A CHRISTMAS−EVE SUIT

E. P. Roe

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The Christmas holidays had come, and with them a welcome vacation for Hedley Marstern. Although as yet a briefless young lawyer, he had a case in hand which absorbed many of his thoughts—the conflicting claims of two young women in his native village on the Hudson. It must not be imagined that the young women were pressing their claims except as they did so unconsciously, by virtue of their sex and various charms. Nevertheless, Marstern was not the first lawyer who had clients over whom midnight oil was burned, they remaining unaware of the fact.

If not yet a constitutional attorney, he was at least constitutionally one. Falling helplessly in love with one girl simplifies matters. There are no distracting pros and cons— nothing required but a concentration of faculties to win the enslaver, and so achieve mastery. Marstern did not appear amenable to the subtle influences which blind the eyes and dethrone reason, inspiring in its place an overwhelming impulse to capture a fortuitous girl because (to a heated imagination) she surpasses all her sex. Indeed, he was level−headed enough to believe that he would never capture any such girl; but he hoped to secure one who promised to make as good a wife as he would try to be a husband, and with a fair amount of self−esteem, he was conscious of imperfections. Therefore, instead of fancying that any of his fair acquaintances were angels, he had deliberately and, as some may think, in a very cold−blooded fashion, endeavored to discover what they actually were. He had observed that a good deal of prose followed the poetry of wooing and the lunacy of the honeymoon; and he thought it might be well to criticise a little before marriage as well as after it.

There were a number of charming girls in the social circle of his native town; and he had, during later years, made himself quite impartially agreeable to them. Indeed, without much effort on his part he had become what is known as a general favorite. He had been too diligent a student to become a society man, but was ready enough in vacation periods to make the most of every country frolic, and even on great occasions to rush up from the city and return at some unearthly hour in the morning when his partners in the dance were not half through their dreams. While on these occasions he had shared in the prevailing hilarity, he nevertheless had the presentiment that some one of the laughing, light−footed girls would one day pour his coffee and send him to his office in either a good or a bad mood to grapple with the problems awaiting him there. He had in a measure decided that when he married it should be to a girl whom he had played with in childhood and whom he knew a good deal about, and not to a chance acquaintance of the world at large. So, beneath all his diversified gallantries he had maintained a quiet little policy of observation, until his thoughts had gradually gathered around two of his young associates who, unconsciously to themselves, as we have said, put in stronger and stronger claims every time he saw them. They asserted these claims in the only way in which he would have recognized them—by being more charming, agreeable, and, as he fancied, by being better than the others. He had not made them aware, even by manner, of the distinction accorded to them; and as yet he was merely a friend.

But the time had come, he believed, for definite action. While he weighed and considered, some prompter fellows might take the case out of his hands entirely; therefore he welcomed this vacation and the opportunities it afforded.

The festivities began with what is termed in the country a "large party"; and Carrie Mitchell and Lottie Waldo were both there, resplendent in new gowns made for the occasion. Marstern thought them both charming. They danced equally well and talked nonsense with much the same ease and vivacity. He could not decide which was the prettier, nor did the eyes and attentions of others afford him any aid. They were general favorites, as well as

himself, although it was evident that to some they might become more, should they give encouragement. But they were apparently in the heyday of their girlhood, and thus far had preferred miscellaneous admiration to individual devotion. By the time the evening was over Marstern felt that if life consisted of large parties he might as well settle the question by the toss of a copper.

It must not be supposed that he was such a conceited prig as to imagine that such a fortuitous proceeding, or his best efforts afterward, could settle the question as it related to the girls. It would only decide his own procedure. He was like an old marauding baron, in honest doubt from which town he can carry off the richest booty—that is, in case he can capture any one of them. His overtures for capitulation might be met with the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" and he be sent limping off the field. Nevertheless, no man regrets that he must take the initiative, and he would be less than a man who would fear to do so. When it came to this point in the affair, Marstern shrugged his shoulders and thought, "I must take my chances like the rest." But he wished to be sure that he had attained this point, and not lay siege to one girl only to wish afterward it had been the other.

His course that evening proved that he not only had a legal cast of mind but also a judicial one. He invited both Miss Mitchell and Miss Waldo to take a sleigh−ride with him the following evening, fancying that when sandwiched between them in the cutter he could impartially note his impressions. His unsuspecting clients laughingly accepted, utterly unaware of the momentous character of the trial scene before them.

