

# A ROUND ROBIN OF A CHRISTMAS

## A STORY OF THE HAPPY BLENDING OF CHRISTMAS EFFORTS

BY  
HARRIETT PRESCOTT  
SPOFFORD.



THE LITTLE MOTHER,  
LOOKED OUT BEWILDERED.

(Copyright, by W. G. Chapman.)

**T**HE little mother, as her husband called her, sat in the porch where the vine leaves fluttered down, while her husband gathered the over-ripe grapes from the trellis.

She was old now, but still fair with beauty of the spirit blossomed out on the pale face whose smile was sweet as ever. Her husband, tall and thin and brown, glanced at her now and then as if he still saw the loveliness she wore when he brought her home, his wife. And as she looked up at him he was still the stalwart youth, the touch of whose strong hand once made her heart beat so madly. Their children were all gone; some to the further life, some returning for a holiday.

"To think," she said, "that the day you fetched me here I could sit in the door and see the river loopin' along all blue an' silver, and the low hills beyond, with their black pine woods an' the sunshine falling through, and all the wide ma'sh an' the haystacks, an' the colors changin' 'em. It seemed to me—I do' no' what it seemed to me! Oh, heaven can't be no more beautiful than that was, lookin' down this side the knoll. There's a big bunch 'most beyond your hand, jes' drippin' 'ith juice—"

"And one day you cut down the big elms at the back there—"

"Hated to. A tree allus seems to me to have a life of its own, 'most as much as a man has. I don't feel no assurance I ain't settin' a sperrit free. But there, who knows. Anyway it cleared a sightly spot for you on t'other side."

"I don't care. I wisht that swamp could be struck by lightning! Well, 'lightnin' never struck a hull ten-acre lot onst."

"It might set fire to it."

"An' burn up somebody's wood lot! Why, Huldly, I'm 'shamed on ye!"

"You orter be, I'm 'shamed on myself. But I feel jes' so. We ain't got many years to live, as you say; and I'd like to see that likeness of the promised land an' hev Laury see it. I do' no' as Asa'd care so much. Laury likes it open all about her. She'd stay here more. She'd hev her colored chalks out in no time. Them paintin' people down in Peeble's pastur 'd may be give her some hints. An' you know the minister said Laury hed a real gift for drorin'." But there, she won't be here till Christmas time. Sakes alive, father, what a Christmas it'd be 'ith that swamp burned up—"

"Well, well, wife, as long as we've got each other, an' the children, here and in heaven, and enough to keep the wolf from the door—"

"I know. And I'm silly. An' the dear Lord knows I ain't makin' no fuss. I'm jes' sayin' what I'd like. I did useter love that sight—an' the Lord made it. My, I guess he loved beautiful thin's, tew. I set by it. I'm happy as thin's are; but I'd be happier of that was thrown in."

"Like a chromo down to the store w'en you're tradin' your butter. Wal, it's time I give Brindle her supper, an' she give me mine. I hope the day'll be long o' comin' w'en I can't milk my cow an' take her sweet breath all made o' clover blows. There—I guess the birds may have all I've left. There's a bunch on top for luck. Yes, there they be, comin' after it now. You can't make jell 'ith them grapes, they're too ripe, little mother."

"They'll make sweetmeat, all right."

"An' the's nothin' nicer'n your grape sweetmeat 'ith my meat. But, Lor' sakes, I guess you'd cook sawdust so't would be tasty. I'm glad we've got suthin' to cook with—not like them city folks, dependin' on coal an' none to depend on. That's a noble wood-ple we've got. There's nothin' like bein' forehanded. Come, it's gittin' dampish, an' you'd better be thinkin' o' your rheumatics. Ef they'd dren that swamp you wouldn't be havin'

rheumatics. I lay most of our ills to the damp that rises fum there. I'd sell the place an' git away to-morrow ef there was any one to buy."

"No, no, I wouldn't have you. You've got a silly old wife, moonin' over something she's lost sight of," and she went in with him to put on the teakettle. He carried the basket of grapes on one arm, but he put the other arm about her to help her a little. "An' w'en we say grace, Huldly, we'll thank the Lord we even hed the picter, and hev it still to remember," he said.

In the doorway of the little red house on a lower terrace of the knoll two other persons were talking, as it chanced, upon the same theme. The curve of the hill hid all but a gable of the little red house in Peeble's pasture from the eyes of the old people above, and the forest of the swamp hid from it, also, the view of plain and river and hill that had so fed the poetry in the soul of the little mother.

"Well," said Luzanne, looking over her husband's shoulder, before the closed easel and color box, "it's great, this coming into the country to paint and photograph winter scenes and finding yourself shut off from the most glorious landscape you can imagine!"

