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Hercule Poirot's Christmas

Written by Agatha Christie

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Agatha Christie

Hercule Poirot's Christmas

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PART 1

December 22nd

I

Stephen pulled up the collar of his coat as he walked briskly along the platform. Overhead a dim fog clouded the station. Large engines hissed superbly, throwing off clouds of steam into the cold raw air. Everything was dirty and smoke-grimed.

Stephen thought with revulsion:

'What a foul country—what a foul city!'

His first excited reaction to London, its shops, its restaurants, its well-dressed, attractive women, had faded. He saw it now as a glittering rhinestone set in a dingy setting.

Supposing he were back in South Africa now… He felt a quick pang of homesickness. Sunshine—blue skies—gardens of flowers—cool blue flowers—hedges of plumbago—blue convolvulus clinging to every little shanty.

And here—dirt, grime, and endless, incessant crowds—moving, hurrying—jostling. Busy ants running industriously about their ant-hill.

For a moment he thought, 'I wish I hadn't come…'

Then he remembered his purpose and his lips set back in a grim line. No, by hell, he'd go on with it! He'd planned this for years. He'd always meant to do—what he was going to do. Yes, he'd go on with it!

That momentary reluctance, that sudden questioning of himself: 'Why? Is it worth it? Why dwell on the past? Why not wipe out the whole thing?'—all that was only weakness. He was not a boy—to be turned his this way and that by the whim of the moment. He was a man of forty, assured, purposeful. He would go on with it. He would do what he had come to England to do.

He got on the train and passed along the corridor looking for a place. He had waved aside a porter and was carrying his own raw-hide suitcase. He looked into carriage after carriage. The train was full. It was only three days before Christmas. Stephen Farr looked distastefully at the crowded carriages.

People! Incessant, innumerable people! And all so—so—what was the word—so *drab*-looking! So alike, so horribly alike! Those that hadn't got faces like sheep had faces like rabbits, he thought. Some of them chattered and fussed. Some, heavily middle-aged men, grunted. More like pigs, those. Even the girls, slender, egg-faced, scarlet-lipped, were of a depressing uniformity.

He thought with a sudden longing of open veldt, sun-baked and lonely…

And then, suddenly, he caught his breath, looking into a carriage. This girl was different. Black hair, rich creamy

pallor—eyes with the depth and darkness of night in them. The sad proud eyes of the South… It was all wrong that this girl should be sitting in this train among these dull, drab-looking people—all wrong that she should be going into the dreary midlands of England. She should have been on a balcony, a rose between her lips, a piece of black lace draping her proud head, and there should have been dust and heat and the smell of blood—the smell of the bull-ring—in the air… She should be somewhere splendid, not squeezed into the corner of a third-class carriage.

He was an observant man. He did not fail to note the shabbiness of her little black coat and skirt, the cheap quality of her fabric gloves, the flimsy shoes and the defiant note of a flame-red handbag. Nevertheless splendour was the quality he associated with her. She *was* splendid, fine, exotic…

What the hell was she doing in this country of fogs and chills and hurrying industrious ants?

He thought, 'I've got to know who she is and what she's doing here… I've got to know…'

II

Pilar sat squeezed up against the window and thought how very odd the English smelt… It was what had struck her so far most forcibly about England—the difference of smell. There was no garlic and no dust and very little perfume. In this carriage now there was a smell of cold stuffiness—the sulphur smell of the trains—the smell of soap and another very unpleasant smell—it came, she thought, from the fur collar of the stout woman sitting beside her. Pilar sniffed

delicately, imbibing the odour of mothballs reluctantly. It was a funny scent to choose to put on yourself, she thought.

A whistle blew, a stentorian voice cried out something and the train jerked slowly out of the station. They had started. She was on her way…

Her heart beat a little faster. Would it be all right? Would she be able to accomplish what she had set out to do? Surely—surely—she had thought it all out so carefully… She was prepared for every eventuality. Oh, yes, she would succeed—she must succeed…

The curve of Pilar's red mouth curved upwards. It was suddenly cruel, that mouth. Cruel and greedy—like the mouth of a child or a kitten—a mouth that knew only its own desires and that was as yet unaware of pity.

