

# The Night Before Christmas

BY W. D. HOWELLS

A MORALITY

I

MR. AND MRS. CLARENCE FOUNTAIN

*M*R. CLARENCE FOUNTAIN backing into the room, and closing the door noiselessly before looking round: "Oh, you poor thing! I can see that you are dead, at the first glance. I'm dead myself, for that matter." She is speaking to her husband, who clings with one hand to the chimneypiece, and supports his back with the other; from this hand a little girl's long stocking lumpily dangles; Mrs. Fountain, turning round, observes it. "Not finished yet? But I don't wonder! I wonder you've even begun. Well, now, I will take hold with you." In token of the aid she is going to give, Mrs. Fountain sinks into a chair, and rolls a distracted eye over the littered and tumbled room. "It's worse than I thought it would be. You ought to have smoothed the papers out and laid them in a pile as fast as you unwrapped the things; that is the way I always do; and wound the strings up and put them one side. Then you wouldn't have had to wade round in them. I suppose I oughtn't to have left it to you, but if I had let *you* put the children to bed you know you'd have told them stories and kept them all night over their prayers. And as it was each of them wanted to put in a special Christmas clause; I know what kind of Christmas clause I should have put in if I'd been frank. I'm not sure it's right to keep up the deception. One comfort, the oldest ones don't believe in it any more than we do. Dear! I did think at one time this afternoon I should have to be brought home in an ambulance; it would have been a convenience, with all the packages. I simply marvel at their delivery wagons getting them here."

*Fountain*, coming to the table, where

she sits, and taking up one of the toys with which it is strewn: "They haven't, all of them."

*Mrs. Fountain*: "What do you mean by all of them?"

*Fountain*: "I mean half." He takes up a mechanical locomotive and stuffs it into the stocking he holds.

*Mrs. Fountain*, staying his hand: "What are you doing? Putting Jimmy's engine into Susy's stocking! She'll be perfectly insulted when she finds it, for she'll know you weren't paying the least attention, and you can't blame Santa Claus for it with *her*. If that's what you've been doing with the other stockings— But there *aren't* any others. Don't tell me you've just begun! Well, I could simply cry."

*Fountain*, dropping into the chair on the other side of the table, under the shelter of a tall Christmas tree standing on it: "Do you call unwrapping a whole car-load of truck and getting it sorted, just beginning? I've been slaving here from the dawn of time, and I had to have *some* leisure for the ghosts of my own Christmases when I was little. I didn't have to wade round in the wrappings of my presents in those days. But it isn't the sad memories that take it out of you; it's the happy ones. I've never had a ghastlier half-hour than I've just spent in the humiliating multiplicity of these gifts. All the old birthdays and wedding-days and Fourth of Julys and home-comings and children's christenings I've ever had came trooping back. There oughtn't to be any gay anniversaries; they should be forbidden by law. If I could only have recalled a few dangerous fevers and funerals!"

*Mrs. Fountain*: "Clarence! Don't say such a thing; you'll be punished for it. I know how you suffer from those gloomy feelings, and I pity you. You ought to bear up against them. If I gave way!

You must think about something cheerful in the future when the happiness of the past afflicts you, and set one against the other; life isn't *all* a vale of tears. You must keep your mind fixed on the work before you. I don't believe it's the number of the packages here that's broken you down. It's the shopping that's worn you out; I'm sure I'm a mere thread. And I had been at it from immediately after breakfast; and I lunched in one of the stores with ten thousand suburban who had come pouring in with the first of their unnatural trains: I did hope I should have some of the places to myself; but they were every one jammed. And you came up from your office about four, perfectly fresh."

*Fountain*: "Fresh! Yes, quite dewy from a day's fight with the beasts at Ephesus on the eve of Christmas week."

*Mrs. Fountain*: "Well, don't be cynical, Clarence, on this, of all nights of the year. You know how sorry I always am for what you have to go through down there, and I suppose it's worse, as you say, at this season than any other time of year. It's the terrible concentration of everything just before Christmas that makes it so killing. I really don't know which of the places was the worst: the big department stores or the separate places for jewelry and toys and books and stationery and antiques; they were all alike, and all maddening. And the rain outside, and everybody coming in reeking; though I don't believe that sunshine would have been any better; there'd have been more of them. I declare, it made my heart ache for those poor creatures behind the counters, and I don't know whether I suffered most for them when they kept up a ghastly cheerfulness in their attention or were simply insulting in their indifference. I know they must be all dead by this time. 'Going up?' 'Going down?' 'Ca-ish!' 'Here, boy!' I believe it will ring in my ears as long as I live. And the whiz of those overhead wire things, and having to wait ages for your change, and then drag your tatters out of the stores into the streets! If I hadn't had you with me at the last I should certainly have dropped."

*Fountain*: "Yes, and what had become of your good resolutions about doing all your Christmas shopping in July?"