As Marstern smoked a cigar before retiring that night, he admitted to himself that it was rather a remarkable court that was about to be held. He was the only advocate for the claims of each, and finally he proposed to take a seat on the bench and judge between them. Indeed, before he slept he decided to take that august position at once, and maintain a judicial impartiality while noting his impressions.

Christmas Eve happened to be a cold, clear, star−lit night; and when Marstern drove to Miss Waldo's door, he asked himself, "Could a fellow ask for anything daintier and finer" than the red−lipped, dark−eyed girl revealed by the hall−lamp as she tripped lightly out, her anxious mamma following her with words of unheeded caution about not taking cold, and coming home early. He had not traversed the mile which intervened between the residences of the two girls before he almost wished he could continue the drive under the present auspices, and that, as in the old times, he could take toll at every bridge, and encircle his companion with his arm as they bounced over the "thank−'ee mams." The frosty air appeared to give keenness and piquancy to Miss Lottie's wit, and the chime of the bells was not merrier or more musical than her voice. But when a little later he saw blue−eyed Carrie Mitchell in her furs and hood silhouetted in the window, his old dilemma became as perplexing as ever. Nevertheless, it was the most delightful uncertainty that he had ever experienced; and he had a presentiment that he had better make the most of it, since it could not last much longer. Meanwhile, he was hedged about with blessings clearly not in disguise, and he gave utterance to this truth as they drove away.

"Surely there never was so lucky a fellow. Here I am kept warm and happy by the two finest girls in town."

"Yes," said Lottie; "and it's a shame you can't sit on both sides of us."

"I assure you I wish it were possible. It would double my pleasure."

"I'm very well content," remarked Carrie, quietly, "as long as I can keep on the right side of people—"

"Well, you are not on the right side to−night," interrupted Lottie.

"Good gracious!" thought Marstern, "she's next to my heart. I wonder if that will give her unfair advantage;" but Carrie explained:

"Of course I was speaking metaphorically."

"In that aspect of the case it would be a shame to me if any side I have is not right toward those who have so honored me," he hastened to say.

"Oh, Carrie has all the advantage—she is next to your heart."

"Would you like to exchange places?" was the query flashed back by Carrie.

"Oh, no, I'm quite as content as you are."

"Why, then, since I am more than content—exultant, indeed—it appears that we all start from excellent premises to reach a happy conclusion of our Christmas Eve," cried Marstern.

"Now you are talking shop, Mr. Lawyer—Premises and Conclusions, indeed!" said Lottie; "since you are such a happy sandwich, you must be a tongue sandwich, and be very entertaining."

He did his best, the two girls seconding his efforts so genially that he found himself, after driving five miles, psychologically just where he was physically—between them, as near to one in his thoughts and preferences as to

the other.

"Let us take the river road home," suggested Lottie.

"As long as you agree," he answered, "you both are sovereign potentates. If you should express conflicting wishes, I should have to stop here in the road till one abdicated in favor of the other, or we all froze."

"But you, sitting so snugly between us, would not freeze," said Lottie. "If we were obstinate we should have to assume our pleasantest expressions, and then you could eventually take us home as bits of sculpture. In fact, I'm getting cold already."

"Are you also, Miss Carrie?"

"Oh, I'll thaw out before summer. Don't mind me."

"Well, then, mind me," resumed Lottie. "See how white and smooth the river looks. Why can't we drive home on the ice? It will save miles—I mean it looks so inviting."

"Oh, dear!" cried Carrie, "I feel like protesting now. The longest way round may be both the shortest and safest way home."

"You ladies shall decide. This morning I drove over the route we would take to−night, and I should not fear to take a ton of coal over it."

"A comparison suggesting warmth and a grate−fire. I vote for the river," said Lottie, promptly.

"Oh, well, Mr. Marstern, if you've been over the ice so recently— I only wish to feel reasonably safe."

"I declare!" thought Marstern, "Lottie is the braver and more brilliant girl; and the fact that she is not inclined to forego the comfort of the home−fire for the pleasure of my company, reveals the difficulty of, and therefore incentive to, the suit I may decide to enter upon before New Year's."

Meanwhile, his heart on Carrie's side began to grow warm and alert, as if recognizing an affinity to some object not far off. Granting that she had not been so brilliant as Lottie, she had been eminently companionable in a more quiet way. If there had not been such bursts of enthusiasm at the beginning of the drive, her enjoyment appeared to have more staying powers. He liked her none the less that her eyes were often turned toward the stars or the dark silhouettes of the leafless trees against the snow. She did not keep saying, "Ah, how lovely! What a fine bit that is!" but he had only to follow her eyes to see something worth looking at.

