JAMES LANE ALLEN

THE DOCTOR'S CHRISTMAS EVE

MUSAICUM CHRISTMAS SPECIALS

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Part I

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I. The Children of Desire

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The morning of the twenty-fourth of December a quarter of a century ago opened upon the vast plateau of central Kentucky as a brilliant but bitter day—with a wind like the gales of March.

Out in a neighborhood of one of the wealthiest and most thickly settled counties, toward the middle of the forenoon, two stumpy figures with movements full of health and glee appeared on a hilltop of the treeless landscape. They were the children of the neighborhood physician, a man of the highest consequence in his part of the world; and they had come from their home, a white and lemon-colored eighteenth-century manor house a mile in their rear. Through the crystalline air the chimneys of this low structure, rising out of a green girdle of cedar trees, could be seen emptying unusual smoke which the wind in its gambolling pounced upon and jerked away level with the chimney-tops.

But if you had stood on the hill where the two children climbed into view and if your eye could have swept round the horizon with adequate radius of vision, it would everywhere have been greeted by the same wondrous harmonious spectacle: out of the chimneys of all dwellings scattered in comfort and permanence over that rich domestic land—a land of Anglo-Saxon American homes—more than daily winter smoke was pouring: one spirit of preparation, one mood of good will, warmed houses and

hearts. The whole visible heaven was receiving the incense of Kentucky Christmas fires; the whole visible earth was a panorama of the common peace.

The two dauntless, frost-defying wayfarers—what Emerson, meeting them in the depths of a New England winter, might have called two scraps of valor—were following across fields and meadows and pastures one of the footpaths which children who are friendly neighbors naturally make in order to get to each other, as the young of wild creatures trace for themselves upon the earth some new map of old hereditary traits and cravings. For the goal of their journey they were hurrying toward a house not yet in sight but hardly more than a mile ahead, where they were to spend Christmas Day and share in an old people's and children's Christmas-Tree party on Christmas Night—and where also they were to put into execution a plot of their own: about which a good deal is to be narrated.

They were thus transferring the nation's yearly festival of the home from their own roof-tree to that of another family as the place where it could be enacted and enjoyed. The tragical meaning of this arrangement was but too well understood by their parents. To them the abandonment of their own fireside at the season when its bonds should have been freshened and deepened scarcely seemed an unnatural occurrence. The other house had always been to them as a secondary home. It was the residence of their father's friend, a professor in the State University situated some miles off across fine country. His two surviving children, a boy and a girl of about their own ages, had always been their intimate associates. And the woman of

that household—the wife, the mother—all their lives they had been mysteriously impelled toward this gentlewoman by a power of which they were unconscious but by which they had been swayed.

The little girl wore a crimson hood and a brown cloak and the boy a crimson skull cap and a brown overcoat; and both wore crimson mittens; and both were red-legged and red-footed; for stockings had been drawn over their boots to insure warmth and to provide safeguard against slipping when they should cross the frozen Elkhorn or venture too friskily on silvery pools in the valley bottoms.

The chestnut braids of the girl falling heavily from under her hood met in a loop in the middle of her broad fat back and were tied there with a snip of ribbon that looked like a feather out of the wing of a bluejay. Her bulging hips overreached the borders of the narrow path, so that the boy was crowded out upon the rough ground as he struggled forward close beside her. She would not allow him to walk in front of her and he disdained to walk behind.

"Then walk beside me or go back!" she had said to him, laughing carelessly.

She looked so tight inside her wrappings, so like a jolly ambulatory small barrel well hooped and mischievously daubed here and there with vermilion, that you might have had misgivings as to the fate of the barrel, were it to receive a violent jolt and be rolled over. No thought of such mishap troubled her as she trotted forward, balancing herself as lightly on her cushioned feet as though she were wind-carried thistledown. Nor was she disturbed by her selfishness in monopolizing the path and forcing her brother

to encounter whatsoever the winter earth obtruded—stumps of forest trees, brambles of blackberry, sprouts of cane, or stalks of burdock and of Spanish needle. His footing was especially troublesome when he tried to straddle wide corn-rows with his short legs; or when they crossed a hemp-field where the butt-ends of the stalks serried the frost-gray soil like bayonet points. Altogether his exertions put him out of breath somewhat, for his companion was fleet and she made no allowance for his delays and difficulties.

