

ALLEN JAMES LANE

THE BRIDE OF THE
MISTLETOE

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The Bride of the Mistletoe:

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TO ONE WHO KNOWS

Je crois que pour produire il ne faut pas trop raisonner. Mais il faut regarder beaucoup et songer à ce qu'on a vu. Voir: tout est là, et voir juste. J'entends, par voir juste, voir avec ses propres yeux et non avec ceux des maîtres. L'originalité d'un artiste s'indique d'abord dans les petites choses et non dans les grandes.

Il faut trouver aux choses une signification qui n'a pas encore découverte et tâcher de l'exprimer d'une façon personnelle.

—GUY DE MAUPASSANT.

PREFACE

Any one about to read this work of fiction might properly be apprised beforehand that it is not a novel: it has neither the structure nor the purpose of *The Novel*.

It is a story. There are two characters—a middle-aged married couple living in a plain farmhouse; one point on the field of human nature is located; at that point one subject is treated; in the treatment one movement is directed toward one climax; no external event whatsoever is introduced; and the time is about forty hours.

A second story of equal length, laid in the same house, is expected to appear within a twelvemonth. The same father and mother are characters, and the family friend the country doctor; but subordinately all. The main story concerns itself with the four children of the two households.

It is an American children's story:

“A Brood of The Eagle.”

During the year a third work, not fiction, will be published, entitled:

“The Christmas Tree: An Interpretation.”

The three works will serve to complete each other, and they complete a cycle of the theme.

EARTH SHIELD AND EARTH FESTIVAL

A mighty table-land lies southward in a hardy region of our country. It has the form of a colossal Shield, lacking and broken in some of its outlines and rough and rude of make. Nature forged it for some crisis in her long warfare of time and change, made use of it, and so left it lying as one of her ancient battle-pieces—Kentucky.

The great Shield is raised high out of the earth at one end and sunk deep into it at the other. It is tilted away from the dawn toward the sunset. Where the western dip of it reposes on the planet, Nature, cunning artificer, set the stream of ocean flowing past with restless foam—the Father of Waters. Along the edge for a space she bound a bright river to the rim of silver. And where the eastern part rises loftiest on the horizon, turned away from the reddening daybreak, she piled shaggy mountains wooded with trees that loose their leaves ere snowflakes fly and with steadfast evergreens which hold to theirs through the gladdening and the saddening year. Then crosswise over the middle of the Shield, northward and southward upon the breadth of it, covering the life-born rock of many thicknesses, she drew a tough skin of verdure—a broad strip of hide of the ever growing grass. She embossed noble forests on this greensward and under

the forests drew clear waters.

This she did in a time of which we know nothing—uncharted ages before man had emerged from the deeps of ocean with eyes to wonder, thoughts to wander, heart to love, and spirit to pray. Many a scene the same power has wrought out upon the surface of the Shield since she brought him forth and set him there: many an old one, many a new. She has made it sometimes a Shield of war, sometimes a Shield of peace. Nor has she yet finished with its destinies as she has not yet finished with anything in the universe. While therefore she continues her will and pleasure elsewhere throughout creation, she does not forget the Shield.

She likes sometimes to set upon it scenes which admonish man how little his lot has changed since Hephaistos wrought like scenes upon the shield of Achilles, and Thetis of the silver feet sprang like a falcon from snowy Olympus bearing the glittering piece of armor to her angered son.

These are some of the scenes that were wrought on the shield of Achilles and that to-day are spread over the Earth Shield Kentucky:

Espousals and marriage feasts and the blaze of lights as they lead the bride from her chamber, flutes and violins sounding merrily. An assembly-place where the people are gathered, a strife having arisen about the blood-price of a man slain; the old lawyers stand up one after another and make their tangled arguments in turn. Soft, freshly ploughed fields where ploughmen drive their teams to and fro, the earth growing dark

behind the share. The estate of a landowner where laborers are reaping; some armfuls the binders are binding with twisted bands of straw: among them the farmer is standing in silence, leaning on his staff, rejoicing in his heart. Vineyards with purpling clusters and happy folk gathering these in plaited baskets on sunny afternoons. A herd of cattle with incurved horns hurrying from the stable to the woods where there is running water and where purple-topped weeds bend above the sleek grass. A fair glen with white sheep. A dancing-place under the trees; girls and young men dancing, their fingers on one another's wrists: a great company stands watching the lovely dance of joy.