She looked round her with the frank curiosity of a child. All these people, seven of them—how funny they were, the English! They all seemed so rich, so prosperous—their clothes—their boots—Oh! undoubtedly England was a very rich country as she had always heard. But they were not at all gay—no, decidedly not gay.

That was a handsome man standing in the corridor… Pilar thought he was very handsome. She liked his deeply bronzed face and his high-bridged nose and his square shoulders. More quickly than any English girl, Pilar had seen that the man admired her. She had not looked at him once directly, but she knew perfectly how often he had looked at her and exactly how he had looked.

She registered the facts without much interest or emotion. She came from a country where men looked at women as

a matter of course and did not disguise the fact unduly. She wondered if he was an Englishman and decided that he was not.

'He is too alive, too real, to be English,' Pilar decided. 'And yet he is fair. He may be perhaps Americano.' He was, she thought, rather like the actors she had seen in Wild West films.

An attendant pushed his way along the corridor.

'First lunch, please. First lunch. Take your seats for first lunch.'

The seven occupants of Pilar's carriage all held tickets for the first lunch. They rose in a body and the carriage was suddenly deserted and peaceful.

Pilar quickly pulled up the window which had been let down a couple of inches at the top by a militant-looking, grey-haired lady in the opposite corner. Then she sprawled comfortably back on her seat and peered out of the window at the northern suburbs of London. She did not turn her head at the sound of the door sliding back. It was the man from the corridor, and Pilar knew, of course, that he had entered the carriage on purpose to talk to her.

She continued to look pensively out of the window.

Stephen Farr said:

'Would you like the window down at all?'

Pilar replied demurely:

'On the contrary. I have just shut it.'

She spoke English perfectly, but with a slight accent.

During the pause that ensued, Stephen thought:

'A delicious voice. It has the sun in it… It is warm like a summer night…'

Pilar thought:

'I like his voice. It is big and strong. He is attractive—yes, he is attractive.'

Stephen said: 'The train is very full.'

'Oh, yes, indeed. The people go away from London, I suppose, because it is so black there.'

Pilar had not been brought up to believe that it was a crime to talk to strange men in trains. She could take care of herself as well as any girl, but she had no rigid taboos.

If Stephen had been brought up in England he might have felt ill at ease at entering into conversation with a young girl. But Stephen was a friendly soul who found it perfectly natural to talk to anyone if he felt like it.

He smiled without any self-consciousness and said:

'London's rather a terrible place, isn't it?'

'Oh, yes. I do not like it at all.'

'No more do I.'

Pilar said: 'You are not English, no?'

'I'm British, but I come from South Africa.'

'Oh, I see, that explains it.'

'Have you just come from abroad?'

Pilar nodded. 'I come from Spain.'

Stephen was interested.

'From Spain, do you? You're Spanish, then?'

'I am half Spanish. My mother was English. That is why I talk English so well.'

'What about this war business?' asked Stephen.

'It is very terrible, yes—very sad. There has been damage done, quite a lot—yes.'

'Which side are you on?'

Pilar's politics seemed to be rather vague. In the village where she came from, she explained, nobody had paid very much attention to the war. 'It has not been near us, you understand. The Mayor, he is, of course, an officer of the Government, so he is for the Government, and the priest is for General Franco—but most of the people are busy with the vines and the land, they have not time to go into these questions.'

'So there wasn't any fighting round you?'

Pilar said that there had not been. 'But then I drove in a car,' she explained, 'all across the country and there was much destruction. And I saw a bomb drop and it blew up a car—yes, and another destroyed a house. It was very exciting!'

Stephen Farr smiled a faintly twisted smile.

'So that's how it seemed to you?'

'It was a nuisance, too,' explained Pilar. 'Because I wanted to get on, and the driver of my car, he was killed.'