Her hands, deep in the fleece-lined mittens, were comfortably warm; but she moreover kept them thrust into a muff of white fur, which also looked overfed and seemed of a gay harmony with its owner. This muff she now and then struck against her flexed knees in a vixenish playfulness as one beats a tambourine on a bent elbow; and at a certain point of the journey, having glanced sidewise at him and remarked his breath on the icy air, she lifted it to her mouth and spoke guardedly from behind it:—

"Remember the last thing Papa told us at the window, Herbert: we were to keep our mouths closed and to breathe through our noses. And remember also, my child, that we were to rely upon—*especially* to rely upon—the ribs and the diaphragm! I wonder why he thought it necessary to tell us that! Did he suppose that as soon as we got by ourselves or arrived at the Ousleys', we'd begin to rely upon something else, and perhaps try to breathe with our spines and elbows?"

Her eyes sparkled with mischief, and her laughter had the audacity of a child's satire, often more terrible in its small world than a sage's in his larger one. The instant she

spoke, you recognized the pertness and precocity of an American child—which, when seen at its best or at its worst, is without precedent or parallel among the world's children. She was the image of a hard bold crisp newness. Her speech was new, her ideas were new, her impertinence was new—except in this country. She appeared to have gathered newness during her short life, to be newer than the day she was born. The air was full of frost spangles that zigzagged about her as she danced along; they rather seemed like particles of salt especially provided to escort her character. If it had been granted Lot's wife with tears of repentance to dissolve away the crystals of her curiosity and resume the duties of motherhood,—though possibly permeated by a mild saline solution as a warning,—that salt-cured matron might admirably have adapted herself to the decrees of Providence by producing Elsie.

The boy as she administered her caution stopped; and shutting his own red mouth, which was like hers though more generous, he drew a long breath through his nostrils; then, throwing back his head, he blew this out with an open-mouthed puff, and a column of white steam shot up into the blue ether and was whirled away by the wind. He stood studying it awhile as it disappeared, for he was a close observer always—a perpetual watcher of the thing that is—sometimes an observer fearful to confront. Then he sprang forward to catch up with his sharp-tongued monitress, who had hurried on. As he came alongside, he turned his face toward her and made his reply, which was certainly deliberate enough in arriving:—

"We have to be *taught* the best way to breathe, Elsie; as anything else!"

The defence only brought on a fresh attack:—

"I wonder who teaches the young of other animals how to breathe! I should like to know who teaches kittens and puppies and calves and lambs how to breathe! How *do* they ever manage to get along without country doctors among them! Imagine a middle-aged sheep—old Dr. Buck—assembling a flock of lambs and trying to show them how to breathe!" Judging from Elsie's expression, the lambs in the case could not have thought very highly of this queer and genial Dr. Buck.

"But *they* are all four-legged creatures, Elsie; and *they* breathe backward and forward; if you are a two-legged animal and stand up straight, you breathe up and down: it's quite different! It's easier!"

"Then I suppose the fewer legs a thing has, the harder it is to get its breath. And I suppose if we ventured to stand on *one* leg, we'd all soon suffocate! Dear me! why *don't* all one-legged people die at once!"

The lad looked over the field of war on which it would seem that he was being mowed down by small-gun fire before he could get his father's heavy artillery into action. He decided to terminate the wordy engagement, a prudential manœuvre of the wiser head but slower tongue.

"Father is right," he declared. His manner of speaking was sturdy and decisive: it was meant to remind her first that he had enough gallantry as a male to permit her to crowd him out of the path; but that the moment a struggle for mental footing arose between them, he reserved the

whole road: the female could take to the weeds! He notified her also that he stood with his father not only in this puzzling question of legs and parlous types of respiration, but that the men in the family were regularly combined against the women—like good organized against evil!

But now something further had transpired. Had there been present on the winter fields that morning an ear trained to separate our complex human tones into simple ones—to disengage one from another the different fibres of meaning which always make up even the slenderest tendril of sound (as there is a cluster of grapes to a solitary stem), it might, as it noted one thing, have discovered another. While the boy asserted his father to be right in the matter they were debating, there escaped from him an accent of admission that his father was wrong—wrong in some far graver affair which was his discovery and his present trouble.

