

**THE CHRISTMAS
HOLLY, PP.11-85**

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The Christmas Holly, pp.11-85 by Marion Harland

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MARION HARLAND

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SALUTATORY.

IN a Christmas Eve, many years ago, before I had learned to accept Life as it is,—as it must ever be while Man needs the discipline of reverses, and while the ways of God are known but to Himself,—a chequered scene, always; often grey and lowering; sometimes black with midnight and chill with storm—on a certain Christmas Eve, then, when I was young, unreasonable and rebellious, I took a long, lonely walk into the country. The afternoon suited my temper, and both were gloomy. Low heavens of clouded steel that yet seemed, now and then, to shiver with the still, biting air, and with each shudder, to let down a few wandering flakes of snow; a bleak landscape of commons, blasted by invisible frost; of sterile hills, that must have been stony and bare in the sunniest spring-time,—and for a horizon, a girdle of leafless woods, stretching up motionless boughs against the pitiless sky; in the hollow formed by the amphitheatre of hills, an artificial pond—too intensely tame in form

and surroundings to deserve the name of lake, or be mistaken for aught but what it was, viz., a pool dug and filled with a single eye to the production of ice for the next summer's use,—this was the picture that greeted my outlooking sight. Within was the dull, icy calm of stoical misanthropy; distrust of my fellows, which stubbornly refused to ask of heavenly wisdom the solution of the human enigma that had baffled, in disgusting me.

Into the midst of this sunless mood came a surprise. Right before me, in my steady but aimless track across the waste, was a clump of dwarf trees, poor, puny things that must have had a hard coming-up. I marvelled, in surveying them, that the germs from which they had struggled had had the courage to sprout in such a barren spot. In the centre of the coppice, head and shoulders above his fellows, arose a holly sapling, brave with leaves of glossy green and scarlet berries. The only smile in the drear expanse, it was in itself a whole fountain of cheer. The soil about the trunk might be frozen to stone-like hardness, but below, the great heart of Mother Earth pulsed warmly still; throwing up, at each beat, sap into the hardy frame of her winter-child; strength to the lusty limbs; verdure to the spiky leaves; blushes to the coral beads. And while I looked, a bevy of brown-coated plump-breasted snow-birds whirled noisily across the plain, and alighted, with much twittering and a deal of happy, useless fluttering, among the inviting branches.

I had conned my lesson, and I turned my face homewards with changed spirits and a changed purpose. As one measure towards the fulfilment of the latter, I send this Christmas greeting into the waste we know as the common life of this working-day world. We make it too common, dear reader. We choose for ourselves a path across a dead level, and then perversely adapt our feelings to what we are pleased to call our circumstances. I pray you, for this one holiday season, learn with me of my holly-tree. Seek out present brightness, and in it read the promise of happy days to come. Sigh not that

—“All hope of Spring-time
Has perished with the year,”

while the same Love that nourishes the tiny greenling of the forest into brightness and beauty, despite wintry blast and wintry sleet, will keep alive in your heart, if not the tender shoots of youthful joys, the stronger, braver, worthier growth of love for your brother man; helpful charity for all things weak and lowly and sorrowing; hope and faith in the wise and tender Father of us all.

MARION HARLAND.