Such pageants appeared on the shield of Achilles as art; as pageants of life they appear on the Earth Shield Kentucky. The metal-worker of old wrought them upon the armor of the Greek warrior in tin and silver, bronze and gold. The world-designer sets them to-day on the throbbing land in nerve and blood, toil and delight and passion. But there with the old things she mingles new things, with the never changing the ever changing; for the old that remains always the new and the new that perpetually becomes old—these Nature allots to man as his two portions wherewith he must abide steadfast in what he is and go upward or go downward through all that he is to become.

But of the many scenes which she in our time sets forth upon the stately grassy Shield there is a single spectacle that she spreads over the length and breadth of it once every year now as best liked by the entire people; and this is both old and new.

It is old because it contains man's faith in his immortality, which was venerable with age before the shield of Achilles ever grew effulgent before the sightless orbs of Homer. It is new because it contains those latest hopes and reasons for this faith, which briefly blossom out upon the primitive stock with the altering years and soon are blown away upon the winds of change. Since this spectacle, this festival, is thus old and is thus new and thus enwraps the deepest thing in the human spirit, it is never forgotten.

When in vernal days any one turns a furrow or sows in the teeth of the wind and glances at the fickle sky; when under the summer shade of a flowering tree any one looks out upon his fattened herds and fattening grain; whether there is autumnal plenty in his barn or autumnal emptiness, autumnal peace in his breast or autumnal strife,—all days of the year, in the assembly-place, in the dancing-place, whatsoever of good or ill befall in mind or hand, never does one forget.

When nights are darkest and days most dark; when the sun seems farthest from the planet and cheers it with lowest heat; when the fields lie shorn between harvest-time and seed-time and man turns wistful eyes back and forth between the mystery of his origin and the mystery of his end,—then comes the great pageant of the winter solstice, then comes Christmas.

So what is Christmas? And what for centuries has it been to differing but always identical mortals?

It was once the old pagan festival of dead Nature. It was once

the old pagan festival of the reappearing sun. It was the pagan festival when the hands of labor took their rest and hunger took its fill. It was the pagan festival to honor the descent of the fabled inhabitants of an upper world upon the earth, their commerce with common flesh, and the production of a race of divine-and-human half-breeds. It is now the festival of the Immortal Child appearing in the midst of mortal children. It is now the new festival of man's remembrance of his errors and his charity toward erring neighbors. It has latterly become the widening festival of universal brotherhood with succor for all need and ighness to all suffering; of good will warring against ill will and of peace warring upon war.

And thus for all who have anywhere come to know it, Christmas is the festival of the better worldly self. But better than worldliness, it is on the Shield to-day what it essentially has been through many an age to many people—the symbolic Earth Festival of the Evergreen; setting forth man's pathetic love of youth—of his own youth that will not stay with him; and renewing his faith in a destiny that winds its ancient way upward out of dark and damp toward Eternal Light.

This is a story of the Earth Festival on the Earth Shield.

I. THE MAN AND THE SECRET

A man sat writing near a window of an old house out in the country a few years ago; it was afternoon of the twenty-third of December.

One of the volumes of a work on American Forestry lay open on the desk near his right hand; and as he sometimes stopped in his writing and turned the leaves, the illustrations showed that the long road of his mental travels—for such he followed—was now passing through the evergreens.

Many notes were printed at the bottoms of the pages. They burned there like short tapers in dim places, often lighting up obscure faiths and customs of our puzzled human race. His eyes roved from taper to taper, as gathering knowledge ray by ray. A small book lay near the large one. It dealt with primitive nature-worship; and it belonged in the class of those that are kept under lock and key by the libraries which possess them as unsafe reading for unsafe minds.

Sheets of paper covered with the man's clear, deliberate handwriting lay thickly on the desk. A table in the centre of the room was strewn with volumes, some of a secret character, opened for reference. On the tops of two bookcases and on the mantelpiece were prints representing scenes from the oldest known art of the East. These and other prints hanging about the walls, however remote from each other in the times and places

where they had been gathered, brought together in this room of a quiet Kentucky farmhouse evidence bearing upon the same object: the subject related in general to trees and in especial evergreens.

While the man was immersed in his work, he appeared not to be submerged. His left hand was always going out to one or the other of three picture-frames on the desk and his fingers bent caressingly.