"A proof that Miss Carrie also is not so preoccupied with the pleasure of my company that she has no thoughts for other things," cogitated Marstern. "It's rather in her favor that she prefers Nature to a grate fire. They're about even yet."

Meanwhile the horse was speeding along on the white, hard expanse of the river, skirting the west shore. They now had only about a mile to drive before striking land again; and the scene was so beautiful with the great dim outlines of the mountains before them that both the girls suggested that they should go leisurely for a time.

"We shouldn't hastily and carelessly pass such a picture as that, any more than one would if a fine copy of it were hung in a gallery," said Carrie. "The stars are so brilliant along the brow of that highland yonder that they form a dia—oh, oh! what IS the matter?" and she clung to Marstern's arm.

The horse was breaking through the ice.

"Whoa!" said Marstern, firmly. Even as he spoke, Lottie was out of the sleigh and running back on the ice, crying and wringing her hands.

"We shall be drowned," she almost screamed hysterically.

"Mr. Marstern, what SHALL we do? Can't we turn around and go back the way we came?"

"Miss Carrie, will you do what I ask? Will you believe me when I say that I do not think you are in any danger?"

"Yes, I'll do my best," she replied, catching her breath. She grew calm rapidly as he tried to reassure Lottie, telling her that water from the rising of the tide had overflowed the main ice and that thin ice had formed over it, also that the river at the most was only two or three feet deep at that point. But all was of no avail; Lottie stood out upon the ice in a panic, declaring that he never should have brought them into such danger, and that he must turn around at once and go back as they came.

"But, Miss Waldo, the tide is rising, and we may find wet places returning. Besides, it would bring us home very late. Now, Miss Carrie and I will drive slowly across this place and then return for you. After we have been across it twice you surely won't fear."

"I won't be left alone; suppose you two should break through and disappear, what would become of ME?"

"You would be better off than we," he replied, laughing.

"I think it's horrid of you to laugh. Oh, I'm so cold and frightened! I feel as if the ice were giving way under my feet."

"Why, Miss Lottie, we just drove over that spot where you stand. Here, Miss Carrie shall stay with you while I drive back and forth alone."

"Then if you were drowned we'd both be left alone to freeze to death."

"I pledge you my word you shall be by that grate−fire within less than an hour if you will trust me five minutes."

"Oh, well, if you will risk your life and ours too; but Carrie must stay with me."

"Will YOU trust me, Miss Carrie, and help me out of this scrape?"

Carrie was recovering from her panic, and replied, "I have given you my promise."

He was out of the sleigh instantly, and the thin ice broke with him also. "I must carry you a short distance," he said. "I cannot allow you to get your feet wet. Put one arm around my neck, so; now please obey as you promised."

She did so without a word, and he bore her beyond the water, inwardly exulting and blessing that thin ice. His decision was coming with the passing seconds; indeed, it had come. Returning to the sleigh he drove slowly forward, his horse making a terrible crunching and splashing, Lottie meanwhile keeping up a staccato accompaniment of little shrieks.

"Ah, my charming creature," he thought, "with you it was only, 'What will become of ME?' I might not have found out until it was too late the relative importance of 'me' in the universe had we not struck this bad crossing; and one comes to plenty of bad places to cross in a lifetime."

The area of thin ice was not very narrow, and he was becoming but a dim and shadowy outline to the girls. Lottie was now screaming for his return. Having crossed the overflowed space and absolutely assured himself that there was no danger, he returned more rapidly and found Carrie trying to calm her companion.

"Oh," sobbed Lottie, "my feet are wet and almost frozen. The ice underneath may have borne you, but it won't bear all three of us. Oh, dear, I wish I hadn't—I wish I was home; and I feel as if I'd never get there."

"Miss Lottie, I assure you that the ice will hold a ton, but I'll tell you what I'll do. I shall put you in the sleigh, and Miss Carrie will drive you over. You two together do not weigh much more than I do. I'll walk just behind you with my hands on the back of the sleigh, and if I see the slightest danger I'll lift you out of the sleigh first and carry you to safety."

This proposition promised so well that she hesitated, and he lifted her in instantly before she could change her mind, then helped Carrie in with a quiet pressure of the hand, as much as to say, "I shall depend on you."

"But, Mr. Marstern, you'll get your feet wet," protested Carrie.