"Shut off?" inquired her husband. "Oh, you're content with the day of small things, Eugene! I was till I saw what lies on the other side of that great wet wood down there."

"What is it? Morning and Greek temples? Sunshine and a rolling sea? The purple of the hills?"

"Titles for pictures? No; pictures themselves. Just the vale of Avoca, the vale of Cashmire, the valley of Avilion, a fragment of Eden. Something idyllic and perfect. I was on the edge of the wood and got in—it was so alluring—deeper and deeper, till there I was scared to death of the morass—"

"Poor child."

"But it wasn't so wet, after all—it's been so dry—though there were spots just steaming where the sun broke through. But I skirted them and made for the light, and the trees grew thinner, and suddenly I was at the end, and there, below and beyond, lay the very outskirts of Paradise. Yes, indeed, a view that would make our everlasting fortunes and give us satisfaction in our souls if we could put even bits of it on canvas. Why, I should feel I'd been chosen for sanctification if I were only allowed to do it. You must come down with me and see for yourself, Eugene. I never shall be content to go on painting old Purple behind us there, now I've seen this. And fancy, if that swampy wood were out of the way, we could sit here all winter and sketch, and feel an uplift in every brushful of paint, and every one of the pictures would be hung on the line next spring. Isn't it hard to be shut out of Paradise by a bit of woods? It's as bad as a flaming sword."

"I'm not shut out of Paradise," said her husband, looking at her with the red in her cheeks, the spark in her eyes, her whole face full of the spirit of life.

"Oh, I know, it's all delightful, our being together here by ourselves. It is Paradise, of course. But that view out there would justify it, and it's vexatious to have to go asid for what we might have from our own door. And it's too far, in the winter weather, every day. There's a long interval of champagne country from tender green to dark, with warm ruscuss, and a bluish of red sapphire, breated with creeks that are neither blue nor green, but the green of the grass and the blue of the sky and the gold of the sun; and in the middle distance a river skims along, the blue sloping into it, and beyond are hills clothed with level layers of pine forest, and you look straight into their depths as if you penetrated mysteries, and over all is a bountiful, enormous sky, blue as blue, and carrying here and there a mare's tail of a snowy cloud. And gulls—you ought to see the 10,000 gulls swooping round the river! Oh, it's no 'ese staying here with that to tantalize us, the breadth, the largeness, the freedom—and only old purple hills to console us. One picture of old Purple and there's an end. But this—why, you could paint all winter and not exhaust it. Think of it, with the blue shadows of the snow, with sunsets like fires on a great hearth, in a dark blue midnight, while the stars shake in the wind! If we could wake up some morning and find it gone!"

"The days of miracles are gone."

"Oh, my, it makes me cross!"

"I wouldn't be cross, sweet purveyor of motifs. I'd come in and make my husband a cup of tea, and then dress for dinner in my gown with the sea gray chiffons and make believe pearls, and I'd play I was a Venetian lady supping with old Tizian—"

"Nothing, if not modest. I believe you'd be satisfied to paint old Purple forever!"

"With my wife looking over my shoulder; yes."



"BUT IT WASN'T SO WET AFTER ALL."

"For my part, I shan't be happy again till I forget that scene, with its blues and greens and vapors and sunbeams. We can't get down there to sketch in the winter months."

"But we can find a great deal in old Purple. Come; it's a damp breath blows over from that swamp. A good frost will make that right, however. Come in and shut the door. I like to feel the door shut you and me in from the rest of the world."

If there is no such thing as telepathy there certainly ought to be, in order to explain some things. It was in this same half hour that the Champion family down in the Port came in, one by one, shivering and shrugging their shoulders, and brightening at sight of the big fire their mother had had laid on the hearth of the library, its flames making the whole room rosy.

"Nothing beats fire," said Rose Champion, pulling off her gloves and holding out her little hands, sparkling with rings.

"Dante's conception of the deepest hell as a big block of ice just suits mine," said Katherine.

"One might as well starve as perish with cold," said Rose.

"The English call perishing with cold starving."

"I was thinking of the poor people who can't get coal."

"I myself believe the world will come to an end with cold," said Sophy, "and not with fire. The sun will cool, and the earth will freeze. Minus 270."

"Well, that's a good way off, I hope," said their father, coming in. "Mighty unseasonable weather," as they ran and warmed him with their welcome. "The first fire of autumn," he said, rubbing his hands and taking possession of his chair. "It always has a promise of cheer. Where'd you get this wood, my love? It snaps like apple wood."