Two of these frames held photographs of four young children—a boy and a girl comprising each group. The children had the air of being well enough bred to be well behaved before the camera, but of being unruly and disorderly out of sheer health and a wild naturalness. All of them looked straight at you; all had eyes wide open with American frankness and good humor; all had mouths shut tight with American energy and determination. Apparently they already believed that the New World was behind them, that the nation backed them up. In a way you believed it. You accepted them on the spot as embodying that marvellous precocity in American children, through which they early in life become conscious of the country and claim it their country and believe that it claims them. Thus they took on the distinction of being a squad detached only photographically from the rank and file of the white armies of the young in the New World, millions and millions strong, as they march, clear-eyed, clear-headed, joyous, magnificent, toward new times and new destinies for the nation and for humanity—a kinder knowledge of man

and a kinder ignorance of God.

The third frame held the picture of a woman probably thirty years of age. Her features were without noticeable American characteristics. What human traits you saw depended upon what human traits you saw with.

The hair was dark and abundant, the brows dark and strong. And the lashes were dark and strong; and the eyes themselves, so thornily hedged about, somehow brought up before you a picture of autumn thistles—thistles that look out from the shadow of a rock. They had a veritable thistle quality and suggestiveness: gray and of the fields, sure of their experience in nature, freighted with silence.

Despite grayness and thorniness, however, you saw that they were in the summer of their life-bloom; and singularly above even their beauty of blooming they held what is rare in the eyes of either men or women—they held a look of being just.

The whole face was an oval, long, regular, high-bred. If the lower part had been hidden behind a white veil of the Orient (by that little bank of snow which is guardedly built in front of the overflowing desires of the mouth), the upper part would have given the impression of reserve, coldness, possibly of severity; yet ruled by that one look—the garnered wisdom, the tempering justice, of the eyes. The whole face being seen, the lower features altered the impression made by the upper ones; reserve became bettered into strength, coldness bettered into dignity, severity of intellect transfused into glowing nobleness of character. The look

of virgin justice in her was perhaps what had survived from that white light of life which falls upon young children as from a receding sun and touches lingeringly their smiles and glances; but her mouth had gathered its shadowy tenderness as she walked the furrows of the years, watching their changeful harvests, eating their passing bread.

A handful of some of the green things of winter lay before her picture: holly boughs with their bold, upright red berries; a spray of the cedar of the Kentucky yards with its rosary of piteous blue. When he had come in from out of doors to go on with his work, he had put them there—perhaps as some tribute. After all his years with her, many and strong, he must have acquired various tributes and interpretations; but to-day, during his walk in the woods, it had befallen him to think of her as holly which ripens amid snows and retains its brave freshness on a landscape of departed things. As cedar also which everywhere on the Shield is the best loved of forest-growths to be the companion of household walls; so that even the poorest of the people, if it does not grow near the spot they build in, hunt for it and bring it home: everywhere wife and cedar, wife and cedar, wife and cedar.

The photographs of the children grouped on each side of hers with heads a little lower down called up memories of Old World pictures in which cherubs smile about the cloud-borne feet of the heavenly Hebrew maid. Glowing young American mother with four healthy children as her gifts to the nation—this was the

practical thought of her that riveted and held.

As has been said, they were in two groups, the children; a boy and girl in each. The four were of nearly the same age; but the faces of two were on a dimmer card in an older frame. You glanced at her again and persuaded yourself that the expression of motherhood which characterized her separated into two expressions (as behind a thin white cloud it is possible to watch another cloud of darker hue). Nearer in time was the countenance of a mother happy with happy offspring; further away the same countenance withdrawn a little into shadow—the face of the mother bereaved—mute and changeless.

The man, the worker, whom this little flock of wife and two surviving children now followed through the world as their leader, sat with his face toward his desk in a corner of the room; solidly squared before his undertaking, liking it, mastering it; seldom changing his position as the minutes passed, never nervously; with a quietude in him that was oftener in Southern gentlemen in quieter, more gentlemanly times. A low powerful figure with a pair of thick shoulders and tremendous limbs; filling the room with his vitality as a heavy passionate animal lying in a corner of a cage fills the space of the cage, so that you wait for it to roll over or get up on its feet and walk about that you may study its markings and get an inkling of its conquering nature.