"That doesn't matter," he replied good−naturedly. "I shall be no worse off than Miss Lottie, and I'm determined to convince her of safety. Now go straight ahead as I direct."

Once the horse stumbled, and Lottie thought he was going down head first. "Oh, lift me out, quick, quick!" she cried.

"Yes, indeed I will, Miss Lottie, as soon as we are opposite that grate fire of yours."

They were soon safely over, and within a half−hour reached Lottie's home. It was evident she was a little ashamed of her behavior, and she made some effort to retrieve herself. Bat she was cold and miserable, vexed with herself and still more vexed with Marstern. That a latent sense of justice forbade the latter feeling only irritated her the more. Individuals as well as communities must have scapegoats; and it is not an unusual impulse on the part of some to blame and dislike those before whom they have humiliated themselves.

She gave her companions a rather formal invitation to come in and get warm before proceeding further; but Marstern said very politely that he thought it was too late, unless Miss Carrie was cold. Carrie protested that she was not so cold but that she could easily wait till she reached her own fireside.

"Well, good−night, then," and the door was shut a trifle emphatically.

"Mr. Marstern," said Carrie, sympathetically, "your feet must be very cold and wet after splashing through all that ice−water."

"They are," he replied; "but I don't mind it. Well, if I had tried for years I could not have found such a test of character as we had to−night."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, well, you two girls did not behave exactly alike. I liked the way you behaved. You helped me out of a confounded scrape."

"Would you have tried for years to find a test?" she asked, concealing the keenness of her query under a laugh.

"I should have been well rewarded if I had, by such a fine contrast," he replied.

Carrie's faculties had not so congealed but that his words set her thinking. She had entertained at times the impression that she and Lottie were his favorites. Had he taken them out that night together in the hope of contrasts, of finding tests that would help his halting decision? He had ventured where the intuitions of a girl like Carrie Mitchell were almost equal to second−sight; and she was alert for what would come next.

He accepted her invitation to come in and warm his feet at the glowing fire in the grate, which Carrie's father had made before retiring. Mrs. Mitchell, feeling that her daughter was with an old friend and playmate, did not think the presence of a chaperon essential, and left the young people alone. Carrie bustled about, brought cake, and made hot lemonade, while Marstern stretched his feet to the grate with a luxurious sense of comfort and complacency, thinking how homelike it all was and how paradisiacal life would become if such a charming little Hebe presided over his home. His lemonade became nectar offered by such hands.

She saw the different expression in his eyes. It was now homage, decided preference for one and not mere gallantry to two. Outwardly she was demurely oblivious and maintained simply her wonted friendliness. Marstern, however, was thawing in more senses than one, and he was possessed by a strong impulse to begin an open siege at once.

"I haven't had a single suit of any kind yet, Carrie," he said, dropping the prefix of "Miss," which had gradually been adopted as they had grown up.

"Oh, well, that was the position of all the great lawyers once," she replied, laughing. Marstern's father was wealthy, and all knew that he could afford to be briefless for a time.

"I may never be great; but I shall work as hard as any of them," he continued. "To tell you the honest truth, however, this would be the happiest Christmas Eve of my life if I had a downright suit on my hands. Why can't I be frank with you and say I'd like to begin the chief suit of my life now and here—a suit for this little hand? I'd plead for it as no lawyer ever pleaded before. I settled that much down on the ice."

"And if I hadn't happened to behave on the ice in a manner agreeable to your lordship, you would have pleaded with the other girl?" she remarked, withdrawing her hand and looking him directly in the eyes.

"What makes you think so?" he asked somewhat confusedly.

"You do."

He sprang up and paced the room a few moments, then confronted her with the words, "You shall have the whole truth. Any woman that I would ask to be my wife is entitled to that," and he told her just what the attitude of his mind had been from the first.

She laughed outright, then gave him her hand as she said, "Your honesty insures that we can be very good friends; but I don't wish to hear anything more about suits which are close of kin to lawsuits."

He looked very dejected, feeling that he had blundered fatally in his precipitation.

