



**A CHRISTMAS IDYL**



**LITTLE BLOSSOM** thrust her tiny dimpled hands into the great china rose jar, and shook out a gust of summery fragrance, though outside the winter wind was raging wildly, and piling the fleecy snow into deep snow drifts.

"Don't spill the pot-pourri, my pet!" murmured a sweet, sad voice.

It was Blossom's sister, blue-eyed Mabel, who sat sewing by a dim light and a dying fire—sewing furtively on a white dress for a cheap doll hidden under her apron, for to-morrow would be Christmas, and the poor gift must go into Blossom's little red stocking hanging yonder with that pathetic darn in the tiny heel.

They were alone in the world, these two, and Mabel was fighting the battle of life for both, with a brave heart but failing hope, for alas! encumbered with the care of the 4-year-old child, there was so little she could do to keep the grim wolf of poverty away from the door.

Only two years ago they had been the petted daughters of a rich merchant, but falling in business, he had died of the shock, and his delicate wife had soon followed him to the grave.

Everything was sold to satisfy the clamorous creditors.

Of all the splendors and luxuries of their old home nothing remained to the orphans but the beautiful china vase of pot-pourri of which Arthur and Mabel had gathered the roses that summer when they were betrothed.



"Don't spill the pot-pourri, my pet." That was almost three years ago, now, and to-night, as the wild winter winds shrieked through the leafless trees, and the blinding snow whirled along the lonely streets, little Blossom stirred the rose leaves in the old china jar, and with the summery gust of spicy perfume, old memories rose to flood tide in Mabel's tortured heart.

Where was Arthur now when his beautiful young love was so lonely and friendless in the cruel world, her slight form too thinly clad for the wintry cold, her cheek too wan from lack of food? Was he dead, or false?

Alas, they had quarreled bitterly, the headstrong young lovers!

But as Mabel wept so heart-brokenly now, she thought less of their bitter quarrel and more of their love and

happiness that golden summer when they had gathered the roses to fill the china jar, and kissed each other so often beneath the bending foliage.

Later on, in winter weather, they had quarreled, because Mabel was displeased at Arthur's flirting with a cold coquette. So the sweet idyl of love came to a sudden end, and Arthur devoted himself to the girls that Mabel despised the most. She did not seem to care, although she favored none of her other suitors, but smiled on all alike. Her mamma did not allow her to take refuge, like Arthur, in reckless flirting.

"A young girl should be as pure as a white rosebud. The virgin dew of innocence should not be brushed from her heart by idle flirtations. Let her keep her love looks and her heart smiles for her husband," said the wise matron.

And therein lay the gist of the lover's quarrel.

Arthur had flirted and Mabel had taken him to task.

He was so handsome and so rich that women kept angling for him even after his engagement was announced, and his easy masculine vanity soon drew him into a coquette's toils. He looked love into her winking eyes and kissed her hand because she tempted him. He knew he was in the wrong, but he waxed angry at Mabel's naive lectures.

"Mamma says a male fiend is even more despicable than a female one, and that a truly noble man will not stoop to pain a woman's heart merely to gratify his silly vanity. And an engaged man is almost the same as a married man. Mamma says he has no right—"

But her timid arguments were interrupted by Arthur's angry retort:

"See here, Mabel, you're beginning to quote my mother-in-law to me too soon, and I tell you plainly I won't stand it now, nor after I'm married, either."

"You can never marry me unless you change your fickle ways!" flashed Mabel, indignantly, and Arthur, not to be outdone, replied:

"Very well, Miss Miller, I can soon find another sweetheart as pretty as you are, and perhaps not so jealous!"

Mabel's blue eyes flashed with anger, and tossing her beautiful golden head, she threw his diamond ring disdainfully at his feet. Arthur picked it up with a reproachful glance from his large, dark eyes, bowed scornfully, and went away. After that they never spoke as they passed by.