Meantime there were hints of him. When he had come in, he had thrown his overcoat on a chair that stood near the table in

the centre of the room and had dropped his hat upon his coat. It had slipped to the floor and now lay there—a low, soft black hat of a kind formerly much worn by young Southerners of the countryside,—especially on occasions when there was a spur of heat in their mood and going,—much the same kind that one sees on the heads of students in Rome in winter; light, warm, shaping itself readily to breezes from any quarter, to be doffed or donned as comfortable and negligible. It suggested that he had been a country boy in the land, still belonged to the land, and as a man kept to its out-of-door habits and fashions. His shoes, one of which you saw at each side of his chair, were especially well made for rough-going feet to tramp in during all weathers.

A sack suit of dark blue serge somehow helped to withdraw your interpretation of him from farm life to the arts or the professions. The scrupulous air of his shirt collar, showing against the clear-hued flesh at the back of his neck, and the Van Dyck-like edge of the shirt cuff, defining his powerful wrist and hand, strengthened the notion that he belonged to the arts or to the professions. He might have been sitting before a canvas instead of a desk and holding a brush instead of a pen: the picture would have been true to life. Or truer yet, he might have taken his place with the grave group of students in the Lesson in Anatomy left by Rembrandt.

Once he put down his pen, wheeled his chair about, and began to read the page he had just finished: then you saw him. He had a big, masculine, solid-cut, self-respecting, normal-looking,

executive head—covered with thick yellowish hair clipped short; so that while everything else in his appearance indicated that he was in the prime of manhood, the clipped hair caused him to appear still more youthful; and it invested him with a rustic atmosphere which went along very naturally with the sentimental country hat and the all-weather shoes. He seemed at first impression a magnificent animal frankly loved of the sun—perhaps too warmly. The sun itself seemed to have colored for him his beard and mustache—a characteristic hue of men's hair and beard in this land peopled from Old English stock. The beard, like the hair, was cut short, as though his idea might have been to get both hair and beard out of life's daily way; but his mustache curled thickly down over his mouth, hiding it. In the whole effect there was a suggestion of the Continent, perhaps of a former student career in Germany, memories of which may still have lasted with him and the marks of which may have purposely been kept up in his appearance.

But such a fashion of beard, while covering a man's face, does much to uncover the man. As he sat amid his papers and books, your thought surely led again to old pictures where earnest heads bend together over some point on the human road, at which knowledge widens and suffering begins to be made more bearable and death more kind. Perforce now you interpreted him and fixed his general working category: that he was absorbed in work meant to be serviceable to humanity. His house, the members of his family, the people of his neighborhood, were

meantime forgotten: he was not a mere dweller on his farm; he was a discoverer on the wide commons where the race forever camps at large with its problems, joys, and sorrows.

He read his page, his hand dropped to his knee, his mind dropped its responsibility; one of those intervals followed when the brain rests. The look of the student left his face; over it began to play the soft lights of the domestic affections. He had forgotten the world for his own place in the world; the student had become the husband and house-father. A few moments only; then he wheeled gravely to his work again, his right hand took up the pen, his left hand went back to the pictures.

The silence of the room seemed a guarded silence, as though he were being watched over by a love which would not let him be disturbed. (He had the reposeful self-assurance of a man who is conscious that he is idolized.)

Matching the silence within was the stillness out of doors. An immense oak tree stood just outside the windows. It was a perpetual reminder of vanished woods; and when a windstorm tossed and twisted it, the straining and grinding of the fibres were like struggles and outcries for the wild life of old. This afternoon it brooded motionless, an image of forest reflection. Once a small black-and-white sapsucker, circling the trunk and peering into the crevices of the bark on a level with the windows, uttered minute notes which penetrated into the room like steel darts of sound. A snowbird alighted on the window-sill, glanced familiarly in at the man, and shot up its crest; but disappointed

perhaps that it was not noticed, quoted its resigned gray phrase—a phrase it had made for itself to accompany the score of gray whiter—and flitted on billowy wings to a juniper at the corner of the house, its turret against the long javelins of the North.

Amid the stillness of Nature outside and the house-silence of a love guarding him within, the man worked on.

A little clock ticked independently on the old-fashioned Parian marble mantelpiece. Prints were propped against its sides and face, illustrating the use of trees about ancient tombs and temples. Out of this photographic grove of dead things the uncaring clock threw out upon the air a living three—the fateful three that had been measured for each tomb and temple in its own land and time.

A knock, regretful but positive, was heard, and the door opening into the hall was quietly pushed open. A glow lit up the student's face though he did not stop writing; and his voice, while it gave a welcome, unconsciously expressed regret at being disturbed:

“Come in.”

“I am in!”