*Mrs. Fountain*: "My good resolutions? Really, Clarence, sometimes if it were not cruelty to animals I should like to hit you. My good— You *know* that you suggested that plan, and it wasn't even original with you. The papers have been talking about it for years; but when you brought it up as such a new idea, I fell in with it to please you—"

*Fountain*: "Now, look out, Lucy!"

*Mrs. Fountain*: "Yes, to please you, and to help you forget the Christmas worry, just as I've been doing to-night. You never spare *me*."

*Fountain*: "Stick to the record. Why didn't you do your Christmas shopping in July?"

*Mrs. Fountain*: "Why didn't I? Did you expect me to do my Christmas shopping down at Sculpin Cove, where I spent the whole time from the middle of June till the middle of September? Why didn't *you* do the Christmas shopping in July? You had the stores under your nose here from the beginning till the end of summer, with nothing in the world to hinder you, and not a chick or a child to look after."

*Fountain*: "Oh, I like that. You think I was leading a life of complete leisure here, with the thermometer among the nineties nine-tenths of the time?"

*Mrs. Fountain*: "I only know you were bragging in all your letters about your bath and your club, and the folly of any one going away from the cool, comfortable town in the summer. I suppose you'll say that was to keep me from feeling badly at leaving you. When it was only for the children's sake! I will let you take them the next time."

*Fountain*: "While you look after my office? And you think the stores are full of Christmas things in July, I suppose."

*Mrs. Fountain*: "I never thought so; and now I hope you see the folly of that idea. No, Clarence. We must be logical in everything. You can't get rid of Christmas shopping at Christmas-time."

*Fountain*, shouting wrathfully: "Then I say get rid of Christmas!"

## II

MR. FRANK WATKINS, MRS. FOUNTAIN,  
FOUNTAIN.

*Watkins*, opening the door for himself and struggling into the room with

an armful of parcels: "I'm with you there, Clarence. Christmas is at the root of Christmas shopping, and Christmas giving, and all the rest of it. Oh, you needn't be afraid, Lucy. I didn't hear any epithets; just caught the drift of your argument through the key-hole. I've been kicking at the door ever since you began. Where shall I dump these things?"

*Mrs. Fountain*: "Oh, you poor boy! Here—anywhere—on the floor—on the sofa—on the table." She clears several spaces and helps *Watkins* unload. "Clarence! I'm surprised at you. What are you thinking of?"

*Fountain*: "I'm thinking that if this goes on, I'll let somebody else arrange the presents."

*Watkins*: "If I saw a man coming into my house with a load like this tonight, I'd throw him into the street. But living in a ninth-story flat like you, it might hurt him."

*Mrs. Fountain*, reading the inscriptions on the packages: "'For Benny from his uncle Frank.' Oh, how sweet of you, Frank! And here's a kiss for his uncle Frank." She embraces him with as little interruption as possible. "'From Uncle Frank to Jim.' Oh, I know what that is!" She feels the package over. "And this is for 'Susy from her aunt Sue.' Oh, I knew she would remember her namesake. 'For Maggie. Merry Christmas from Mrs. Watkins.' 'Bridget, with Mrs. Watkins's best wishes for a Merry Christmas.' Both the girls! But it's like Sue; she never forgets anybody. And what's this for Clarence? I *must* know! Not a bath-gown?" Undoing it: "I simply *must* see it. Blue! His very color!" Holding it up: "From you, Frank?" He nods. "Clarence!"

*Watkins*: "If *Fountain* tries to kiss me, I'll—"

*Fountain*: "I wouldn't kiss you for a dozen bath-gowns." Lifting it up from the floor where *Mrs. Fountain* has dropped it: "It is rather nice."

*Watkins*: "Don't overwhelm me."

*Mrs. Fountain*, dancing about with a long, soft roll in her hand: "Oh, oh, oh! She saw me gloating on it at *Shumaker's*! I do wonder if it is."

*Fountain*, reaching for it: "Why, open it—"

*Mrs. Fountain*: "You dare! No, it shall be opened the very last thing in the morning, now, to punish you! How is poor Sue? I saw her literally dropping by the way at *Shumaker's*."

*Watkins*, making for the door: "Well, she must have got up again. I left her registering a vow that if ever she lived to see another Christmas she would leave the country months before the shopping began. She called down maledictions on all the recipients of her gifts and wished them the worst harm that can befall the wicked."

*Mrs. Fountain*: "Poor Sue! She simply lives to do people good, and I can understand exactly how she feels toward them. I'll be round bright and early to-morrow to thank her. Why do you go?"

*Watkins*: "Well, I can't stay here all night, and I'd better let you and Clarence finish up." He escapes from her detaining embrace and runs out.

### III

#### MRS. FOUNTAIN, FOUNTAIN

*Mrs. Fountain*, intent upon her roll: "How funny he is! I wonder if he did hear anything but our scolding voices? Where were we?"

*Fountain*: "I had just called you a serpent."