Therefore his voice, which should have been buoyant, for the instant was depressed; and his face, which should have been a healthy boy's happy face, was overcast as by a foreign interference. You might have likened it to a small luminary upon the shining disk of which a larger body, traversing its darkened orbit, has just begun to project a wavering shadow. And thus some patient astronomer of our inter-orbited lives, sweeping the spiritual heavens for signs of its pendent mysteries, here might have arrested his telescope to watch the portent of a celestial event: was there to take place the eclipse of a son by a father?

Certainly at least this weight of responsibility on the voice must have caused it to strike only the more winningly

upon any hearer. It was such a devoted, loyal voice when he thus spoke of his father, with a curious quavering huskiness of its own, as though the bass note of his distant manhood were already beginning to clamor to be heard.

The voice of the little girl contrariwise was a shrill treble. Had you first become aware of it at your back, you must instantly have wheeled to investigate the small creature it came from, as a wild animal quickly turns to face any sound that startles its instincts. Voltaire might have had such a voice if he had been a little girl. Yet to look at her, you would never have imagined that anything but the honey of speech could have dripped from so perfect a little rose. (Many surprises await mankind behind round amiable female faces: shrews are not *all* thin.)

Instead of being silenced by her brother's ultimatum, she did not deign to notice it, but continued to direct her voluble satire at her father—quite with the air of saying that a girl who can satirize a parent is not to be silenced by a son.

"... forever telling us that American children must have the newest and best way of doing everything.... My, my, my! The working of our jaws! And the drinking and the breathing; and the stretching and the bending: developing everything we have—and everything we haven't! I am even trying now to find an original American way to go to sleep at night and to wake up in the morning! Dear me, but old people can be silly without knowing it!" She laughed with much self-approval.

For Elsie had already entered into one of mankind's most dependable recreations—the joy of listening to our own words: into that economic arrangement of nature whereby

whatsoever a human being might lose through the vocal cords is returned to the owner along the auditory nerve! So that a woman can eat her colloquial cake times over: and each time, having devoured it, can return it to the storeroom and have it brought out as whole and fresh as ever—sometimes actually increased in size. And a man can send his vocal Niagara through his whirlpool rapids and catch it again above the falls! The more gold the delver unearths, the more he can empty back into the thinking mine. One can sit in his own cranial theatre and produce his own play: he can be stage and orchestra, audience and critic; and he can see that the claque does not get drowsy and slack: it never does—in *this* case!

The child now threw back her round winter-rose of a face and started along the path with a fresh outburst of speed and pride. Access of impertinence seemed to have released in her access of vitality. Perhaps it had. Perhaps it always does. Perhaps life itself at the full is sheer audacity.

The lad scrambled roughly along, and merely repeated the words that sufficed for him:—

"Father knows."

Suddenly he gave a laughing outcry, and stood still.

"Look!" he called out, with amusement at his plight.

He had run into some burdock, and the nettles had stuck to his yarn stockings like stinging bees—a cluster of them about his knees and calves. He drew off his gloves, showing the strong, overgrown hands of boyhood: they, like his voice, seemed impatiently reaching out for maturity.

When he overtook his companion, who had not stopped, he had transferred a few of the burrs to his skull cap. He had

done this with crude artistry—from some faint surviving impulse of primitive man to decorate his body with things around him in nature: especially his head (possibly he foresaw that his head would be most struck at). The lad was pleased with his caper; and, smiling, thrust his head across her path, expecting her to take sympathetic notice. He had reason to expect this, because on dull rainy days at home he often amused her with the things he did and the things he made: for he was a natural carpenter and toy-maker. But now she took only the contemptuous notice of disapproval. This morning her mind was intent on playthings of positive value: she was a little travelling ten-toed pagoda of holiday greed. Every Christmas she prepared for its celebration with a balancing eye to what it would cost her and what it would bring in: she always calculated to receive more than she gave: for Elsie, the Nativity must be made *to pay*!