He lifted his heavy figure with instant courtesy—rather obsolete now—and bowing to one side, sat down again.

“So I see,” he said, dipping his pen into his ink.

“Since you did not turn around, you would better have said ‘So I hear.’ It is three o'clock.”

“So I hear.”

“You said you would be ready.”

“I am ready.”

“You said you would be done.”

“I am done—nearly done.”

“How nearly?”

“By to-morrow—to-morrow afternoon before dark. I have reached the end, but now it is hard to stop, hard to let go.”

His tone gave first place, primary consideration, to his work. The silence in the room suddenly became charged. When the voice was heard again, there was constraint in it:

“There is something to be done this afternoon before dark, something I have a share in. Having a share, I am interested. Being interested, I am prompt. Being prompt, I am here.”

He waved his hand over the written sheets before him—those cold Alps of learning; and asked reproachfully:

“Are you not interested in all this, O you of little faith?”

“How can I say, O me of little knowledge!”

As the words impulsively escaped, he heard a quick movement behind him. He widened out his heavy arms upon his manuscript and looked back over his shoulder at her and laughed. And still smiling and holding his pen between his fingers, he turned and faced her. She had advanced into the middle of the room and had stopped at the chair on which he had thrown his overcoat and hat. She had picked up the hat and stood turning it and pushing its soft material back into shape for his head—without looking at him.

The northern light of the winter afternoon, entering through

the looped crimson-damask curtains, fell sidewise upon the woman of the picture.

Years had passed since the picture had been made. There were changes in her; she looked younger. She had effaced the ravages of a sadder period of her life as human voyagers upon reaching quiet port repair the damages of wandering and storm. Even the look of motherhood, of the two motherhoods, which so characterized her in the photograph, had disappeared for the present. Seeing her now for the first time, one would have said that her whole mood and bearing made a single declaration: she was neither wife nor mother; she was a woman in love with life's youth—with youth—youth; in love with the things that youth alone could ever secure to her.

The carriage of her beautiful head, brave and buoyant, brought before you a vision of growing things in nature as they move towards their summer yet far away. There still was youth in the round white throat above the collar of green velvet—woodland green—darker than the green of the cloth she wore. You were glad she had chosen that color because she was going for a walk with him; and green would enchain the eye out on the sere ground and under the stripped trees. The flecklessness of her long gloves drew your thoughts to winter rather—to its one beauteous gift dropped from soiled clouds. A slender toque brought out the keenness in the oval of her face. From it rose one backward-sweeping feather of green shaded to coral at the tip; and there your fancy may have cared to see lingering the last radiance of

whiter-sunset skies.

He kept his seat with his back to the manuscript from which he had repulsed her; and his eyes swept loyally over her as she waited. Though she could scarcely trust herself to speak, still less could she endure the silence. With her face turned toward the windows opening on the lawn, she stretched out her arm toward him and softly shook his hat at him.

“The sun sets—you remember how many minutes after four,” she said, with no other tone than that of quiet warning. “I marked the minutes in the almanac for you the other night after the children had gone to bed, so that you would not forget. You know how short the twilights are even when the day is clear. It is cloudy to-day and there will not be any twilight. The children said they would not be at home until after dark, but they may come sooner; it may be a trick. They have threatened to catch us this year in one way or another, and you know they must not do that—not this year! There must be one more Christmas with all its old ways—even if it must be without its old mysteries.”

He did not reply at once and then not relevantly:

“I heard you playing.”

He had dropped his head forward and was scowling at her from under his brows with a big Beethoven brooding scowl. She did not see, for she held her face averted.

The silence in the room again seemed charged, and there was greater constraint in her voice when it was next heard:

“I had to play; you need not have listened.”

“I had to listen; you played loud—”

“I did not know I was playing loud. I may have been trying to drown other sounds,” she admitted.

“What other sounds?” His voice unexpectedly became inquisitorial: it was a frank thrust into the unknown.

“Discords—possibly.”

“What discords?” His thrust became deeper.

She turned her head quickly and looked at him; a quiver passed across her lips and in her eyes there was noble anguish.

But nothing so arrests our speech when we are tempted to betray hidden trouble as to find ourselves face to face with a kind of burnished, radiant happiness. Sensitive eyes not more quickly close before a blaze of sunlight than the shadowy soul shuts her gates upon the advancing Figure of Joy.