*Mrs. Fountain*, with amusement: "No, really?" Feeling the parcel: "If it's that Spanish lace scarf I can tell her it was machine lace. I saw it at the first glance. But poor Sue has no taste. I suppose I must stand it. But I can't bear to think what she's given the girls and children. She means well. Did you really say serpent, Clarence? You never called me just *that* before."

*Fountain*: "No, but you called me a laughing hyena, and said I scoffed at everything sacred."

*Mrs. Fountain*: "I can't remember using the word hyena, exactly, though I do think the way you talk about Christmas is dreadful. But I take back the laughing hyena."

*Fountain*: "And I take back the serpent. I meant dove, anyway. But it's this Christmas-time when a man gets so tired he doesn't know what he's saying."

*Mrs. Fountain:* "Well, you're good, anyway, dearest, whatever you say; and now I'm going to help you arrange the things. I suppose there'll be lots more to-morrow, but we must get rid of these now. Don't you wish nobody would do anything for us? Just the children—dear little souls! I don't believe but what we can make Jim and Susy believe in Santa Claus again; Benny is firm in the faith; he put him into his prayer. I declare, his sweetness almost broke my heart." At a knock: "Who's that, I wonder? Come in! Oh, it's you, Maggie. Well?"

## IV

## THE FOUNTAINS, FOUNTAIN'S SISTERS

*Maggie:* "It's Mr. Fountain's sisters just telephoned up."

*Mrs. Fountain:* "Have them come up at once, Maggie, of course." As Maggie goes out: "Another interruption! If it's going to keep on like this! Shouldn't you have thought they might have sent their presents?"

*Fountain:* "I thought something like it in Frank's case; but I didn't say it."

*Mrs. Fountain:* "And I don't know why I say it, now. It's because I'm so tired I don't know what I am saying. Do forgive me! It's this terrible Christmas spirit that gets into me. But now you'll see how nice I can be to them." At a tap on the door: "Come in! Come in! Don't mind our being in all this mess. So darling of you to come! You can help cheer Clarence up; you know his Christmas Eve dumps." She runs to them and clasps them in her arms with several half-open packages dangling from her hands and contrasting their disarray with the neatness of their silk-ribboned and tissue-papered parcels which their embrace makes meet at her back. "Minnie! Aggie! To lug here, when you ought to be at home in bed dying of fatigue! But it's just like you, both of you. Did you ever see anything like the stores to-day? Do sit down, or swoon on the floor, or anything. Let me have those wretched bundles which are simply killing you." She looks at the different packages. "'For Benny from Grandpa.' 'For a good girl, from Susy's grandmother.' 'Jim, from Aunt Minnie and Aunt Aggie.' 'Lucy, with love

from Aggie and Minnie.' And Clarence! What hearts you have got! Well, I always say there never were such thoughtful girls, and you always show such taste and such originality. I long to get at the things." She keeps fingering the large bundle marked with her husband's name. "Not—not—a—"

*Minnie:* "Yes, a bath-robe. Unless you give him a cigar-case it's about the only thing you can give a man."

*Aggie:* "Minnie thought of it and I chose it. Blue, because it's his color. Try it on, Clarence, and if it's too long—"

*Mrs. Fountain:* "Yes, do, dear! Let's see you with it on." While the girls are fussily opening the robe, she manages to push her brother's gift behind the door. Then, without looking round at her husband: "It isn't a bit too long. Just the very—" Looking: "Well, it can easily be taken up at the hem. I can do it to-morrow." She abandons him to his awkward isolation while she chatters on with his sisters. "Sit down; I insist! Don't think of going. Did you see that frightful pack of people when the cab horse fell down in front of Shumaker's?"

*Minnie:* "See it!"

*Aggie:* "We were in the midst of it! I wonder we ever got out alive. It's enough to make you wish never to see another Christmas as long as you live."

*Minnie:* "A great many won't live. There will be more grippe, and more pneumonia, and more appendicitis from those jams of people in the stores!"

*Aggie:* "The germs must have been swarming."

*Fountain:* "Lucy was black with them when we got home."

*Mrs. Fountain:* "Don't pay the slightest attention to him, girls. He'll probably be the first to sneeze himself."

*Minnie:* "I don't know about sneezing. I shall only be too glad if I don't have nervous prostration from it."

*Aggie:* "I'm glad we got our motor-car just in time. Any one that goes in the trolleys now will take their life in their hand." The girls rise and move toward the door. "Well, we must go on now. We're making a regular round; you can't trust the delivery wagons at a time like this. Good-by. Merry Christ-

mas to the children. They're fast asleep by this time, I suppose."

*Minnie*: "I only wish I was!"

*Mrs. Fountain*: "I believe you, Minnie. Good-by. Good night. Good night, Aggie. Clarence, go to the elevator with them! Or no, he can't in that ridiculous bath-gown!" Turning to Fountain as the door closes: "Now, I've done it."

## V

MRS. FOUNTAIN, FOUNTAIN

*Fountain*: "It isn't a thing you could have wished to phrase that way, exactly."