Stephen said, watching her:

'That didn't upset you?'

Pilar's great dark eyes opened very wide.

'Everyone must die! That is so, is it not? If it comes quickly from the sky—bouff—like that, it is as well as any other way. One is alive for a time—yes, and then one is dead. That is what happens in this world.'

Stephen Farr laughed.

'I don't think you are a pacifist.'

'You do not think I am what?' Pilar seemed puzzled by a word which had not previously entered her vocabulary.

'Do you forgive your enemies, señorita?'

Pilar shook her head.

'I have no enemies. But if I had—'

'Well?'

He was watching her, fascinated anew by the sweet, cruel upward-curving mouth.

Pilar said gravely:

'If I had an enemy—if anyone hated me and I hated them—then I would cut my enemy's throat like *this*…'

She made a graphic gesture.

It was so swift and so crude that Stephen Farr was momentarily taken aback. He said:

'You are a bloodthirsty young woman!'

Pilar asked in a matter-of-fact tone:

'What would you do to your enemy?'

He started—stared at her, then laughed aloud.

'I wonder—' he said. 'I wonder!'

Pilar said disapprovingly:

'But surely—you know.'

He checked his laughter, drew in his breath and said in a low voice:

'Yes. I know…'

Then with a rapid change of manner, he asked:

'What made you come to England?'

Pilar replied with a certain demureness.

'I am going to stay with my relations—with my English relations.'

'I see.'

He leaned back in his seat, studying her—wondering

what these English relations of whom she spoke were like—wondering what they would make of this Spanish stranger… trying to picture her in the midst of some sober British family at Christmas time.

Pilar asked: 'Is it nice, South Africa, yes?'

He began to talk to her about South Africa. She listened with the pleased attention of a child hearing a story. He enjoyed her naïve but shrewd questions and amused himself by making a kind of exaggerated fairy story of it all.

The return of the proper occupants of the carriage put an end to this diversion. He rose, smiled into her eyes, and made his way out again into the corridor.

As he stood back for a minute in the doorway, to allow an elderly lady to come in, his eyes fell on the label of Pilar's obviously foreign straw case. He read the name with interest—*Miss Pilar Estravados*—then as his eye caught the address it widened to incredulity and some other feeling—*Gorston Hall, Longdale, Addlesfield*.

He half turned, staring at the girl with a new expression—puzzled, resentful, suspicious… He went out into the corridor and stood there smoking a cigarette and frowning to himself…

III

In the big blue and gold drawing-room at Gorston Hall Alfred Lee and Lydia, his wife, sat discussing their plans for Christmas. Alfred was a squarely built man of middle age with a gentle face and mild brown eyes. His voice when he spoke was quiet and precise with a very clear

enunciation. His head was sunk into his shoulders and he gave a curious impression of inertia. Lydia, his wife, was an energetic, lean greyhound of a woman. She was amazingly thin, but all her movements had a swift, startled grace about them.

There was no beauty in her careless, haggard face, but it had distinction. Her voice was charming.

Alfred said:

'Father insists! There's nothing else to it.'

Lydia controlled a sudden impatient movement. She said:

'Must you always give in to him?'

'He's a very old man, my dear—'

'Oh, I know—I know!'

'He expects to have his own way.'

Lydia said dryly:

'Naturally, since he has always had it! But some time or other, Alfred, you will have to make a stand.'

'What do you mean, Lydia?'

He stared at her, so palpably upset and startled, that for a moment she bit her lip and seemed doubtful whether to go on.

Alfred Lee repeated:

'What do you mean, Lydia?'

She shrugged her thin, graceful shoulders.

She said, trying to choose her words cautiously:

'Your father is—inclined to be—tyrannical—'

'He's old.'

'And will grow older. And consequently more tyrannical. Where will it end? Already he dictates our lives to

us completely. We can't make a plan of our own! If we do, it is always liable to be upset.'