He resented her refusal to approve his playfulness by so much as a smile, and he came back at her by doing worse:—

"Why didn't I think to bring all the burrs along and make a Christmas basket for Elizabeth? Now what will I give her?"

This drew out a caustic comment quickly enough:—

"Poor Elizabeth!"

A child resents injustice with a blow or rage or tears: the old have learned to endure without a sign—waiting for God's day of judgment (or their first good opportunity!).

He was furious at the way she said "Poor Elizabeth"—as though Elizabeth's hands would be empty of gifts from him.

"You *know* I have *bought* my presents for Elizabeth, Elsie!" he exclaimed. "But Elizabeth thinks more of what I

make than of what I *buy*," he continued hotly. "And the less it is worth, the more she values it. But you can't understand *that*, Elsie! And you needn't try!"

The little minx laughed with triumph that she had incensed him.

"I don't expect to try!" she retorted blithely. "I don't see that I'd gain anything, if I *did* understand. You and Elizabeth are a great deal too—"

He interrupted overbearingly:—

"Leave Elizabeth out! Confine your remarks to me!"

"My remarks will be wholly unconfined," said Elsie, as she trotted forward.

He scrambled alongside in silent rage. Perhaps he was thinking of his inability to reach protected female license. He may obscurely have felt that life's department of justice was being balked at the moment by its department of natural history—a not uncommon interference in this too crowded world. At least he put himself on record about it:—

"If you were a boy, Elsie, you'd get taken down a buttonhole!"

"Don't you worry about my buttonholes!" chirped Elsie. "My buttonholes are where they ought to be!"

It was not the first time that he had made something of this sort for Elizabeth. One morning of the May preceding he had pulled apart the boughs of a blooming lilac bush in the yard, and had seen a nest with four pale-green eggs. That autumn during a ramble in the woods and fields he had taken burrs and made a nest and deposited in it four pale-green half-ripe horse chestnuts.

Elizabeth, who did not amount to much in this world but breath and a soft cloud of hair and sentiment, had loyally carried it off to her cabinet of nests. These were duly arranged on shelves, and labelled according to species and life and love: "The Meadow Lark's"—"The Blue-bird's"—"The Orchard Oriole's"—"The Brown Thrasher's"; on and on along the shelves. At the end of a row she placed this treasured curiosity, and inscribed it, "An Imitation by a Young Animal."

Elizabeth's humor was a mild beam.

Do country children in that part of the world make such playthings now? Do they still look to wild life and not wholly to the shops of cities for the satisfying of their instincts for toys and games and fancies?

Do alder stalks still race down dusty country lanes as thoroughbred colts, afterwards to be tied in their stalls in fence corners with halters of green hemp? Does any little rustic instrument-maker now draw melodies from a homegrown corn-stalk? Across rattling window-panes of old farm-houses—between withered sashes—during long winter nights does there sound the æolian harp made with a hair from a horse-tail? Do boys still squeeze the red juice of poke-berries on the plumage of white barnyard roosters, thus whenever they wish bringing on a cock-fight between old far-squandered Cochins, who long previously had entered into a treaty as to their spheres of influence in a Manchuria of hens? Do the older boys some wet night lead the youngest around the corner of the house in the darkness and show him, there! rising out of the ground! the long expected Devil come at last (as a pumpkin carved and candle-lighted) for his own particular urchin? When in

autumn the great annual ceremony of the slaughter of the swine takes place on the farms at the approach of the winter solstice,—a festival running back to aboriginal German tribes before the beginnings of agriculture, when the stock that had been fattened on the mast and pasturage of the mountains was driven down into the villages and perforce killed to keep it from starving,—when this carnival of flesh recurs on Kentucky farms, do boys with turkey-quills or goose-quills blow the bladders up, tie the necks and hang them in smoke-houses or garrets to dry; and then at daybreak of Christmas morning, having warmed and expanded them before the fire, do they jump on them and explode them—a primitive folk-rite for making a magnificent noise ages older than the use of crackers and cannon?