*Mrs. Fountain*: "And you made me do it. Never thanking them, or anything, and standing there like I don't know what, and leaving the talk all to me. And now, making me lose my temper again, when I wanted to be so nice to you. Well, it is no use trying, and from this on I won't. *Clarence!*" She has opened the parcel addressed to herself and now stands transfixed with joy and wonder. "See what the girls have given me! The very necklace I've been longing for at Planets', and denying myself for the last fortnight! Well, never will I say your sisters are mean again."

*Fountain*: "You ought to have said that to them."

*Mrs. Fountain*: "It quite reconciles one to Christmas. What? Oh, that *was* rather nasty. You know I didn't mean it. I was so excited I didn't know what I was saying. I'm sure nobody ever got on better with sisters-in-law, and that shows my tact; if I do make a slip, now and then, I can always get out of it. They will understand. Do you think it was very nice of them to flaunt their new motor in my face? But of course anything *your* family does is perfect, and always was, though I must say this necklace is sweet of them. I wonder they had the taste." A tap on the door is heard. "Come in, Maggie!" *Sotto voce*: "Take it off." She snatches his bath-robe, and tosses it behind the door.

## VI

WILBUR HAZARD, THE FOUNTAINS

*Hazard*: "I suppose I can come in, even if I'm not Maggie. Catch, Fountain." He tosses a large bundle to Foun-

tain. "It's huge, but it isn't hefty." He turns to go out again.

*Mrs. Fountain*: "Oh, oh, oh! Don't go! Come in and help us. What have you brought Clarence? May I feel?"

*Hazard*: "You can look, if you like. I'm rather proud of it. There's only one other thing you can give a man, and I said, 'No, not a cigar-case. Fountain smokes enough already, but if a bath-robe can induce him to wash—' He goes out.

*Mrs. Fountain*, screaming after him through the open door: "Oh, how good! Come back and see it on him." She throws the bath-robe over Fountain's shoulders.

*Hazard*, looking in again: "Perfect fit, just as the Jew said, and the very color for Fountain." He vanishes, shutting the door behind him.

## VII

MRS. FOUNTAIN, FOUNTAIN

*Mrs. Fountain*: "How coarse! Well, my dear, I don't know where you picked up your bachelor friends. I hope this is the last of them."

*Fountain*: "Hazard's the only one who has survived your rigorous treatment. But he always had a passion for cold shoulder, poor fellow. As bath-robos go, this isn't bad." He gets his arms into it, and walks up and down. "Heigh?"

*Mrs. Fountain*: "Yes, it is pretty good. But the worst of Christmas is that it rouses up all your old friends."

*Fountain*: "They feel so abnormally good, confound them. I suppose poor old Hazard half killed himself looking this thing up and building the joke to go with it."

*Mrs. Fountain*: "Well, take it off, now, and come help me with the children's presents. You're quite forgetting about them, and it'll be morning and you'll have the little wretches swarming in before you can turn round. Dear little souls! I can sympathize with their impatience, of course. But what are you going to do with these bath-robos? You can't wear *four* bath-robos."

*Fountain*: "I can change them every day. But there ought to be seven. This hood is rather a new wrinkle, though,



isn't it? I suppose it's for a voyage, and you pull it up over your head when you come through the corridor back to your stateroom. We shall have to go to Europe, Lucy."

*Mrs. Fountain*: "I would go to Asia, Africa, and Oceanica, to escape another Christmas. Now if there are any more bath-ropes— Come in, Maggie."

### VIII

#### MAGGIE, THE FOUNTAINS

*Maggie*, bringing in a bundle: "Something a District Messenger brought. Will you sign for it, ma'am?"

*Mrs. Fountain*: "You sign, Clarence. If I know anything about the look and the feel of a bundle, this *is* another bath-robe, but I shall soon see." While she is cutting the string and tearing the wrappings away, *Fountain* signs and *Maggie* goes. *Mrs. Fountain* shakes out the folds of the robe. "Well, upon my word, I should think there was conspiracy to insult you, Clarence. I should like to know who has had the effrontery—What's on it?"

*Fountain*, reading from the card which had fallen out of the garment to the floor: "'With Christmas greetings from Mrs. Arthur J. Gibby.'"

*Mrs. Fountain*, dropping the robe and seizing the card: "*Mrs. Arthur J. Gibby!* Well, upon my word, this *is* impudence. It's not only impudence, it's indelicacy. And I had always thought she was the very embodiment of refinement, and I've gone about saying so. Now I shall have to take it back. The idea of a lady sending a bath-robe to a gentleman! What next, I wonder! What right has *Mrs. Gibby* to send you a bath-robe? Don't prevaricate! Remember that the truth is the only thing that can save you. Matters must have gone pretty far, when a woman could send you anything so—intimate. What are you staring at with that paper? You needn't hope to divert my mind by—"

*Fountain*, giving her the paper in which the robe came: "Seems to be for *Mrs. Clarence Fountain*."