Alfred said:

'Father expects to come first. He is very good to us, remember.'

'Oh! good to us!'

'*Very* good to us.'

Alfred spoke with a trace of sternness.

Lydia said calmly:

'You mean financially?'

'Yes. His own wants are very simple. But he never grudges us money. You can spend what you like on dress and on this house, and the bills are paid without a murmur. He gave us a new car only last week.'

'As far as money goes, your father is very generous, I admit,' said Lydia. 'But in return he expects us to behave like slaves.'

'Slaves?'

'That's the word I used. You *are* his slave, Alfred. If we have planned to go away and Father suddenly wishes us not to go, you cancel your arrangements and remain without a murmur! If the whim takes him to send us away, we go… We have no lives of our own—no independence.'

Her husband said distressfully:

'I wish you wouldn't talk like this, Lydia. It is very ungrateful. My father has done everything for us…'

She bit off a retort that was on her lips. She shrugged those thin, graceful shoulders once more.

Alfred said:

'You know, Lydia, the old man is very fond of you—'

His wife said clearly and distinctly:

'I am not at all fond of him.'

'Lydia, it distresses me to hear you say things like that. It is so unkind—'

'Perhaps. But sometimes a compulsion comes over one to speak the truth.'

'If Father guessed—'

'Your father knows perfectly well that I do not like him! It amuses him, I think.'

'Really, Lydia, I am sure you are wrong there. He has often told me how charming your manner to him is.'

'Naturally I've always been polite. I always shall be. I'm just letting you know what my real feelings are. I dislike your father, Alfred. I think he is a malicious and tyrannical old man. He bullies you and presumes on your affection for him. You ought to have stood up to him years ago.'

Alfred said sharply:

'That will do, Lydia. Please don't say any more.'

She sighed.

'I'm sorry. Perhaps I was wrong… Let's talk of our Christmas arrangements. Do you think your brother David will really come?'

'Why not?'

She shook her head doubtfully.

'David is—queer. He's not been inside the house for years, remember. He was so devoted to your mother—he's got some feeling about this place.'

'David always got on Father's nerves,' said Alfred, 'with

his music and his dreamy ways. Father was, perhaps, a bit hard on him sometimes. But I think David and Hilda will come all right. Christmas time, you know.'

'Peace and goodwill,' said Lydia. Her delicate mouth curved ironically. 'I wonder! George and Magdalene are coming. They said they would probably arrive tomorrow. I'm afraid Magdalene will be frightfully bored.'

Alfred said with some slight annoyance:

'Why my brother George ever married a girl twenty years younger than himself I can't think! George was always a fool!'

'He's very successful in his career,' said Lydia. 'His constituents like him. I believe Magdalene works quite hard politically for him.'

Alfred said slowly:

'I don't think I like her very much. She is very good-looking—but I sometimes think she is like one of those beautiful pears one gets—they have a rosy flush and a rather waxen appearance—' He shook his head.

'And they're bad inside?' said Lydia. 'How funny you should say that, Alfred!'

'Why funny?'

She answered:

'Because—usually—you are such a gentle soul. You hardly ever say an unkind thing about anyone. I get annoyed with you sometimes because you're not sufficiently—oh, what shall I say?—sufficiently suspicious—not worldly enough!'

Her husband smiled.

'The world, I always think, is as you yourself make it.'

Lydia said sharply:

'No! Evil is not only in one's mind. Evil exists! *You* seem to have no consciousness of the evil in the world. I have. I can feel it. I've always felt it—here in this house—' She bit her lip and turned away.

Alfred said, 'Lydia—'

But she raised a quick admonitory hand, her eyes looking past him at something over his shoulder. Alfred turned.

A dark man with a smooth face was standing there deferentially.

Lydia said sharply:

'What is it, Horbury?'

Horbury's voice was low, a mere deferential murmur.

'It's Mr Lee, madam. He asked me to tell you that there would be two more guests arriving for Christmas, and would you have rooms prepared for them.'

