

Allen James Lane

The Last Christmas Tree: An Idyl of Immortality



James Allen

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THE LAST CHRISTMAS TREE

LIFE on this earth, my children, means warmth. Do not forget that: whatever else it may be, life as we know it is warmth. Every living earthly thing is on fire and every fire is perpetually going out. When the warmth, when the fire, which is within us and which is perpetually going out, goes out for good, that is the end of us. It is the end of us as far as the life which we derive from the planet is ourselves. If our planetary life is our only life, when the planetary fire within us dies out, all of us dies out. If planetary fire be not our only vital flame, vital energy, then planetary dust and ashes are not the complete end of us, not the last word of our terrible lovable human story. And if this be true, what next may come, what kind of story will then begin with ourselves as its characters, what sort of existence for us will emerge from planetary extinction – that has always been the one greatest question, solicitude, hope, help, song, prayer of our race. It has never been more a problem than now when we know more about many other things than we have ever known yet can find out nothing about this thing and were never so impatient of our ignorance.

But meantime life on this earth implies warmth and carries warmth: that at least we positively have found out though without knowing what warmth is. Every living terrestrial creature is a candle, is a lamp. The rose is a perfumed lamp and when its bowl is without oil, that inimitable lamp so silently built to give off for a little while a few serene rays of vestal beauty as silently falls to pieces. The pine tree is a wild candle poised on a mountain table. The eagle is a winged candle burning to cinders on a peak of air. The albatross is a floating conflagration with all the ineffectual sea drenching its back and breast. The polar bear is a four-branch candle in a candlestick of snow. We human beings are laughing and tear-dripping candles, descending swiftly to our sockets. The sun and the stars are candles, whirling golden candles in the night of the universe, a long, long night. One by one they too burn down at those brief intervals which we with our puny measurements call ages. The whole myriad-lighted starry infinite, as far as we know, is a mere ballroom arranged for somebody's pleasure, somebody's dancing. The candles may last as long as the master of the revels requires them; and then perhaps at some strange daybreak of which we can conceive naught, they will go out to the final one – all go out at the coming-on of day. A strange day indeed without any suns, without any stars, these having been consumed during the ancient night. What our human race has always most wished to know, most liked to believe, is that Nature, the whole universe of Nature, is itself but a troubled night of being; and that when Nature has come to some kind of end, the night of existence will have come to an end also. Beyond will have to be some kind of day, endless day. Our human race has always believed or has tried to believe that on the Natureward confines of that day it will be discovered, assembled there, waiting there, having journeyed thither somehow: no matter how, so it arrive. For however dull and petty man may be, however despicable, brutish, abandoned, there has been no lack of sublimity in his vision, in his faith, of what he is to be: that after the last star has gone out in the night of Nature, the orb of his soul will have but begun to flash the immortality of its dawn.

Once and for an immeasurable time the whole earth was warm, and life on it being warmth, the life on it was everywhere. That was Nature's particular hour of the night just then – it called for a warm earth completely covered with life. Then one day something took place that had never taken place before. For the first time, for the very first time in the experience of the earth, out of one of its clouds there began to fall, not what had always fallen in the past, drops of rain, but tiny white crystals.

At first they were few; then more and more; then myriads, myriads, myriads, until the air grew grey with the thick host of them. Finally the scene became as if the sky were the floor of the desert, an upper inverted desert floor covered with fine white sand, with sand-dunes; and the winds, sweeping and roaring across this desert floor, lifted the dunes, scattered them and swept them along: avalanches of white sand, cloudy landslides of white sand – blown toward the earth underneath. No creature there below had ever seen the like; and as those avalanches slid down on their heads and backs, tumult, fear, flight followed. Perhaps caught in the raging, roaring tempest, perhaps having lost its way, some bird of brilliant-red plumage flew round and round like a wandering ball of fire, uttering its cry of bewilderment, of helplessness, of its fate – the prophetic note of the fate of everything.

When the first of these strange cold white crystals struck the warm earth, at once they vanished. So that for a while the vast catastrophe looked like some unfeeling prank of the clouds, some too grave a trick, heartless deception. But faster than the first could melt, others came, more, more, until the later ones arrived before the earlier ones had disappeared. And then they began to stay where they fell. They began to stay and to pile up one on another; they began to make a white spot, a frozen spot. We know nothing as to how and when and where; yet we are bound to understand that some time there was the first snowcloud, somewhere the first snowstorm, the first snowbank.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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