*Mrs. Fountain*, snatching it from him: "What! It is, it is! Oh, poor dear *Lilly!* How can you ever forgive me? She saw me looking at it to-day at

*Shumaker's*, and it must have come into her head in despair what else to get me. But it was a perfect inspiration—for it was just what I was longing for. Why"—laughing hysterically while she holds up the robe, and turns it this way and that—"I might have seen at a glance that it wasn't a man's, with this lace on and this silk hood, and"—she hurries into it, and pulls it forward, looking down at either side—"it's just the right length, and if it was made for me it couldn't fit me better. What a joke I *shall* have with *Lilly*, when I tell her about it. I sha'n't spare myself a bit!"

*Fountain*: "Then I hope you'll spare me. I have some little delicacy of feeling, and I don't like the notion of a lady's giving me a bath-robe. It's—intimate. I don't know where you picked up your girl friends."

*Mrs. Fountain*, capering about joyfully: "Oh, how funny you are, darling! But go on. I don't mind it, now. And you may be glad you've got off so easily. Only now if there are any more bath-ropes—" A timid rap is heard at the door. "Come in, *Maggie!*" The door is slowly set ajar, then flung suddenly wide open, and *Jim* and *Susy* in their night-gowns rush dancing and exulting in.

### IX

#### JIM, SUSY, THE FOUNTAINS

*Susy*: "We've caught you, we've caught you."

*Jim*: "I just bet it was you, and now I've won, haven't I, mother?"

*Susy*: "And I've won, too, haven't I, father?" Arrested at sight of her father in the hooded bath-gown: "He does look like Santa Claus, doesn't he, *Jimmy?* But the real Santa Claus would be all over snow, and a long white beard. You can't fool *us!*"

*Jim*: "You can't fool *us!* We know you, we know you! And mother dressed up, too! There isn't any *Mrs. Santa Claus*, and that proves it!"

*Mrs. Fountain*, severely: "Dreadful little things! Who said you might come here? Go straight back to bed, this minute, or— Will you send them back, *Clarence*, and not stand staring so? What are you thinking of?"

*Fountain*, dreamily: "Nothing. Mere-

ly wondering what we shall do when we've got rid of our superstitions. Shall we be the better for it, or even the wiser?"

*Mrs. Fountain:* "What put that question into your head? Christmas, I suppose; and that's another reason for wishing there was no such thing. If I had my way, there wouldn't be."

*Jim:* "Oh, mother!"

*Susy:* "No Christmas?"

*Mrs. Fountain:* "Well, not for disobedient children who get out of bed and come in, spoiling everything. If you don't go straight back, it will be the last time, Santa Claus or no Santa Claus."

*Jim:* "And if we go right back?"

*Susy:* "And promise not to come in any more?"

*Mrs. Fountain:* "Well, we'll see how you keep your promise. If you don't, that's the end of Christmas in this house."

*Jim:* "It's a bargain, then! Come on, Susy!"

*Susy:* "And we do it for you, mother. And for you, father. We just came in for fun, anyway."

*Jim:* "We just came for a surprise."

*Mrs. Fountain,* kissing them both: "Well, then, if it was only for fun, we'll excuse you this time. Run along, now, that's good children. *Clarence!*"

## X

### MRS. FOUNTAIN, FOUNTAIN

*Fountain:* "Well?" He looks up at her from where he has dropped into a chair beside the table strewn with opened and unopened gifts at the foot of the Christmas tree.

*Mrs. Fountain:* "What are you mooning about?"

*Fountain:* "What if it was all a fake? Those thousands and hundreds of thousands of churches that pierce the clouds with their spires; those millions of ministers and missionaries: those billions of worshippers, sitting and standing and kneeling, and singing and praying; those nuns and monks, and brotherhoods and sisterhoods, with their ideals of self-denial, and their duties to the sick and poor; those martyrs that died for the one true faith, and those other martyrs of the other true faiths

whom the one true faith tortured and killed; those masses and sermons and ceremonies: what if they were all a delusion, a mistake, a misunderstanding? What if it were all as unlike the real thing, if there is any real thing, as this pagan Christmas of ours is as unlike a Christian Christmas?"

*Mrs. Fountain,* springing up: "I knew it! I knew that it was this Christmas giving that was making you morbid again. Can't you shake it off and be cheerful—like me? I'm sure I have to bear twice as much of it as you have. I've been shopping the whole week, and you've been just this one afternoon." She begins to catch her breath, and fails in searching for her handkerchief in the folds of her dress under the bath-robe.

*Fountain,* offering his handkerchief: "Take mine."

*Mrs. Fountain,* catching it from him, and biding her face in it on the table: "You ought to help me bear up, and instead of that you fling yourself on my sympathies and break me down." Lifting her face: "And if it was all a fake, as you say, and an illusion, what would you do, what would you give people in place of it?"

*Fountain:* "I don't know."

*Mrs. Fountain:* "What would you have in place of Christmas itself?"

*Fountain:* "I don't know."

*Mrs. Fountain:* "Well, then, I wouldn't set myself up to preach down everything—in a blue bath-gown. You've no idea how ridiculous you are."