Do children contrive their picture-frames by glueing October acorns and pine-cones to ovals of boards and giving the mass a thick coat of varnish? On winter nights do little girls count the seeds of the apples they are eating and pronounce over them the incantation of their destinies—thus in another guise going through the same charm of words that Marguerite used as she scattered earthward the petals of trust and ruin? Do they, sitting face to face bareheaded on sun-hued meadows, pluck the dandelion when its seed are clustered at the top like a ball of gauze, and with one breath try to blow these off: for the number of seed that remain will tell the too many years before they shall be asked in marriage? Do they slit the stems and cast them into the near brook and watch them form into ringlets and floating hair—as of a water spirit? Do they hold buttercups under each other's chins to see who likes butter

—that is, mind you, *good* butter! Romping little Juliets of Nature's proud courtyards—with young Montagues watching from afar! Sane little Ophelias of the garland at the water's brink—secure for many years yet from all sad Hamlets! Do country children do such things and have such notions now?

Perhaps once in a lifetime, on some summer day when the sky was filled with effulgence and white clouds, you may have seen a large low-flying bird cross the landscape straight away from you, so exactly poised under the edge of a cloud, that one of the wings beat in shadow while the other waved in light. Thus these two children, following their path over the fields that morning, ran along the dividing-line between the darkness and the light of their world.

On one side of them lay the thinning shadow of man's ancient romance with Nature which is everywhere most rapidly dying out in this civilization—the shadow of that romance which for ages was the earliest ray of his religion: in later centuries became the splendor of his art; then loomed as the historic background of his titanic myths and fables; and now only in obscure valleys is found lingering in the play of superstitious children at twilights before darkness engulfs them—the latest of the infants in the dusk of the oldest gods.

On the other side blazed the hard clear light of that realism of human life which is the unfolding brightness of the New World; that light of reason and of reasonableness which seems to take from man both his mornings and his evenings, with all their half-lights and their mysteries; and to leave him only a perpetual noonday of the actual in which everything loses its shadow. So the two ran that morning.

But so children ever run—between the fresh light and the old darkness of ever-advancing humanity—between the world's new birth and a forgetting.

On the brother and sister skipped and bounded, wild with health and Christmas joy. Their quarrel was in a moment forgotten—happy children! The nature of the little girl was not deep enough to remember a quarrel; the boy's nature was too deep to remember one. Crimson-tipped, madcap, winter spirits! The blue dome vaulting infinitely above them with all its clouds pushed aside; the wind throwing itself upon them at every step like some huge young animal force unchained for exercise and rude in its good-natured play. As they crossed a woodland pasture the hoary trees rocked and roared, strewing in their path bits of bark and rotten twigs and shattered sprigs of mistletoe. In an open meadow a yellow-breasted lark sprang reluctantly from its cuddling-place and drifted far behind them on the rushing air. In a corn-field out of a dried bunch of partridge grass a rabbit started softly and went bobbing away over the corn-rows—with its white flag run up at the rear end of the fortifications as a notice "Please not to shoot or otherwise trespass!" Alas, that so palpable and polite a request should be treated as so plain a target!

Once the little girl changed her trotting gait to a walk nearly as fast, so that her skirts swished from side to side of her plump hips with wren-like energy and briskness. Her mind was still harping on her father; and having satirized him, and adoring him, she now would fain approve him.

"My! but it's cold, Herbert! Papa says it is not sickness that plays havoc with you: it's not being ready for sickness;

and being ready depends upon how you have lived: it depends upon what you are; and that's where your virtue comes in, my child, if you have any virtue. We have been taught to stay out of doors when it is cold; and now we can come out when it is colder. We were ready for the crisis!" and Elsie pushed her nose into the air with smallish amusement.

The boy gravely pondered her words about crisis, and pondered his own before replying:—

"I wonder what kind of children we'd have been if we'd had some other father. Or some other *mother*," he added with a change of tone as he uttered that last word; and he looked askance at his sister to see whether she would glance at him.

She kept her face set straight forward; but she impatiently exclaimed:—

"Others, others, others! You are always thinking of *others*, Herbert!"

"I am one of them myself! I am one of the others myself!" cried the boy, relieved that his secret was his own; and bounding suddenly on the earth also as if with a sense of his kinship to its unseen host.