"It is; it's the old apple tree that came ashore at the foot of the garden in the freshet," said Mrs. Champion.

"Lucky flotsam. I wish there'd be a freshet that would bring an old apple tree to every family in town."

"I guess you'll be that freshet, pa," said Sophy.

"I'm sure I don't know what some of them are going to do," said his wife, pulling up her shawl in sympathy with her thoughts, "with no money to buy coal at present prices, and no coal to be bought at any price."

"Thank goodness, we filled our bins in April. But it looks now as if we

would have to go shares with some that didn't."

"Why, how can we? We'd freeze ourselves."

"I don't know; but some way must be provided. In this interior place people would perish before we could get the coal from abroad or from Nova Scotia."

"I suppose they'll be glad even of wood," said Mrs. Champion. "It's dreadful for them—and Christmas coming."

"Poor sort of Christmas for them."

"Dreadful," echoed Katherine.

"I wish there were something we could do—"

"Do! To supply a whole township with heat?"

"We might cut down the oaks on the avenue."

"Those magnificent oaks! I guess not!" said Rob, looking up from his book. "Why, it would ruin the whole place! Don't you let them, father!"

"I've no idea of it. Those oaks are as old as oaks can be and live. They are full of history. No, indeed."

"And you would rather people should freeze!" cried Rose.

"Give them your rings to buy fuel, Rose," said her father.

"My engagement ring! And the ring was Donald's mother's—and she dead!"

"I value these pines similarly. They were my father's; and he is dead."

"What can we do, pa, dear?"

"I don't know. Unless you take the money you would have at Christmas and do what you please with that. Fifty dollars apiece is what you've always had. And I'll double it. That's the best I can do."

"Oh!" said Sophy, softly. "And there are so many things I want to do with mine."

"I, too," said Bob.

"Oh, I'd counted so much on that fifty," said Rose.

"Well, you can take your choice," said their father. "I've taken mine. I shall go without a new overcoat, and your mother'll have to make her old sealskin do."

"I'm sure I shall be glad," said the mother.

"But you can't get coal. And it would buy so little wood, after all."

"Because you can't stop some of the suffering in the world is no reason you shouldn't stop any," said Katherine. "I don't care! It's wicked to be having Christmas presents and all that when people are dying of cold."

And it would keep four or five families warm all winter."

"Four or five?" said her father. "With economy, half again as many."

"Done, then!" exclaimed Katherine. "And I see the gold chain and baroque pearl I was to have going up in smoke."

"And my set of Pater," ruefully.

"And my amethyst heart."

"A real holocaust," said their father.

"Father," said Bob, "I've an idea worth two of that. You know that piece of swamp land of yours up country, on the old Peebles farm? There's enough wood in that for 50 families—black birch, gray birch, yellow birch, brown ash—I don't know what—and—all—"

"But, Bob, that's a splendid piece of forest. I should hate to cut it down."

"Even to keep 50 families, or maybe 100, from distress? The girls' money will pay for cutting and hauling and kilndrying and distributing, and it can all be done before Christmas—and there you are!"

"Bob," said Mr. Champion, "you're a genius! There we are!"

"There we are!" said the girls in one brave breath. "It will be a good Christmas present for them, won't it, pa?"

"It makes me all of a glow now to think of it!" said Rose. "I wonder what Donald will say. Fifty or 100 families made comfortable by going without some trinkets—though I did want that English edition of 'Pater.' Why, we don't know 100 poor families."

"The General Charitable does. When shall we begin, father? I'll oversee it for you," said Rob.

"To-morrow morning, early," said his father. "There won't be an hour to spare if you want that wood delivered by or before Christmas. I'll have drains put in as we go along and get a good piece of grass land out of it. Well, I shall sleep better to-night."

If the people on the knoll had listened that next day and many a day thereafter, they might have heard, or thought they heard, a sound of chopping in the swamp woods, faint, far off, muffled in the rustling of falling leaves and the crashing of branches. But the painting people were busy with Old Purple at the back of the little red house, and little mother was getting her mince meat ready for Christmas, and what with stoning raisins and slicing citron and sifting spices and boiling down cider, she was too much occupied to think of anything but her work and of Asa's and Laury's home-coming.

"It seems to me the woodpeckers are dreftful busy down in the swamp," she said once.

"Probly the trees hev borers," said her husband.

"Why, that's too bad," she said with her quick habit of kindness, and went on about her work.