Lydia said, 'Two more guests?'

Horbury said smoothly, 'Yes, madam, another gentleman and a young lady.'

Alfred said wonderingly: 'A young lady?'

'That's what Mr Lee said, sir.'

Lydia said quickly:

'I will go up and see him—'

Horbury made one little step, it was a mere ghost of a movement but it stopped Lydia's rapid progress automatically.

'Excuse me, madam, but Mr Lee is having his afternoon sleep. He asked specifically that he should not be disturbed.'

'I see,' said Alfred. 'Of course we won't disturb him.'

'Thank you, sir.' Horbury withdrew.

Lydia said vehemently:

'How I dislike that man! He creeps about the house like a cat! One never hears him going or coming.'

'I don't like him very much either. But he knows his job. It's not so easy to get a good male nurse attendant. And Father likes him, that's the main thing.'

'Yes, that's the main thing, as you say. Alfred, what is this about a young lady? What young lady?'

Her husband shook his head.

'I can't imagine. I can't even think of anyone it might be likely to be.'

They stared at each other. Then Lydia said, with a sudden twist of her expressive mouth:

'Do you know what I think, Alfred?'

'What?'

'I think your father has been bored lately. I think he is planning a little Christmas diversion for himself.'

'By introducing two strangers into a family gathering?'

'Oh! I don't know what the details are—but I do fancy that your father is preparing to—amuse himself.'

'I hope he *will* get some pleasure out of it,' said Alfred gravely. 'Poor old chap, tied by the leg, an invalid—after the adventurous life he has led.'

Lydia said slowly:

'After the—adventurous life he has led.'

The pause she made before the adjective gave it some special though obscure significance. Alfred seemed to feel it. He flushed and looked unhappy.

She cried out suddenly:

'How he ever had a son like you, I can't imagine! You two are poles apart. And he fascinates you—you simply worship him!'

Alfred said with a trace of vexation:

'Aren't you going a little far, Lydia? It's natural, I should say, for a son to love his father. It would be very unnatural not to do so.'

Lydia said:

'In that case, most of the members of this family are—unnatural! Oh, don't let's argue! I apologize. I've hurt your feelings, I know. Believe me, Alfred, I really didn't mean to do that. I admire you enormously for your—your—*fidelity*. Loyalty is such a rare virtue in these days. Let us say, shall we, that I am jealous? Women are supposed to be jealous of their mothers-in-law—why not, then, of their fathers-in-law?'

He put a gentle arm round her.

'Your tongue runs away with you, Lydia. There's no reason for you to be jealous.'

She gave him a quick remorseful kiss, a delicate caress on the tip of his ear.

'I know. All the same, Alfred, I don't believe I should have been in the least jealous of your mother. I wish I'd known her.'

'She was a poor creature,' he said.

His wife looked at him interestedly.

'So that's how she struck you… as a poor creature… That's interesting.'

He said dreamily:

'I remember her as nearly always ill… Often in tears…' He shook his head. 'She had no spirit.'

Still staring at him, she murmured very softly:

'How odd…'

But as he turned a questioning glance on her, she shook her head quickly and changed the subject.

'Since we are not allowed to know who our mysterious guests are I shall go out and finish my garden.'

'It's very cold, my dear, a biting wind.'

'I'll wrap up warmly.'

She left the room. Alfred Lee, left alone, stood for some minutes motionless, frowning a little to himself, then he walked over to the big window at the end of the room. Outside was a terrace running the whole length of the house. Here, after a minute or two, he saw Lydia emerge, carrying a flat basket. She was wearing a big blanket coat. She set down the basket and began to work at a square stone sink slightly raised above ground level.

Her husband watched for some time. At last he went out of the room, fetched himself a coat and muffler, and emerged on to the terrace by a side door. As he walked along he passed various other stone sinks arranged as miniature gardens, all the products of Lydia's agile fingers.