"Come now, Hedley, be sensible," she resumed, half laughing, half serious. "As you say, we can be frank with each other. Why, only the other day we were boy and girl together coasting downhill on the same sled. You are applying your legal jargon to a deep experience, to something sacred—the result, to my mind, of a divine instinct. Neither you nor I have ever felt for each other this instinctive preference, this subtle gravitation of the heart. Don't you see? Your head has been concerned about me, and only your head. By a kindred process you would select one bale of merchandise in preference to another. Good gracious! I've faults enough. You'll meet some other girl that will stand some other test far better than I. I want a little of what you call silly romance in my courtship. See; I can talk about this suit as coolly and fluently as you can. We'd make a nice pair of lovers, about as frigid as the ice−water you waded through so good−naturedly;" and the girl's laugh rang out merrily, awakening echoes in the old house. Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell might rest securely when their daughter could laugh like that. It was the mirth of a genuine American girl whose self−protection was better than the care of a thousand duennas.

He looked at her with honest admiration in his eyes, then rose quietly and said, "That's fine, Carrie. Your head's worth two of mine, and you'd make the better lawyer. You see through a case from top to bottom. You were right—I wasn't in love with you; I don't know whether I'm in love with you now, and you haven't an

infinitesimal spark for me. Nevertheless, I begin my suit here and now, and I shall never withdraw it till you are engaged to another fellow. So there!"

Carrie looked rather blank at this result of her reductio ad absurdum process; and he did not help her by adding, "A fellow isn't always in love. There must be a beginning; and when I arrive at this beginning under the guidance of reason, judgment, and observation, I don't see as I'm any more absurd than the fellow who tumbles helplessly in love, he doesn't know why. What becomes of all these people who have divine gravitations? You and I both know of some who had satanic repulsions afterward. They used their eyes and critical faculties after marriage instead of before. The romance exhaled like a morning mist; and the facts came out distinctly. They learned what kind of man and woman they actually were, and two idealized creatures were sent to limbo. Because I don't blunder upon the woman I wish to marry, but pick her out, that's no reason I can't and won't love her. Your analysis and judgment were correct only up to date. You have now to meet a suit honestly, openly announced. This may be bad policy on my part; yet I have so much faith in you and respect for you that I don't believe you will let my precipitation create a prejudice. Give me a fair hearing; that's all I ask."

"Well, well, I'll promise not to frown, even though some finer paragon should throw me completely in the shade."

"You don't believe in my yet," he resumed, after a moment of thought. "I felt that I had blundered awfully a while ago; but I doubt it. A girl of your perceptions would soon have seen it all. I've not lost anything by being frank from the start. Be just to me, however. It wasn't policy that led me to speak, but this homelike scene, and you appearing like the good genius of a home."

He pulled out his watch, and gave a low whistle as he held it toward her. Then his manner suddenly became grave and gentle. "Carrie," he said, "I wish you, not a merry Christmas, but a happy one, and many of them. It seems to me it would be a great privilege for a man to make a woman like you happy."

"Is this the beginning of the suit?" she asked with a laugh that was a little forced.

"I don't know. Perhaps it is; but I spoke just as I felt. Good− night."

She would not admit of a trace of sentiment on her part. "Good− night," she said. "Merry Christmas! Go home and hang up your stocking."

"Bless me!" she thought, as she went slowly up the stairs, "I thought I was going to be through with him for good and all, except as a friend; but if he goes on this way—"

The next morning a basket of superb roses was left at her home. There was no card, and mamma queried and surmised; but the girl knew. They were not displeasing to her, and somehow, before the day was over, they found their way to her room; but she shook her head decidedly as she said, "He must be careful not to send me other gifts, for I will return them instantly. Flowers, in moderation, never commit a girl."

But then came another gift—a book with pencillings here and there, not against sentimental passages, but words that made her think. It was his manner in society, however, that at once annoyed, perplexed, and pleased her. On the first occasion they met in company with others, he made it clear to every one that he was her suitor; yet he was not a burr which she could not shake off. He rather seconded all her efforts to have a good time with any and every one she chose. Nor did he, wallflower fashion, mope in the meanwhile and look unutterable things. He added to the pleasure of a score of others, and even conciliated Lottie, yet at the same time surrounded the girl of his choice with an atmosphere of unobtrusive devotion. She was congratulated on her conquest— rather maliciously so by Lottie. Her air of courteous indifference was well maintained; yet she was a woman, and could not help being flattered. Certain generous traits in her nature were touched also by a homage which yielded everything and exacted nothing.

The holidays soon passed, and he returned to his work. She learned incidentally that he toiled faithfully, instead of mooning around. At every coigne of vantage she found him, or some token of his ceaseless effort. She was compelled to think of him, and to think well of him. Though mamma and papa judiciously said little, it was evident that they liked the style of lover into which he was developing.

Once during the summer she said: "I don't think it's right to let you go on in this way any longer."

