

The Bride of the Mistletoe

MR. JAMES LANE ALLEN writes a sort of foreboding preface to his new book.* And the story justifies the foreboding. A crueller book for women has not been written before this time. How an innocent old bachelor came by such marital information is a proof of the "second sight" of genius and also of the indifference of genius to the harm it may work. About the meanest thing any person could devise would be to give a copy of it to a young bride, or a middle-aged married woman, or any kind of a married woman. It contains the death sentence of love, written out with a kind of epic logic in a high anthem tone of spirit, as if the author was singing it gladly from the topmost bough of his tree of life.

It is not a novel; "it is a story," he writes in the preface.

"There are two characters—a middle-aged married couple living in a plain farmhouse; one point on the field of human nature is located; at that point one subject is treated; in the treatment one movement is directed toward one climax; no external event whatsoever is introduced; and the time is about forty hours."

There you have the skull and bones of the thing. The "plain farmhouse" is in Kentucky, which Mr. Allen raises before the reader's vision in the form of a great shield. "Nature forged it for some crisis in her long warfare of time and change, made use of it, and so left it lying as one of her ancient battlepieces—Kentucky." The pageant of time that he works out upon the shield before he introduces the "middle-aged married couple" is an illustration of the way a poet can emboss a figure of speech with the inlaid silver and gold and green of a fine literary style. The "one point on the field of human nature located" is the relation of husband and wife. The husband is a college professor carefully cherished in his home by a wife who is

infinitely his superior in nature, morals and understanding, altho Mr. Allen is far from intending to produce this impression. The man occupies his leisure hours studying forestry and the history of the human in connection with the history of the oak in particular.

The earth life has always dominated in Mr. Allen's work in some symbolic sense, and he has strained the sense to the last point in this book. It is not simply that he strips us, bones us and casts us back native mollusks into our native sea, nor that he drags us up out of it, only to set us to growing savage and wild in the wild and savage wood. He has done us a deeper wrong than dragging these, our prehistoric skeletons, out of the dust closets of time. It is difficult to tell what the wrong is, he has covered it with so many balsam sentences of sweetness, poured so much language frankincense and myrrh upon it, but as near as a poor, half-sacrificed reviewer can make out, he means that we are not moral except by chance or custom or coercion, which may be true, but the chief thing he means is that Nature just produces us, grows us and fathers us for sacrifices to the next higher order of beings, who in their turn must suffer the same fate. All is sacrifice. That is the one unchanging law. And apparently it calls for the woman first upon the Druid altar he has made the world into for the purposes of his story, which is not a story so much as it is an argument for sacrifice. The one "subject treated" which he mentions in his awful preface is the passing of the husband's love for his wife. The dramatic malignancy of the book consists in the poetic beauty and diabolical frankness with which the husband tells his wife on Christmas Eve, under the prolonged radiation of a symbolic Christmas tree, that he no longer loves her, and indeed, would like to make some passion experiments in old forest customs on his own account. Nothing could be more heinously correct than the callous way the husband makes the

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changed state of his affections perfectly clear to his wife. He is a philosopher, the season is past, the thing is done and cannot be helped.

The "climax" the author refers to in the same grim tone of voice in the preface takes place in the heart of the wife during the night. She goes thru all the dramatic phases of feminine depression, but these are only transient moods of the mere woman. Toward morning she becomes less the woman, more intelligently the sacrifice—which is to say, she resigns all thought of escape, hope or vengeance, and prepares to continue in the service of wifedom, performing all its duties, bereft of the one reward for such service—his love. Nature casts off her littler nature, her self-respect, strips her of every feminine art by which, for love's sake, she kept herself looking younger than she was, and binds her to the Great Altar. So, when he awakes, he finds her shorn of her beauty, confessing her years, toned down to being nothing but the one thing, sacrifice, for the coming order, for her children, for him and the honor of his name—and he is moved to pity her, but not to love—men never really love women after they have taken this veil for sacrifice. They merely revere and pity them.

This is the story. In the next paragraph of his preface Mr. Allen tells us there will be another book, with the scenes laid in the same house within the year. Well, let him write it. He cannot do a more devastating thing than he has done in this one. And possibly he may do better. He says in the last paragraph that there will be a third book also within the twelvemonth entitled "The Christmas Tree: An Interpretation." Half of the present volume is taken up with an interpretation of the Christmas tree, but it may be that he can keep it up indefinitely.