*Fountain:* "Oh, yes, I have. I can see you. You look like one of those blue nuns in Rome. But I don't remember any lace on them."

*Mrs. Fountain:* "Well, you don't look like a blue monk, you needn't flatter yourself, for there are none. You look like— What are you thinking about?"

*Fountain:* "Oh, nothing. What do you suppose is in all these packages here? Useful things, that we need, that we must have? You know without looking that it's the superfluity of naughtiness in one form or other. And the givers of these gifts, they *had* to give them, just as we've had to give dozens of gifts ourselves. We ought to have put on our cards, 'With the season's bitterest grudges,' 'In hopes of a return,' 'With

a hopeless sense of the folly,' 'To pay a hateful debt,' 'With impotent rage and despair.'"

*Mrs. Fountain:* "I don't deny it, Clarence. You're perfectly right; I almost wish we *had* put it. How it would have made them hop! But they'd have known it was just the way they felt themselves."

*Fountain,* going on thoughtfully: "It's the cap sheaf of the social barbarism we live in, the hideous hypocrisy. It's no use to put it on religion. The Jews keep Christmas, too, and we know what they think of Christianity as a belief. No, we've got to go farther back, to the Pagan Saturnalia— Well, I renounce the whole affair, here and now. I'm going to spend the rest of the night bundling these things up, and to-morrow I'm going to spend the day in a taxi, going round and giving them back to the fools that sent them."

*Mrs. Fountain:* "And I'm going with you. I hate it as much as you do— Come in, Maggie!"

## XI

MAGGIE, MRS. FOUNTAIN, FOUNTAIN

*Maggie:* "Something the elevator-boys says he forgot. It came along with the last one."

*Mrs. Fountain,* taking a bundle from her: "If this is another bath-robe, Clarence! It *is*, as I live. Now if it is a woman sending it—" She picks up a card which falls out of the robe as she unfolds it. "'Love the Giver,' indeed! Now, Clarence, I insist, I demand—"

*Fountain:* "Hold on, hold on, my dear. The last bath-robe that came from a woman was for *you*."

*Mrs. Fountain:* "So it was. I don't know what I was thinking about; and I do beg your par— But this is a man's bath-robe!"

*Fountain,* taking the card which she mechanically stretches out to him: "And a man sends it: old Fellows. Can't you read print? Ambrose J. Fellows, and a message in writing: 'It was a toss-up between this and a cigar-case, and the bath-robe won. Hope you haven't got any other thoughtful friends.'"

*Mrs. Fountain:* "Oh, very brilliant, giving me a start like this! I shall let

Mr. Fellows know— What is it, Maggie? Open the door, please."

*Maggie,* opening: "It's just a District Messenger."

*Fountain,* ironically: "Oh, only a District Messenger." He signs the messenger's slip, while his wife receives from Maggie a bundle which she regards with suspicion.

## XII

MRS. FOUNTAIN, FOUNTAIN

*Mrs. Fountain:* "'From Uncle Philip for Clarence.' Well, Uncle Philip, if you have sent Clarence— *Clarence!*" breaking into a whimper. "It is, it is! It's another."

*Fountain:* "Well, that only makes the seventh, and just enough for every day in the week. It's quite my ideal. Now, if there's nothing about a cigar-case— Hello!" He feels in the pocket of the robe and brings out a cigar-case, from which a slip of paper falls: "'Couldn't make up my mind between them, so send both. Uncle Phil.' Well, this is the last stroke of Christmas insanity."

*Mrs. Fountain:* "His brain simply reeled under it, and gave way. It shows what Christmas really comes to with a man of strong intellect like Uncle Phil."

*Fountain,* opening the case: "Oh, I don't know! He's put some cigars in here—in a lucid interval, probably. There's hope yet."

*Mrs. Fountain,* in despair: "No, Clarence, there's no hope. Don't flatter yourself. The only way is to bundle back all their presents and never, never, never give or receive another one. Come! Let's begin tying them up at once; it will take us the rest of the night." A knock at the door. "Come, Maggie."

## XIII

JIM AND SUSY, MRS. FOUNTAIN, FOUNTAIN

*Jim and Susy,* pushing in: "We can't sleep, mother. May we have a pillow fight to keep us amused till we're drowsy?"

*Mrs. Fountain,* desolately: "Yes, go and have your pillow fight. It doesn't matter now. We're sending the presents all back, anyway." She begins frantically wrapping some of the things up.



*Susy*: "Oh, father, are you sending them back?"

*Jim*: "She's just making believe. Isn't she, father?"

*Fountain*: "Well, I'm not so sure of that. If she doesn't do it, I will."

*Mrs. Fountain*, desisting: "Will you go right back to bed?"

*Both*: "Yes, we will."

*Mrs. Fountain*: "And to sleep, instantly?"

*Jim and Susy* in succession: "We won't keep awake a minute longer."