"Are my attentions so very annoying?"

"No, indeed. A girl never had a more agreeable or useful friend."

"Are you engaged to some other fellow?"

"Of course not. You know better."

"There is no 'of course not' about it. I couldn't and wouldn't lay a straw in the way. You are not bound, but I."

"You bound?"

"Certainly. You remember what I said."

"Then I must accept the first man that asks me—"

"I ask you."

"No; some one else, so as to unloose your conscience and give you a happy deliverance,"

"You would leave me still bound and hopeless in that case. I love you now, Carrie Mitchell."

"Oh, dear! you are incorrigible. It's just a lawyer's persistence in winning a suit."

"You can still swear on the dictionary that you don't love me at all?"

"I might—on the dictionary. There, I won't talk about such things any more," and she resolutely changed the subject.

But she couldn't swear, even on the dictionary. She didn't know where she stood or how it would all end; but with increasing frequency the words, "I love you now," haunted her waking and dreaming hours.

The holidays were near again, and then came a letter from Marstern, asking her to take another sleigh−ride with him on Christmas Eve. His concluding words were: "There is no other woman in the world that I want on the other side of me." She kissed these words, then looked around in a startled, shamefaced manner, blushing even in the solitude of her room.

Christmas Eve came, but with it a wild storm of wind and sleet. She was surprised at the depth of her disappointment. Would he even come to call through such a tempest?

He did come, and come early; and she said demurely: "I did not expect you on such a night as this."

He looked at her for a moment, half humorously, half seriously, and her eyes drooped before his. "You will know better what to expect next time," was his comment.

"When is next time?"

"Any and every time which gives me a chance to ses you. Who should know that better than you?"

"Are you never going to give up?" she asked with averted face.

"Not till you become engaged."

"Hush! They are all in the parlor."

"Well, they ought to know as much, by this time, also."

She thought it was astonishing how he made himself at home in the family circle. In half an hour there was scarcely any restraint left because a visitor was present. Yet, as if impelled by some mysterious influence, one after another slipped out; and Carrie saw with strange little thrills of dismay that she would soon be alone with that indomitable lawyer. She signalled to her mother, but the old lady's eyes were glued to her knitting.

At last they were alone, and she expected a prompt and powerful appeal from the plaintiff; but Marstern drew his chair to the opposite side of the hearth and chatted so easily, naturally, and kindly that her trepidation passed utterly. It began to grow late, and a heavier gust than usual shook the house. It appeared to waken him to the dire necessity of breasting the gale, and he rose and said:

"I feel as if I could sit here forever, Carrie. It's just the impression I had a year ago to−night. You, sitting there by the fire, gave then, and give now to this place the irresistible charm of home. I think I had then the decided beginning of the divine gravitation—wasn't that what you called it?—which has been growing so strong ever since. You thought then that the ice−water I waded was in my veins. Do you think so now? If you do I shall have to take another year to prove the contrary. Neither am I convinced of the absurdity of my course, as you put it then. I studied you coolly and deliberately before I began to love you, and reason and judgment have had no chance to jeer at my love."

"But, Hedley," she began with a slight tremor in her tones, "you are idealizing me as certainly as the blindest. I've plenty of faults."

"I haven't denied that; so have I plenty of faults. What right have I to demand a perfection I can't offer? I have known people to marry who imagined each other perfect, and then come to court for a separation on the ground of incompatibility of temperament. They learned the meaning of that long word too late, and were scarcely longer about it than the word itself. Now, I'm satisfied that I could cordially agree with you on some points and lovingly disagree with you on others. Chief of all it's your instinct to make a home. You appear better at your own fireside than when in full dress at a reception. You—"

"See here, Hedley, you've got to give up this suit at last. I'm engaged," and she looked away as if she could not meet his eyes.

"Engaged?" he said slowly, looking at her with startled eyes.

"Well, about the same as engaged. My heart has certainly gone from me beyond recall." He drew a long breath. "I was foolish enough to begin to hope," he faltered.

"You must dismiss hope to−night, then," she said, her face still averted.

He was silent and she slowly turned toward him. He had sunk into a chair and buried his face in his hands, the picture of dejected defeat.

There was a sudden flash of mirth through tear−gemmed eyes, a glance at the clock, then noiseless steps, and she was on her knees beside him, her arm about his neck, her blushing face near his wondering eyes as she breathed:

"Happy Christmas, Hedley! How do you like your first gift; and what room is there now for hope?"