lemon blossoms were, somehow, parts of each other. It was as if she were about to find out a wonderful secret; and, looking up through the green net to a sky of blue, shot with rose, she wandered on with a sense of waiting.

Not only did little paths run the length of those long, straight aisles, but crossed from one aisle into another, until Angel lost count, as from violets she visited roses, and from roses passed to carnations and stocks. Beyond the arbor of orange- and lemon-trees showered a golden rain of mimosas, and close by clustered a grove of palms, with tall-trunked, date-laden giants rearing their crests in the middle of the group, and in an outer ring, low-plumed dwarfs whose feathered branches drooped to earth.

Angel Odell associated palms with large pots in halls and conservatories. She had not known until to-day that they could grow out of doors. Staring at the grove in wonder, she caught sight of something red which showed between the trailing fronds of a palm like a green-domed tent. And mixed in with the something red was something white that moved. Almost before she knew what she was doing, Angel had stooped down and crept beneath the drapery of rustling plumes.

The "red thing" was an old knitted shawl, spread over a wooden seat of the right height for a child; and the "white thing" was a half-Persian kitten. It was sitting on the shawl, too earnestly ironing its silver ruff with a pink tongue to feel the slightest concern in the intrusion of a stranger.

"Oh, you lovely catkin!" exclaimed Angel. Cautiously she subsided on to the end of the wooden seat, and, slipping off her gray mittens, began to smooth the fluffy back. On her thumb glittered a large diamond in a ring of her mother's she had picked up on the dressing-table and forgotten to take

off. Seeing that the object of her attentions did not openly object to them, and, indeed, appeared hypnotized by the flashing stone, she transferred the white ball of fur from the red shawl to her gray-corduroy lap. It was velvet corduroy, and even more delightful to sit on than knitted wool. The kitten submitted in a dignified, aloof manner to the child's caresses, and Angel sat rigidly still, hardly daring to breathe lest the haughty creature should take offense.

It was just then that a woman suddenly appeared from, it seemed, nowhere in particular. Angel's heart gave a jump. What if the woman – just a mere woman, not a fairy at all – owned the garden, and should scold the little stranger girl for coming in, sitting down, and playing with her kitten?

"Maybe if I don't move or make any noise she'll go away and won't see me," the child thought.

To her no grown-up person could be really young, but *for* a grown-up this woman looked youngish, about as young as mother. Mother had been twenty-eight on her last birthday, and looked almost like a little girl before she was dressed in the morning, with clouds of dark hair falling around her small, white face and shading her big, blue eyes.

This woman had dark hair, too, but Angel could not see what color her eyes were. She was looking down. Her eyelashes were long and black, like mother's, yet she was not like mother in any other way. Mother's face was rather round, and nearly always smiling and happy. This woman's face, though pretty – yes, Angel thought it pretty, and, like a picture of the Madonna Mademoiselle had – was very grave and sad. That was strange, in this beautiful garden full of flowers and sunshine; like a wrong note in music, if Angel mischievously struck a key while mother was playing something gay and sweet. Besides, the woman had on a dress that wasn't pretty at all, or like the dresses mother wore. It was brown, and plain, without any trimming, almost like a servant's dress. Angel wished she would go away, but she didn't; she stooped down and began to do two very queer things. Both were queer for a woman to do, and one was dreadful.

The first thing – the thing that was only queer – was to cover up a bed of very delicate flowers, whose name Angel had never heard, with gray stuff such as kitchen towels are made of, only much thicker and rougher. The woman had been carrying a large bundle of this in her arms, and in covering the bed she supported the gray stuff on sticks higher than the flowers.

The other queer thing she did, which was dreadful as well as queer, was to cry. It seemed awful to Angel that a grown-up woman should cry – cry in a beautiful garden, where she thought she was alone. And on Christmas Eve! Angel felt quite sick. Her throat filled as if she, too, were going to cry. It was all she could do not to give the kitten a nervous squeeze. She was seized with a wild wish to rush out and try to comfort the woman; but instinct even more than childish shyness held her back. Angel knew that, if she had stolen away to cry where she hoped not to be seen, she would hate to have a strange person jump out and surprise her. Probably she would hate it even more if she were a grown-up.

The child hidden under the palm-tree and the woman outside were so near to each other that the child could hear the woman give choking sobs which it seemed as if she tried to swallow. Perhaps she didn't try hard enough at first, for the sobs, instead of stopping, came faster and harder, and Angel's large, horrified eyes saw tears run down the woman's face and splash on to the flowers. Suddenly, however, the gasping ceased. The woman let fall an end of the bagging not yet draped over the sticks, and sprang to her feet with the quick grace of a frightened fawn. Not that Angel definitely thought of any such simile, but away in the back of her mind dimly materialized the picture of a deer she had once seen rise up among the tall grasses in a public park.

The young woman fumbled in the pocket of her shabby brown dress and found a handkerchief. She hurriedly dabbed her eyes, and rubbed her cheeks hard, as if to make them so red that the redness of her eyelids might not be noticed.

"She must have heard some noise," thought Angel; and as the thought formed she, too, heard what the woman had heard – the pat-pat of footsteps coming lightly and quickly across grass. Then from under the green-and-gold mimosas a man appeared – a tall, youngish man, very thin and pale,

carrying a thing which seemed a mysterious object for a man to carry in his arms; but then, everything about this fairy garden was mysterious and puzzling.

Heavily leaning against the man's shoulder and hanging down over his back was a pine-tree, small for a pine-tree, but large for a person to carry. He came on with his head bent, and at first did not see the woman, so – apparently – he was not in search of her. But he limped as he walked, and the woman cried out sharply:

"Oh, Paul, you've hurt yourself! You've had a fall!"

He looked up, surprised. "Why, dear one, I didn't know you were here," he said. "I did slip on a stone coming down the mountain. But it's nothing. I've wrenched my ankle a little, that's all."

"And you had that long, hard walk afterward!" the woman exclaimed. "My poor Paul! You out of bed only three days ago. It's too cruel. Everything goes against us."

"Everything?" He caught her up and a look of alarm or anxiety chased away the smile he had put on to reassure her. "Has bad news come, then? But yes – you needn't answer. I know it has. I wish I hadn't said you might open the avocat's letter! You've been crying, Suze."

The woman spoke English as if it were her own language, but the man had an accent which showed that he was not born to it. Even Angel – listening half against her will – noticed that, almost unconsciously. But she had been forced to think a great deal about "accent" in the last few months since she had come to live in Paris and talk with a French governess. She had picked up French quickly, as children do, but was always having the word "accent, accent!" drummed into her head.

"I couldn't help crying a little," said Suze. "I didn't mean to let you know. I thought you'd be longer away."

"You mustn't try to hide your feelings from me, dear," the man said. "Troubles will be lighter if you let me bear them with you."

"But you – you're always trying to cheer me up, no matter what's happened," the woman reminded him, almost reproachfully. Angel realized that they must be husband and wife. They were about the right age for each other, she thought; and even a child could see by the look in their eyes that they loved one another dearly. "You pretend now that you're not hurt, but you are; you're suffering – your face shows it. Ah! the dear face, so white, so patient! I hoped I should have good news for you when you came back. I hoped that in spite of everything we might have a little peace, a little happiness, just enough to last us over Christmas, if no more. But what's the use of our hoping? Always comes another blow!" Her sobs broke out again. Tears poured over her cheeks.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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