She had just put her mince meat into its stone crock to mellow, when a sudden access of her rheumatism sent her to bed with jugs of hot water at her feet and opodeldoc fannels all over her, and copious draughts of composition powder, her eyes following her husband through the open door in fright and dismay at his attempts to do her work, till the painting lady, as they called her, happened up the hill, and, stranger though she was, her self took hold and put things into shape and cooked enough to last till Laury should come, having written to Laury to make haste. "I wouldn't send for her," she said, "but we have to go and arrange our exhibition, and all our things. But I shan't go till Laury comes. We're coming back to have our first Christmas together here but we must go as soon as we can."

"You're real good," sighed the little woman. "I'm more obleeged to you'n I can say. I hate to see him stewing about like a kitchen-colonel. But, oh, I did want to be around when Laury come. I be a little better." She took the painting lady's hand and raised it to her lips. "Oh, you mustn't!" the lady cried; and she bent down and kissed the withered cheek.

"The Lord'll reward you for the good you've done, an' the cheer you've give," said the little mother. "Ef he don't in no other way, he's done a mighty lot for you in makin' you jes' you."

And so it came to pass that two or three weeks later the stage set down the painting people one night at a point on the highway a few rods from the little red house in Peeble's pasture, and they picked their way along through the dark in some concern over a bright light shining from the windows. "I sensed you'd be comin' about this time," said Laury, opening the door. "And I t'ought 'twould be kinder lonesome-like for you in the dark an' cold, and I come down an' lighted the fires an' got you some supper, an' some of mother's mince pies. And I've had a real good time lookin' at the thin's you've hung up. They've learned me lots. Mother's a



"OH, EUGENE! THE MIRACLE HAS HAPPENED"

sight better. She's been settin' up wrapt in a comforter by the kitchen stove. I ain't let her go to the winder yet; it's so draughty. An' then I'm keepin' the winder for Christmas. I'm goin' to push her chair over there to-morrow mornin', Christmas mornin', you know. The Lord's got a surprise for her there. He's got suthin' for her she's longed for ever since Bates was hung—the grandest Christmas present ever you see. I hope the sun'll be out. It's ben rainin' stiddy the whole endurin' week. January thaw's lost count an' come ahead o' time, I guess; an' there ain't a speck o' snow in the valley. I wouldn't wonder but you'll find your share in mother's Christmas, tew."

"What in the world are you talking about?" asked the painting lady.

"Come up an' tell her if you do," said Laury, and snatched up her shawl and ran away laughing.

The sun was streaming into the room before the painting people, tired with their journey and their work, awoke. It was at the same moment that every team to be had down at the Port was delivering great loads of wood at 50 gates, with the best Christmas wishes of the Champion family. It was only partially dry, to be sure, but there was enough pine-tree kindling to insure a royal blaze and every burning armful would dry another armful.

"Luzanne!" cried her husband, rubbing his sleepy eyes; "what in the name of mercy are you doing?" For she was kneeling at the window with both hands clasped, her hair falling about her, her face shining with ecstasy.

"Come and see!" she cried. "Oh, Eugene, the miracle has happened! Oh, can't you buy the place? Come, come and see! The swamp is gone, all gone! What am I doing? I am looking into heaven!"

For there, all the soft rusts and russets veiled and glowing under a translucence of violet vapors smitten with the sun, lay the long intervals, the river sparkling through it curve after curve alive with light; beyond it the pine-clad hills, their black-green depths casting purple gleams across them, and a great pale heaven, still with a flush of rosy sunrise in it, soaring overhead.

It was at the same instant that Laury, having helped her mother, rolled in blankets, into her chair, had, with Asa's and her father's help, pushed it to the window and pulled up the white shade. The little mother looked out bewildered. "No snow?" she said. Then she looked back at her husband, at the others, and looked out again. "Have I died?" she whispered, hoarsely.

"Oh, mother, mother, don't you see what's happened?" cried Laury. "Father's kep' it for a surprise. It's the dear Lord's Christmas gift to you!"

"Oh!" she said, clasping her little thin hands. "It gives me youth again. It's what I had, so long ago, with health and strength an' love. Oh, father dear, I think heaven'll look jes' so! You don't suppose it's a dream, a vision—that it won't last?"

"Last?" said her husband. "They've dreened the swamp and are goin' to lay it down to grass. An' there'll be no more damp risings to make rheumatics. An' you'll see it every day of your life as long as we live, little mother."

"It's too good, it's too good," she said. "I must be goin' to die. I've heern tell o' folks dreamin' dreams an' seein' visions w'en they was goin' to die. Well, well, I don't deserve it, but what a Christmas mornin'. You and the two children here an' the delectable country there. Oh, it's beautiful! It makes the world seem a fit place for Christ to have been born in. I hope the Lord knows how thankful I be." And all day long they heard her singing softly to herself part of an old communion anthem, "Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good."