But, in spite of their outward pride and alienation, they had loved too tenderly and truly to change at heart, and each cherished a secret hope of reconciliation. She thought that Arthur would repent and own his fault; he believed that Mabel would repent and call him back.

But in one brief month her father died, and the heart-broken wife quickly followed her husband to the better land.

Mabel and little Blossom were left all alone in the cold world. Riches took wings, and friends forsook the orphans. With a few dollars, and the old china rose-jar, they removed to a humble room they had rented in the cottage of a poor widow. There, for a little while, Mabel half hoped for Arthur's coming. Surely, if he had ever loved her, he would throw pride to the winds and come to her now, when she was so poor, and sad, and wretched.

But the long months came and went without a sign from Arthur, and it was more than two years now since their angry parting. She seldom went out, she did not read the newspapers—she was too busy and too poor—so she

did not even know what had become of her old love. He might be dead or married—married to that sweetheart he had boasted "he could find, as pretty as Mabel and not so jealous."

Mabel had tried—oh, so hard!—to put fickle Arthur out of her thoughts, but, alas, when Blossom's restless fingers would stir the pot-pourri into perfume, the ghost of that dead summer and that lost love would come out from the withered rose leaves and pull at Mabel's heart-strings with relentless hands.

While Mabel wept on her folded hands, the restless little Blossom, ever intent on childish mischief, came and leaned against her knee, abstracted the tiny silver thimble from her finger, and trotted back to dabble in the rose leaves again until she was presently put to bed after drowsily murmuring her baby prayer, "Now I lay me down to sleep."

Then Mabel knelt to pray also, and to her rightly petition she added, as often before: "God bless Arthur, wherever he may be, and give him a happy life. Amen."

The joyous Christmas morning dawned with dazzling sunshine on the bright, now fallen snow, and Blossom was very happy with the new doll and sugar plums in her red stocking, but for sweet Mabel there was no Christmas token, although in former years the festive season had showered her with gifts. With deft fingers she prepared their simple breakfast of tea and toast, and just as they finished eating their laundress entered.

She was a sunny tempered old negro woman, once Blossom's loving nurse, and since then she had insisted on doing their small wash, charging only a nominal sum, such as she knew Mabel could afford to pay.

Blossom laughed with delight over the big yellow orange Mamma gave her, then the old woman opened her neat basket and brought out the snowy garments so daintily laundered, explaining volubly:



"MY PRECIOUS MABEL." "Miss Mabel, honey, dese yere white aprons uv Blossom's done wared so threadbar", dat I tored a snag in one sleeve, honey. It's mighty sorry, but I cudden' help it to save my life, de muslin is so ole and thin. But, darlin', you git yo' needle right off an' fix it afore Blossom puts hit on, 'cause you know ef she spy dat leetle snag, she gwine to poke her sassie leetle thumb in it shore, and tyar dat hole heap bigger in a minnit! Ah, you spilt little precious," apostrophizing Blossom, "you needn't shake dem yaller curis at me, 'cause you knows dat yo' ole brack Mammy is tellin' de gospel truth on you! You always was a doing of some mischief ebbin

since you was born, dough you do looky like a hebbently angel wid dem big blue eyes an' dimply cheeks!" and she gathered the cherub to her broad bosom in a loving hug while Mabel sought diligently in her little work-basket for her missing thimble.

"It is not here. How strange, for I had it late last night," she said. Then, a sudden memory came over her. She added, anxiously: "Blossom, you had sister's thimble last night. You took it from my finger. Get it for me now, that I may mend your pretty white apron!"

Blossom trotted from corner to corner with a puckered brow of grave perplexity and her rosy thumb in her mouth, sure sign of perturbation. Mabel and Mammy joined in the search, diligently, but all in vain.

"Oh, dear! the little mischief, she is always losing some of my things," sighed Mabel, impatiently. "There was my gold pen that went so strangely, my tooth brush, dozens of spoons of embroidery silks, and—ever so many trifles. But she can never remember what she did with a single thing! She must have found a crack in the floor or wall to poke things in. Think now, pet, with all your might. Where did you hide sister's thimble?"

