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***THE BRIDE
OF THE MISTLETOE***

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The Bride of the Mistletoe

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PREFACE

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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

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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 fatted 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 nighness 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

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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