The question he had asked marked him: for he was one of the children who from the outset begin to ask of life what it means and who are surprised when there is no one to tell them. For him there was no rest until he solved some mystery or had at least found out where some mystery stood abandoned on the road—a mystery still. Her intelligence stopped short at what she perfectly knew. She saw with amazing clearness, but she beheld very little. Hers

was that order of intelligence which is gifted with vision of almost terrifying accuracy—at short range: life is a thin painted curtain, and its depths are the painted curtain's depths.

Once they came to a pair of bars which led into a meadow. The bars were of green timber and were very heavy. As he strained and tugged at them, she waited close behind him, dancing to the right and to the left so that there was a sound of mud-crystals being crushed under her tyrannical little fat feet.

"Hurry, hurry, hurry!" she exclaimed with impatience. "We may run in the cold, but we must not stand still in the cold;" and she kicked him on the heels and pummelled him between the shoulders with her muff.

"I am doing my best," he said, laughing heartily.

"Your best is not good enough," she urged, laughing heartily likewise.

"This bar is wedged tight. It's the sap that's frozen to the post. Look out there behind!"

He stepped back, and, with a short run, lifted his leg and kicked the bar with his full strength. The recoil threw him backward to the ground, but he was quickly on his feet again; and as the bar was now loosened, he let it down for her. She stepped serenely through and without looking back or waiting trotted on. He put the bars up and with a spurt soon overtook her, for the meadow they were now crossing had been closely grazed in the autumn and there was better walking. They went up rising ground and reached one of those dome-like elevations which are a feature of the blue-grass country.

Straight ahead of them half a mile away stood the house toward which they were hastening; a two-story brick house, lifted a little above its surroundings of yard and gardens and shrubbery and vines: an oak-tree over its roof, cedar-trees near its windows, ivy covering one of its walls, a lawn sloping from it to a thicket of evergreens where its Christmas Tree each year was cut.

The children greeted with fresh enthusiasm the sight of this charming, this ideal place to which they were transferring their Christmas plans and pleasures—abandoning their own hearthstone. There lived their father's friend; there lived Harold and Elizabeth, their friends; and there lived the wife and mother of the household—the woman toward whom from their infancy they had been herded as by a driving hand.

The tell-tale Christmas smoke of the land was pouring from its chimneys, showing that it was being warmed through and through for coming guests and coming festivities. At one end of the building, in an ell, was the kitchen; it sent forth a volume of smoke, the hospitable invitations of which there was no misunderstanding. At the opposite end was the parlor: it stood for the Spirit, as the kitchen for the honest Flesh: the wee travellers on the distant hilltop thought of the flesh first.

They had no idea of the origin of the American Christmas. They did not know that this vast rolling festival has migrated to the New World, drawing with it things gathered from many lands and centuries; that the cooking and the feasting crossed from pagan England; that the evergreen with its lights and gifts came from pagan

Germany; that the mystical fireside with its stockings was introduced from Holland; that the evergreen now awaiting them in the shut and darkened parlor of this Kentucky farm-house represented the sacred Tree which has been found in nearly every ancient land and is older than the Tree of Life in the literature of Eden.

As far as they thought of the antiquity of the Christmas festival at all, it had descended straight from the Holy Land and the Manger of Bethlehem; this error now led to complications.

The boy's crimson skull-cap had a peak which curled forward; and attached to this peak by several inches of crewel hung a round crimson ball about the size of the seed-ball of a sycamore. The shifting wind blew it hither and thither so that it buffeted him in the face and eyes. On this exposed height, especially, the wind raced free; and he ducked his head and turned his face sidewise toward her—an imp of winter joy—as he shouted across the gale:—

"If people are still baking such quantities of cake in memory of Christmas after all these hundreds of years, don't you suppose, Elsie, that the Apostles must have been fearful cake-eaters? To have left such an impression on the world! Cake *is* a kind of sacred thing at home even yet, isn't it? A fine cake looks still as if it was baked for an Apostle! Doesn't it? Now doesn't it?"

Elsie did not reply at once. Her younger brother was growing into the habit of saying unexpected things. Once after he had left the breakfast table, she had heard her father say to her mother that he had genius. Elsie was not positive as to all that genius comprised; but she at once