One represented a desert scene with smooth yellow sand, a little clump of green palm trees in coloured tin, and a procession of camels with one or two little Arab figures. Some primitive mud houses had been constructed of plasticine. There was an Italian garden with terraces and formal beds with flowers in coloured sealing-wax. There was an

Arctic one, too, with clumps of green glass for icebergs, and a little cluster of penguins. Next came a Japanese garden with a couple of beautiful little stunted trees, looking-glass arranged for water, and bridges modelled out of plasticine.

He came at last to stand beside her where she was at work. She had laid down blue paper and covered it over with glass. Round this were lumps of rock piled up. At the moment she was pouring out coarse pebbles from a little bag and forming them into a beach. Between the rocks were some small cactuses.

Lydia was murmuring to herself:

'Yes, that's exactly right—exactly what I want.'

Alfred said:

'What's this latest work of art?'

She started, for she had not heard him come up.

'This? Oh, it's the Dead Sea, Alfred. Do you like it?'

He said, 'It's rather arid, isn't it? Oughtn't there to be more vegetation?'

She shook her head.

'It's my idea of the Dead Sea. It *is* dead, you see—'

'It's not so attractive as some of the others.'

'It's not meant to be specially attractive.'

Footsteps sounded on the terrace. An elderly butler, white-haired and slightly bowed, was coming towards them.

'Mrs George Lee on the telephone, madam. She says will it be convenient if she and Mr George arrive by the five-twenty tomorrow?'

'Yes, tell her that will be quite all right.'

'Thank you, madam.'

The butler hurried away. Lydia looked after him with a softened expression on her face.

'Dear old Tressilian. What a standby he is! I can't imagine what we should do without him.'

Alfred agreed.

'He's one of the old school. He's been with us nearly forty years. He's devoted to us all.'

Lydia nodded.

'Yes. He's like the faithful old retainers of fiction. I believe he'd lie himself blue in the face if it was necessary to protect one of the family!'

Alfred said:

'I believe he would… Yes, I believe he would.'

Lydia smoothed over the last bit of her shingle.

'There,' she said. 'That's ready.'

'Ready?' Alfred looked puzzled.

She laughed.

'For Christmas, silly! For this sentimental family Christmas we're going to have.'

IV

David was rereading the letter. Once he screwed it up into a ball and thrust it away from him. Then, reaching for it, he smoothed it out and read it again.

Quietly, without saying anything, his wife, Hilda, watched him. She noted the jerking muscle (or was it a nerve?) in his temple, the slight tremor of the long delicate hands, the nervous spasmodic movements of his whole body. When he pushed aside the lock of fair hair that always tended

to stray down over his forehead and looked across at her with appealing blue eyes she was ready.

'Hilda, what shall we do about it?'

Hilda hesitated a minute before speaking. She had heard the appeal in his voice. She knew how dependent he was upon her—had always been ever since their marriage—knew that she could probably influence his decision finally and decisively. But for just that reason she was chary of pronouncing anything too final.

She said, and her voice had the calm, soothing quality that can be heard in the voice of an experienced nannie in a nursery:

'It depends on how you feel about it, David.'

A broad woman, Hilda, not beautiful, but with a certain magnetic quality. Something about her like a Dutch picture. Something warming and endearing in the sound of her voice. Something strong about her—the vital hidden strength that appeals to weakness. An over-stout dumpy middle-aged woman—not clever—not brilliant—but with *something* about her that you couldn't pass over. Force! Hilda Lee had force!

David got up and began pacing up and down. His hair was practically untouched by grey. He was strangely boyish-looking. His face had the mild quality of a Burne-Jones knight. It was, somehow, not very real…

He said, and his voice was wistful:

'You know how I feel about it, Hilda. You must.'

'I'm not sure.'

'But I've told you—I've told you again and again! How

I hate it all—the house and the country round and everything! It brings back nothing but misery. I hated every moment that I spent there! When I think of it—of all that *she* suffered—my mother…'

His wife nodded sympathetically.