It was the whole familiar picture of him now—triumphantly painted in the harmonies of life, masterfully toned to subdue its discords—that drove her back into herself. When she spoke next, she had regained the self-control which under his unexpected attack she had come near losing; and her words issued from behind the closed gates—as through a crevice of the closed gates:

“I was reading one of the new books that came the other day, the deep grave ones you sent for. It is written by a deep grave German, and it is worked out in the deep grave German way. The whole purpose of it is to show that any woman in the life of any man is merely—an Incident. She may be this to him, she may be that to him; for a briefer time, for a greater time; but all along

and in the end, at bottom, she is to him—an Incident.”

He did not take his eyes from hers and his smile slowly broadened.

“Were those the discords?” he asked gently.

She did not reply.

He turned in his chair and looking over his shoulder at her, he raised his arm and drew the point of his pen across the backs of a stack of magazines on top of his desk.

“Here is a work,” he said, “not written by a German or by any other man, but by a woman whose race I do not know: here is a work the sole purpose of which is to prove that any man is merely an Incident in the life of any woman. He may be this to her, he may be that to her; for a briefer time, for a greater time; but all along and in the end, beneath everything else, he is to her—an Incident.”

He turned and confronted her, not without a gleam of humor in his eyes.

“That did not trouble me,” he said tenderly. “Those were not discords to me.”

Her eyes rested on his face with inscrutable searching. She made no comment.

His own face grew grave. After a moment of debate with himself as to whether he should be forced to do a thing he would rather not do, he turned in his chair and laid down his pen as though separating himself from his work. Then he said, in a tone that ended playfulness:

“Do I not understand? Have I not understood all the time? For a year now I have been shutting myself up at spare hours in this room and at this work—without any explanation to you. Such a thing never occurred before in our lives. You have shared everything. I have relied upon you and I have needed you, and you have never failed me. And this apparently has been your reward—to be rudely shut out at last. Now you come in and I tell you that the work is done—quite finished—without a word to you about it. Do I not understand?” he repeated. “Have I not understood all along? It is true; outwardly as regards this work you have been—the Incident.”

As he paused, she made a slight gesture with one hand as though she did not care for what he was saying and brushed away the fragile web of his words from before her eyes—eyes fixed on larger things lying clear before her in life’s distance.

He went quickly on with deepening emphasis:

“But, comrade of all these years, battler with me for life’s victories, did you think you were never to know? Did you believe I was never to explain? You had only one more day to wait! If patience, if faith, could only have lasted another twenty-four hours—until Christmas Eve!”

It was the first time for nearly a year that the sound of those words had been heard in that house. He bent earnestly over toward her; he leaned heavily forward with his hands on his knees and searched her features with loyal chiding.

“Has not Christmas Eve its mysteries?” he asked, “its secrets

for you and me? Think of Christmas Eve for you and me! Remember!”

Slowly as in a windless woods on a winter day a smoke from a woodchopper's smouldering fire will wander off and wind itself about the hidden life-buds of a young tree, muffling it while the atmosphere near by is clear, there now floated into the room to her the tender haze of old pledges and vows and of things unutterably sacred.

He noted the effect of his words and did not wait. He turned to his desk and, gathering up the sprigs of holly and cedar, began softly to cover her picture with them.

“Stay blinded and bewildered there,” he said, “until the hour comes when holly and cedar will speak: on Christmas Eve you will understand; you will then see whether in this work you have been—the Incident.”

Even while they had been talking the light of the short winter afternoon had perceptibly waned in the room.

She glanced through the windows at the darkening lawn; her eyes were tear-dimmed; to her it looked darker than it was. She held his hat up between her arms, making an arch for him to come and stand under.

“It is getting late,” she said in nearly the same tone of quiet warning with which she had spoken before. “There is no time to lose.”

He sprang up, without glancing behind him at his desk with its interrupted work, and came over and placed himself under the

arch of her arms, looking at her reverently.

But his hands did not take hold, his arms hung down at his sides—the hands that were life, the arms that were love.

She let her eyes wander over his clipped tawny hair and pass downward over his features to the well-remembered mouth under its mustache. Then, closing her quivering lips quickly, she dropped the hat softly on his head and walked toward the door. When she reached it, she put out one of her hands delicately against a panel and turned her profile over her shoulder to him:

“Do you know what is the trouble with both of those books?” she asked, with a struggling sweetness in her voice.

He had caught up his overcoat and as he put one arm through the sleeve with a vigorous thrust, he laughed out with his mouth behind the collar:

“I think I know what is the trouble with the authors of the books.”