*Mrs. Fountain*: "Very well, then, we'll see. Now be off with you." As they put their heads together and go out laughing, "And remember, if you come here another single time, back go every one of the presents."

*Fountain*: "As soon as ever Santa Claus can find a moment for it."

*Jim*, derisively: "Oh, yes, Santa Claus!"

*Susy*: "I guess if you wait for Santa Claus to take them back!"

#### XIV

##### MRS. FOUNTAIN, FOUNTAIN

*Mrs. Fountain*: "Tiresome little wretches. Of course we can't expect them to keep up the self-deception."

*Fountain*: "They'll grow to another. When they're men and women they'll pretend that Christmas is delightful, and go round giving people the presents that they've worn their lives out in buying and getting together. And they'll work themselves up into the notion that they are really enjoying it, when they know at the bottom of their souls that they loathe the whole job."

*Mrs. Fountain*: "There you are with your pessimism again! And I had just begun to feel cheerful about it!"

*Fountain*: "Since when? Since I proposed sending this rubbish back to the givers with our curse?"

*Mrs. Fountain*: "No, I was thinking what fun it would be if we could get up a sort of Christmas game, and do it just among relations and intimate friends."

*Fountain*: "Ah, I wish you luck of it. Then the thing would begin to have some reality, and just as in proportion as people had the worst feelings in giv-

ing the presents, their best feeling would be hurt in getting them back."

*Mrs. Fountain*: "Then why did you ever think of it?"

*Fountain*: "To keep from going mad. Come, let's go on with this job of sorting the presents, and putting them in the stockings and hanging them up on the tree, and laying them round the trunk of it. One thing: it's for the last time. As soon as Christmas week is over, I shall inaugurate an educational campaign against the whole Christmas superstition. It must be extirpated root and branch, and the extirpation must begin in the minds of the children; we old fools are hopeless; we must die in it; but the children can be saved. We must organize and make a house-to-house fight; and I'll begin in our own house. To-morrow, as soon as the children have made themselves thoroughly sick with candy and cake and midday dinner, I will appeal to their reason, and get them to agree to drop it; to sign the Anti-Christmas pledge; to—"

*Mrs. Fountain*: "Clarence! I have an idea."

*Fountain*: "Not a *bright* one?"

*Mrs. Fountain*: "Yes, a bright one, even if you didn't originate it. Have Christmas confined entirely to children—to the very youngest—to children that believe firmly in Santa Claus."

*Fountain*: "Oh, hello! Wouldn't that leave Jim and Susy out? I couldn't have *them* left out."

*Mrs. Fountain*: "That's true. I didn't think of that. Well, say to children that either believe or *pretend* to believe in him. What's that?" She stops at a faint soft sound on the door. "It's Maggie with her hands so full she's pushing with her elbow. Come in, Maggie, come in. *Come in!* Don't you hear me? Come in, I say! Oh, it isn't Maggie, of course! It's those worthless, worthless little wretches, again." She runs to the door calling out, "Naughty, naughty, naughty!" as she runs. Then, flinging the door wide, with a final cry of "*Naughty*, I say!" she discovers a small figure on the threshold, night-gowned to its feet, and looking up with a frightened, wistful face. "Why, Benny!" She stoops down and catches the child in her arms, and presses him

tight to her neck, and bends over, covering his head with kisses. "What in the world are you doing here, you poor little lamb? Is mother's darling walking in his sleep? What did you want, my pet? Tell mudda, do! Whisper it in mudda's big ear! Can't you tell mudda? What? Whisper a little louder, love! We're not angry with you, sweetness. Now, try to speak louder. Is that Santa Claus? No, dearest, that's just dadda. Santa Claus hasn't come yet, but he will soon. What? Say it again. Is there any Santa Claus? Why, who else could have brought all these presents? Presents for Benny and Jim and Susy and mudda, and seven bath-gowns for dadda. Isn't that funny? Seven! And one for mudda. What? I can't quite hear you, pet. Are we going to send the presents back? Why, who ever heard of such a thing! Jim said so? And Susy? Well, I will settle with them, when I come to them. You don't want me to? Well, I won't then, if Benny doesn't want mudda to. I'll just give them a kiss apiece, pop in their big ears. What? You've got something for Santa Claus to give them? What? Where? In your crib? And shall we go and get it? For mudda too? And dadda? Oh, my little angel!" She begins to cry over him, and to kiss him again. "You'll break my heart with your loveliness. He wants to kiss you too, dadda." She puts the boy into his father's arms; then catches him back, and runs from the room with him. Fountain resumes the work of filling the long stocking he had begun with; then he takes up a very short sock. He has that in his hand when Mrs. Fountain comes back, wiping her eyes. "He'll go to sleep now, I guess; he was half dreaming when he came in here. I should think, when you saw how Benny believed in it, you'd be ashamed of saying a word against Christmas."

*Fountain:* "Who's said anything against it? I've just been arguing for it, and trying to convince you that for the sake of little children like Benny it ought to be perpetuated to the end of the world. It began with the child-

hood of the race, in the rejuvenescence of the spirit."

