

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Old Folks' Christmas

RING LARDNER

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Every society, although bent on the future, is a gift from the past. We did not make the world we inhabit; it is a monument to our ancestors. How, then, should we regard—and what do we owe—our past, our traditions, our inherited institutions, our families of origin? These enduring human questions are all the more poignant in American society, given the rapid rate of technological and social change, our embrace of youthfulness and prosperity, and our passionate devotion to “what’s new.”

This sad tale (1929) by Ring Lardner (1885–1933) powerfully exposes the tension between tradition and change. The overindulged young people, indifferent to tradition and heedless of family ties, care only for immediate enjoyment with their friends; the parents, heedless of the effects of social and cultural change, naively assume that their children will be like them.

What went wrong here, and why? What is “old” and what is “new”—and what is “American” and what “Christian”—in this American family’s Christmas? What would you do differently, as one of the parents or as one of the young people? What are the proper attitudes toward past and future? How do you change a tradition while also preserving its meaning?

Tom and Grace Carter sat in their living-room on Christmas Eve, sometimes talking, sometimes pretending to read and all the time thinking things they didn’t want to think. Their two children, Junior, aged nineteen, and Grace, two years younger, had come home that day from their schools for the Christmas vacation. Junior was in his first year at the university and Grace attending a boarding-school that would fit her for college.

I won’t call them Grace and Junior any more, though that is the way they had been christened. Junior had changed his name to Ted and Grace was now Caroline, and thus they insisted on being addressed, even by their parents. This was one of the things Tom and Grace the elder were thinking of as they sat in their living-room Christmas Eve.

Other university freshmen who had lived here had returned on the twenty-first, the day when the vacation was supposed to begin. Ted had telegraphed that he would be three days late owing to a special examination which, if he passed it, would lighten the

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terrific burden of the next term. He had arrived at home looking so pale, heavy-eyed and shaky that his mother doubted the wisdom of the concentrated mental effort, while his father secretly hoped the stuff had been non-poisonous and would not have lasting effects. Caroline, too, had been behind schedule, explaining that her laundry had gone astray and she had not dared trust others to trace it for her.

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Grace and Tom had attempted, with fair success, to conceal their disappointment over this delayed home-coming and had continued with their preparations for a Christmas that would thrill their children and consequently themselves. They had bought an imposing lot of presents, costing twice or three times as much as had been Tom's father's annual income when Tom was Ted's age, or Tom's own income a year ago, before General Motors' acceptance of his new weather-proof paint had enabled him to buy this suburban home and luxuries such as his own parents and Grace's had never dreamed of, and to give Ted and Caroline advantages that he and Grace had perforce gone without.

Behind the closed door of the music-room was the elaborately decked tree. The piano and piano bench and the floor around the tree were covered with beribboned packages of all sizes, shapes and weights, one of them addressed to Tom, another to Grace, a few to the servants and the rest to Ted and Caroline. A huge box contained a sealskin coat for Caroline, a coat that had cost as much as the Carters had formerly paid a year for rent. Even more expensive was a "set" of jewelry consisting of an opal brooch, a bracelet of opals and gold filigree, and an opal ring surrounded by diamonds.

Grace always had preferred opals to any other stone, but now that she could afford them, some inhibition prevented her from buying them for herself; she could enjoy them much more adorning her pretty daughter. There were boxes of silk stockings, lingerie, gloves and handkerchiefs. And for Ted, a three-hundred-dollar watch, a de-luxe edition of Balzac, an expensive bag of shiny, new steel-shafted golf-clubs and the last word in portable phonographs.

But the big surprise for the boy was locked in the garage, a black Gorham sedan, a model more up to date and better-looking than Tom's own year-old car that stood beside it. Ted could use it during the vacation if the mild weather continued and could look forward to driving it around home next spring and summer, there being a rule at the university forbidding undergraduates the possession or use of private automobiles.

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Every year for sixteen years, since Ted was three and Caroline one, it had been the Christmas Eve custom of the Carters' to hang up their children's stockings and fill them with inexpensive toys. Tom and Grace had thought it would be fun to continue the custom this year; the contents of the stockings—a mechanical negro dancing doll, music-boxes, a kitten that meowed when you pressed a spot on her back, et cetera—would make the “kids” laugh. And one of Grace's first pronouncements to her returned offspring was that they must go to bed early so Santa Claus would not be frightened away.

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But it seemed they couldn't promise to make it so terribly early. They both had long-standing dates in town. Caroline was going to dinner and a play with Beatrice Murdock and Beatrice's nineteen-year-old brother Paul. The latter would call for her in his car at half past six. Ted had accepted an invitation to see the hockey match with two classmates, Herb Castle and Bernard King. He wanted to take his father's Gorham, but Tom told him untruthfully that the foot-brake was not working; Ted must be kept out of the garage till tomorrow morning.

Ted and Caroline had taken naps in the afternoon and gone off together in Paul Murdock's stylish roadster, giving their word that they would be back by midnight or a little later and that tomorrow night they would stay home.

And now their mother and father were sitting up for them, because the stockings could not be filled and hung till they were safely in bed, and also because trying to go to sleep is a painful and hopeless business when you are kind of jumpy.

“What time is it?” asked Grace, looking up from the third page of a book that she had begun to “read” soon after dinner.

“Half past two,” said her husband. (He had answered the same question every fifteen or twenty minutes since midnight.)

“You don't suppose anything could have happened?” said Grace.

“We'd have heard if there had,” said Tom.

“It isn't likely, of course,” said Grace, “but they might have had an accident some place where nobody was there to report it or telephone or anything. We don't know what kind of a driver the Murdock boy is.”