“The trouble is,” she replied, “the trouble is that the authors are right and the books are right: men and women *are* only incidents to each other in life,” and she passed out into the hall.

“Human life itself for that matter is only an incident in the universe,” he replied, “if we cared to look at it in that way; but we’d better not!”

He was standing near the table in the middle of the room; he suddenly stopped buttoning his overcoat. His eyes began to wander over the books, the prints, the pictures, embracing in a final survey everything that he had brought together from such

distances of place and time. His work was in effect done. A sense of regret, a rush of loneliness, came over him as it comes upon all of us who reach the happy ending of toil that we have put our heart and strength in.

“Are you coming?” she called faintly from the hall.

“I am coming,” he replied, and moved toward the door; but there he stopped again and looked back.

Once more there came into his face the devotion of the student; he was on the commons where the race encamps; he was brother to all brothers who join work to work for common good. He was feeling for the moment that through his hands ran the long rope of the world at which men—like a crew of sailors—tug at the Ship of Life, trying to tow her into some divine haven.

His task was ended. Would it be of service? Would it carry any message? Would it kindle in American homes some new light of truth, with the eyes of mothers and fathers fixed upon it, and innumerable children of the future the better for its shining?

“Are you coming?” she called more quiveringly.

“I am coming,” he called back, breaking away from his reverie, and raising his voice so it would surely reach her.

II. THE TREE AND THE SUNSET

She had quitted the house and, having taken a few steps across the short frozen grass of the yard as one walks lingeringly when expecting to be joined by a companion, she turned and stood with her eyes fixed on the doorway for his emerging figure.

“To-morrow night,” he had said, smiling at her with one meaning in his words, “to-morrow night you will understand.”

“Yes,” she now said to herself, with another meaning in hers, “to-morrow night I must understand. Until to-morrow night, then, blinded and bewildered with holly and cedar let me be! Kind ignorance, enfold me and spare me! All happiness that I can control or conjecture, come to me and console me!”

And over herself she dropped a vesture of joy to greet him when he should step forth.

It was a pleasant afternoon to be out of doors and to go about what they had planned; the ground was scarcely frozen, there was no wind, and the whole sky was overcast with thin gray cloud that betrayed no movement. Under this still dome of silvery-violet light stretched the winter land; it seemed ready and waiting for its great festival.

The lawn sloped away from the house to a brook at the bottom, and beyond the brook the ground rose to a woodland hilltop. Across the distance you distinguished there the familiar trees of blue-grass pastures: white ash and black ash; white oak and red

oak; white walnut and black walnut; and the scaly-bark hickory in his roughness and the sycamore with her soft leopard-like limbs. The black walnut and the hickory brought to mind autumn days when children were abroad, ploughing the myriad leaves with booted feet and gathering their harvest of nuts—primitive food-storing instinct of the human animal still rampant in modern childhood: these nuts to be put away in garret and cellar and but scantily eaten until Christmas came.

Out of this woods on the afternoon air sounded the muffled strokes of an axe cutting down a black walnut partly dead; and when this fell, it would bring down with it bunches of mistletoe, those white pearls of the forest mounted on branching jade. To-morrow eager fingers would be gathering the mistletoe to decorate the house. Near by was a thicket of bramble and cane where, out of reach of cattle, bushes of holly thrived: the same fingers would be gathering that.

Bordering this woods on one side lay a cornfield. The corn had just been shucked, and beside each shock of fodder lay its heap of ears ready for the gathering wagon. The sight of the corn brought freshly to remembrance the red-ambered home-brew of the land which runs in a genial torrent through all days and nights of the year—many a full-throated rill—but never with so inundating a movement as at this season. And the same grain suggested also the smokehouses of all farms, in which larded porkers, fattened by it, had taken on posthumous honors as home-cured hams; and in which up under the black rafters home-made sausages were

being smoked to their needed flavor over well-chosen chips.

Around one heap of ears a flock of home-grown turkeys, red-mottled, rainbow-necked, were feeding for their fate.

On the other side of the woods stretched a wheat-field, in the stubble of which coveys of bob-whites were giving themselves final plumpness for the table by picking up grains of wheat which had dropped into the drills at harvest time or other seeds which had ripened in the autumn aftermath.