Blossom, with her most cherubic air of innocence, was thinking deeply, and to some purpose this time, for suddenly, with a shout of joy like an infantile Columbus discovering a new America, she rushed to the rose-jar.

"Indat—evyting in dere!" she lisped, joyfully, and boldly overturned the pot-pourri upon the floor.

Oh, the flood of sweetness, the summer-time perfume in the wintry air as the spices and withered roses poured in reckless waste upon the warm carpet! A cry of dismay rose from Mabel's lips, but Mammy and Blossom were already on their knees scattering the fragrant mass and bringing to light all the lost treasures.

And suddenly Mabel saw in Mammy's fat black hand a square, cream-tinted envelope, sealed with pale-blue wax, and on the back her own name in Arthur's writing: Miss Mabel Langley Miller.

"Oh, my Lor' Almighty, dat lost letter! Da's whar she done hid it, dat little mischief!" the old woman was half sobbing when Mabel caught it from her hand.

She thought at first that it was one of Arthur's old love letters, but suddenly she saw that the seal was unbroken, and cried, tremblingly: "Mammy, Mammy, how came this here? When—how—" her voice broke in a sob, and the old woman whispered:

"Taint nothin' important, is it, Miss Mabel, honey? 'Cause, how, maybe I've been wrong that I never tole you 'bout it sooner! Dot letter—I'd know it ag'in anywhere—kem to our house the day of 'poor' mar's' fun'el, darlin', and I jest lay it down in you' room a'tendin' to gib it ter you bimeby when you come up stairs from cryin' ober de corpse. 'Peared lak I jest turned round and dat letter was gone. Blossom, she was a-stanin' close to de fire, an' I 'tought she done took en burn it up. I 'se feared you'd be mad 'bout it, so I neber tolel you; and when de nigger kem dat ebenin' for de answer, I tolel him dat wasn't none. Oh, dat little mischief, she done hid it in de rose-jar all dis time!"

"Oh, Mammy, Mammy, you've wrecked my life! I'll never forgive you—never, never!" wailed Mabel, as she broke the seal of the dear letter whose secret the old rose-jar had kept those two long weary years.

And under date of two years ago, Arthur had written in a passion of love and remorse and tenderness:

"MY DARLING MABEL: I was in the wrong, from first to last. Will you forgive me, and make up our dreadful quarrel?"

"I have never been happy one moment since we parted. I will never flirt again if you will take me back again, my darling."

"My heart aches for you in your loss and sorrow, my own sweet love, but I will love you enough to make up for everything when once you are my darling wife. Blossom shall be my little sister. Send me one word, my Mabel, to put me out of my misery and bid me come to you! Your

ARTHUR."

She turned on the old black woman, her blue eyes haggard with despair.

"The letter was from Arthur, to make up our quarrel," she cried. "You knew all about it, then, how we loved each other and how we parted. But now it is too late, forever too late!" and she fell sobbing, with her lovely face against the withered roses of that golden summer when she and Arthur had been happy together.

So black Mammy, with a sob of dismay, rushed from the room, and Blossom crouched over the scattered pot-pourri in round eyed amazement.

Mabel alternately kissed and wept over the letter all day long, but in the early gloaming she heard a manly footstep inside the room.

"Miss Mabel, honey, I done fetch him back to you, darlin'," sobbed a voice outside the door, and the girl sprang to her feet in bewilderment.

A pair of tender arms clasped her to a warm, manly breast, dark, glorious eyes beamed love into her own, fond lips clung yearningly to hers, and Arthur Earle breathed, with deep emotion:

"My precious Mabel, we must forgive Mammy and Blossom their share in our long separation, for we both have suffered so deeply that our reunion is all the more sweet and thrilling! No more sadness and loneliness for us, Mabel, darling. This is the most joyous Christmas of my life, and to-morrow you shall be my worshiped bride!"

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