'She was so sweet, Hilda, and so patient. Lying there, often in pain, but bearing it—enduring everything. And when I think of my father'—his face darkened—'bringing all that misery into her life—humiliating her—boasting of his love affairs—constantly unfaithful to her and never troubling to conceal it.'

Hilda Lee said:

'She should not have put up with it. She should have left him.'

He said with a touch of reproof:

'She was too good to do that. She thought it was her duty to remain. Besides, it was her home—where else should she go?'

'She could have made a life of her own.'

David said fretfully:

'Not in those days! You don't understand. Women didn't behave like that. They put up with things. They endured patiently. She had us to consider. Even if she divorced my father, what would have happened? He would probably have married again. There might have been a second family. *Our* interests might have gone to the wall. She had to think of all those considerations.'

Hilda did not answer.

David went on:

'No, she did right. She was a saint! She endured to the end—uncomplainingly.'

Hilda said, 'Not quite uncomplainingly or you would not know so much, David!'

He said softly, his face lighting up:

'Yes—she told me things—She knew how I loved her. When she died—'

He stopped. He ran his hands through his hair.

'Hilda, it was awful—horrible! The desolation! She was quite young still, she *needn't* have died. *He* killed her—my father! He was responsible for her dying. He broke her heart. I decided then that I'd not go on living under his roof. I broke away—got away from it all.'

Hilda nodded.

'You were very wise,' she said. 'It was the right thing to do.'

David said:

'Father wanted me to go into the works. That would have meant living at home. I couldn't have stood that. I can't think how Alfred stands it—how he has stood it all these years.'

'Did he never rebel against it?' asked Hilda with some interest. 'I thought you told me something about his having given up some other career.'

David nodded.

'Alfred was going into the army. Father arranged it all. Alfred, the eldest, was to go into some cavalry regiment, Harry was to go into the works, so was I. George was to enter politics.'

'And it didn't work out like that?'

David shook his head.

'Harry broke all that up! He was always frightfully wild. Got into debt—and all sorts of other troubles. Finally he went off one day with several hundred pounds that didn't belong to him, leaving a note behind him saying an office stool didn't suit him and he was going to see the world.'

'And you never heard any more of him?'

'Oh, yes, we did!' David laughed. 'We heard quite often! He was always cabling for money from all over the world. He usually got it too!'

'And Alfred?'

'Father made him chuck up the army and come back and go into the works.'

'Did he mind?'

'Very much to begin with. He hated it. But Father could always twist Alfred round his little finger. He's absolutely under Father's thumb still, I believe.'

'And you—escaped!' said Hilda.

'Yes. I went to London and studied painting. Father told me plainly that if I went off on a fool's errand like that I'd get a small allowance from him during his lifetime and nothing when he died. I said I didn't care. He called me a young fool, and that was that! I've never seen him since.'

Hilda said gently:

'And you haven't regretted it?'

'No, indeed. I realize I shan't ever get anywhere with my art. I shall never be a great artist—but we're happy

enough in this cottage—we've got everything we want—all the essentials. And if I die, well, my life's insured for you.'

He paused and then said:

'And now—*this*!'

He struck the letter with his open hand.

'I am sorry your father ever wrote that letter, if it upsets you so much,' said Hilda.

David went on as though he had not heard her.

'Asking me to bring my wife for Christmas, expressing a hope that we may be all together for Christmas; a united family! What can it mean?'

Hilda said:

'Need it mean anything more than it says?'

He looked at her questioningly.

'I mean,' she said, smiling, 'that your father is growing old. He's beginning to feel sentimental about family ties. That does happen, you know.'

'I suppose it does,' said David slowly.

'He's an old man and he's lonely.'

He gave her a quick look.

'You want me to go, don't you, Hilda?'

She said slowly:

'It seems a pity—not to answer an appeal. I'm old-fashioned, I dare say, but why not have peace and goodwill at Christmas time?'

'After all I've told you?'

'I know, dear, I know. But all that's in the *past*. It's all done and finished with.'

'Not for me.'