Farther away on the landscape there was a hemp-field where hemp-breakers were making a rattling reedy music; during these weeks wagons loaded with the gold-bearing fibre begin to move creaking to the towns, helping to fill the farmer's pockets with holiday largess.

Thus everything needed for Christmas was there in sight: the mistletoe—the holly—the liquor of the land for the cups of hearty men—the hams and the sausages of fastidious housewives—the turkey and the quail—and crops transmutable into coin. They were in sight there—the fair maturings of the sun now ready to be turned into offerings to the dark solstice, the low activities of the soil uplifted to human joyance.

One last thing completed the picture of the scene.

The brook that wound across the lawn at its bottom was frozen to-day and lay like a band of jewelled samite trailed through the olive verdure. Along its margin evergreens grew. No pine nor spruce nor larch nor fir is native to these portions of the Shield; only the wild cedar, the shapeless and the shapely, belongs there.

This assemblage of evergreens was not, then, one of the bounties of Nature; they had been planted.

It was the slender tapering spires of these evergreens with their note of deathless spring that mainly caught the eye on the whole landscape this dead winter day. Under the silvery-violet light of the sky they waited in beauty and in peace: the pale green of larch and spruce which seems always to go with the freshness of dripping Aprils; the dim blue-gray of pines which rather belongs to far-vaulted summer skies; and the dark green of firs—true comfortable winter coat when snows sift mournfully and icicles are spearing earthward.

These evergreens likewise had their Christmas meaning and finished the picture of the giving earth. Unlike the other things, they satisfied no appetite, they were ministers to no passions; but with them the Christmas of the intellect began: the human heart was to drape their boughs with its gentle poetry; and from their ever living spires the spiritual hope of humanity would take its flight toward the eternal.

Thus then the winter land waited for the oncoming of that strange travelling festival of the world which has roved into it and encamped gypsy-like from old lost countries: the festival that takes toll of field and wood, of hoof and wing, of cup and loaf; but that, best of all, wrings from the nature of man its reluctant tenderness for his fellows and builds out of his lonely doubts regarding this life his faith in a better one.

And central on this whole silent scene—the highest element

in it—its one winter-red passion flower—the motionless woman waiting outside the house.

At last he came out upon the step.

He cast a quick glance toward the sky as though his first thought were of what the weather was going to be. Then as he buttoned the top button of his overcoat and pressed his bearded chin down over it to make it more comfortable under his short neck, with his other hand he gave a little pull at his hat—the romantic country hat; and he peeped out from under the rustic brim at her, smiling with old gayeties and old fondnesses. He bulked so rotund inside his overcoat and looked so short under the flat headgear that her first thought was how slight a disguise every year turned him into a good family Santa Claus; and she smiled back at him with the same gayeties and fondnesses of days gone by. But such a deeper pang pierced her that she turned away and walked hurriedly down the hill toward the evergreens.

He was quickly at her side. She could feel how animal youth in him released itself the moment he had come into the open air. There was brutal vitality in the way his shoes crushed the frozen ground; and as his overcoat sleeve rubbed against her arm, there was the same leaping out of life, like the rubbing of tinder against tinder. Halfway down the lawn he halted and laid his hand heavily on her wrist.

“Listen to that!” he said. His voice was eager, excited, like a boy’s.

On the opposite side of the house, several hundred yards away,

the country turnpike ran; and from this there now reached them the rumbling of many vehicles, hurrying in close procession out of the nearest town and moving toward smaller villages scattered over the country; to its hamlets and cross-roads and hundreds of homes richer or poorer—every vehicle Christmas-laden: sign and foretoken of the Southern Yule-tide. There were matters and usages in those American carriages and buggies and wagons and carts the history of which went back to the England of the Georges and the Stuarts and the Henrys; to the England of Elizabeth, to the England of Chaucer; back through robust Saxon times to the gaunt England of Alfred, and on beyond this till they were lost under the forest glooms of Druidical Britain.

They stood looking into each other's eyes and gathering into their ears the festal uproar of the turnpike. How well they knew what it all meant—this far-flowing tide of bounteousness! How perfectly they saw the whole picture of the town out of which the vehicles had come: the atmosphere of it already darkened by the smoke of soft coal pouring from its chimneys, so that twilight in it had already begun to fall ahead of twilight out in the country, and lamp-posts to glimmer along the little streets, and shops to be illuminated to the delight of window-gazing, mystery-loving children—wild with their holiday excitements and secrecies. Somewhere in the throng their own two children were busy unless they had already started home.

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