*Mrs. Fountain:* "Didn't you say that Christmas began with the pagans? How monstrously you prevaricate!"

*Fountain:* "That was merely a figure of speech. And besides, since you've been out with Benny, I've been thinking, and I take back everything I've said or thought against Christmas; I didn't really think it. I've been going back in my mind to that first Christmas we had together, and it's cheered me up, wonderfully."

*Mrs. Fountain,* tenderly: "Have you, dearest? I *always* think of it. If you could have seen Benny, how I left him, just now!"

*Fountain:* "I shouldn't mind seeing him, and I shouldn't care if I gave a glance at poor old Jim and Susy. I'd like to reassure them about not sending back the presents." He puts his arm round her and presses her toward the door.

*Mrs. Fountain:* "How sweet you are! And how funny! And good!" She accentuates each sentiment with a kiss. "And don't you suppose I felt sorry for you, making you go round with me the whole afternoon, and then leaving you to take the brunt of arranging the presents? Now, I'll tell you: *next* year, I *will* do my Christmas shopping in July. It's the only way."

*Fountain:* "No, there's a better way. As you were saying, they don't have the Christmas things out. The only way is to do our Christmas shopping the day after Christmas; everything will be round still, and dog cheap. Come, we'll begin day after to-morrow."

*Mrs. Fountain:* "We will, we will!"

*Fountain:* "Do you think we will?"

*Mrs. Fountain:* "Well, we'll *say* we will." They laugh together, and then he kisses her.

*Fountain:* "Even if it goes on in the same old way, as long as we have each other—"

*Mrs. Fountain:* "And the children."

*Fountain:* "I forgot the children!"

*Mrs. Fountain:* "Oh, how delightful you are!"

# The Vanishing People of the Land of Fire

BY CHARLES WELLINGTON FURLONG, F.R.G.S.

TRAVEL alone with Indians through the shadowy deeps of the Fuegian forests, for the most part with black bog underfoot, and gray veils of mist overhead backed by a thicker gray of clouds, beyond which there seems to be no blue sky; travel in a soft mossy silence broken seldom by other sounds, save the weird creaking of great trees or the terrific crash as one of these decayed monsters crushes to the earth; travel when sullen clouds storm-sweep across the snowy mountain-tops and shriek through the forest trees in discordant rhapsodies—ruthlessly drawing across the very heart-strings of nature! To the lone white man it may symbolize the power of the Great Spirit; to the black-haired, silent Fuegians with him it is the spirits of the winds and rocks, of the mountains and the trees.

It was with caution and constant alertness that I journeyed with four Indians—Aanikin, Otrushoal and Warkeco (his two wives), and Shoyien. The powerful Aanikin with his bloody record and dark-some moods gave me no small concern, and at times on the march or about the camp-fire his dark beady eyes would fix upon me with that wolf-like expression which no white man likes to see lurking in the eyes of the savage. But to know any people it is essential that one approach them with an open mind and an open heart, with vision clarified of mists of certain conventionalities and fogs of preconception which shut out the horizon, or give glimpses of it only through wavering mirages of prejudice and warped judgment. One must have common interests and, refusing to be imposed upon, be the possessor of two valuable assets—toleration and sympathy.

My objective point was inland a bit from Cape St. Inez on the bleak, desolate bight of the eastern coast—Najmish. Here, according to Shoyien, we would probably find some of those nomads camped.

Leaving Beagle Channel to the south, we crossed in snow and storm the range of the Sierra Sorondo, trailed hungry through rain-soaked primeval forests, and slept gratefully on water-soaked bog. We left behind us a great inland sheet of water, Lake Fagnano, and the high glacial peaks which feed it, passed by some smaller lakes and lower mountains, and entered an undulating, open country patched with copses of moss-festooned trees.

There were certain of the Onas, enemies of Aanikin, whom it would not be well to meet, and on finding their moc-casined footprints on the outskirts of their territory, we proceeded with extreme vigilance.

Late one afternoon we saw through the drizzle, at the edge of some woods, Aanikin's wives, who had cross-cut the bog-lands and were now sitting in silence several yards away from two Ona men, Halimioat and his son. Though a year had passed since Aanikin and these Indians had met, immobile they sat, their faces immutable, expressionless, their black eyes looking fixedly, but not in our direction. However, these stoics, taught from childhood a wonderful self-control, were also trained apparently to see nothing but observe all. Not until we rode up almost to their very feet, and Aanikin, dismounting, advanced toward them and spoke, did they move a muscle. Halimioat then indifferently tossed a fine brace of duck to the women, who as indifferently picked them up, but plucked and drew them with wonderful skill. As soon as they were cooked on a stick over the fire, Halimioat tore one apart with his powerful hands and handed me the steaming half, which I ate with keen relish.

Mounting our thin, exhausted horses, we avoided woods, travelling for the most part over grassy meads. Yet a treacherous snare is this beautiful meadow-