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“He’s Ted’s age. Boys that age may be inclined to drive too fast, but they drive pretty well.”

“How do you know?”

“Well, I’ve watched some of them drive.”

“Yes, but not all of them.”

“I doubt whether anybody in the world has seen every nineteen-year-old boy drive.”

“Boys these days seem so kind of irresponsible.”

“Oh, don’t worry! They probably met some of their young friends and stopped for a bite to eat or something.” Tom got up and walked to the window with studied carelessness. “It’s a pretty night,” he said. “You can see every star in the sky.”

But he wasn’t looking at the stars. He was looking down the road for headlights. There were none in sight and after a few moments he returned to his chair.

“What time is it?” asked Grace.

“Twenty-two of,” he said.

“Of what?”

“Of three.”

“Your watch must have stopped. Nearly an hour ago you told me it was half past two.”

“My watch is all right. You probably dozed off.”

“I haven’t closed my eyes.”

“Well, it’s time you did. Why don’t you go to bed?”

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“Why don’t you?”

“I’m not sleepy.”

“Neither am I. But honestly, Tom, it’s silly for you to stay up. I’m just doing it so I can fix the stockings, and because I feel so wakeful. But there’s no use of your losing your sleep.”

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“I couldn’t sleep a wink till they’re home.”

“That’s foolishness! There’s nothing to worry about. They’re just having a good time. You were young once yourself.”

“That’s just it! When I was young, I was young.” He picked up his paper and tried to get interested in the shipping news.

“What time is it?” asked Grace.

“Five minutes of three.”

“Maybe they’re staying at the Murdocks’ all night.”

“They’d have let us know.”

“They were afraid to wake us up, telephoning.”

At three-twenty a car stopped at the front gate.

“There they are!”

“I told you there was nothing to worry about.”

Tom went to the window. He could just discern the outlines of the Murdock boy’s roadster, whose lighting system seemed to have broken down.

“He hasn’t any lights,” said Tom. “Maybe I’d better go out and see if I can fix them.”

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“No, don’t!” said Grace sharply. “He can fix them himself. He’s just saving them while he stands still.”

“Why don’t they come in?”

“They’re probably making plans.”

“They can make them in here. I’ll go out and tell them we’re still up.”

“No, don’t!” said Grace as before, and Tom obediently remained at the window.

It was nearly four when the car lights flashed on and the car drove away. Caroline walked into the house and stared dazedly at her parents.

“Heavens! What are you doing up?”

Tom was about to say something, but Grace forestalled him.

“We were talking over old Christmases,” she said. “Is it very late?”

“I haven’t any idea,” said Caroline.

“Where is Ted?”

“Isn’t he home? I haven’t seen him since we dropped him at the hockey place.”

“Well, you go right to bed,” said her mother. “You must be worn out.”

“I am, kind of. We danced after the play. What time is breakfast?”

“Eight o’clock.”

“Oh, Mother, can’t you make it nine?”

“I guess so. You used to want to get up early on Christmas.”

“I know, but—”

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“Who brought you home?” asked Tom.

“Why, Paul Murdock—and Beatrice.”

“You look rumpled.”

“They made me sit in the ‘rumple’ seat.”

She laughed at her joke, said good night and went upstairs. She had not come even within hand-shaking distance of her father and mother.

“The Murdocks,” said Tom, “must have great manners, making their guest ride in that uncomfortable seat.”

Grace was silent.

“You go to bed, too,” said Tom. “I’ll wait for Ted.”

“You couldn’t fix the stockings.”

“I won’t try. We’ll have time for that in the morning; I mean, later in the morning.”

“I’m not going to bed till you do,” said Grace.

“All right, we’ll both go. Ted ought not to be long now. I suppose his friends will bring him home. We’ll hear him when he comes in.”

There was no chance not to hear him when, at ten minutes before six, he came in. He had done his Christmas shopping late and brought home a package.

Grace was downstairs again at half past seven, telling the servants breakfast would be postponed till nine. She nailed the stockings beside the fireplace, went into the music-room to see that nothing had been disturbed and removed Ted’s hat and overcoat from where he had carefully hung them on the hall floor.

Tom appeared a little before nine and suggested that the children ought to be awakened.

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“I’ll wake them,” said Grace, and went upstairs. She opened Ted’s door, looked, and softly closed it again. She entered her daughter’s room and found Caroline semiconscious.

“Do I have to get up now? Honestly I can’t eat anything. If you could just have Molla bring me some coffee. Ted and I are both invited to the Murdocks’ for breakfast at half past twelve, and I could sleep for another hour or two.”

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“But dearie, don’t you know we have Christmas dinner at one?”

“It’s a shame, Mother, but I thought of course our dinner would be at night.”

“Don’t you want to see your presents?”

“Certainly I do, but can’t they wait?”

Grace was about to go to the kitchen to tell the cook that dinner would be at seven instead of one, but she remembered having promised Signe the afternoon and evening off, as a cold, light supper would be all anyone wanted after the heavy midday meal.

Tom and Grace breakfasted alone and once more sat in the living-room, talking, thinking and pretending to read.

“You ought to speak to Caroline,” said Tom.

“I will, but not today. It’s Christmas.”

“And I intend to say a few words to Ted.”

“Yes, dear, you must. But not today.”

“I suppose they’ll be out again tonight.”

“No, they promised to stay home. We’ll have a nice cozy evening.”

“Don’t bet too much on that,” said Tom.

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At noon the “children” made their entrance and responded to their parents’ salutations with almost the proper warmth. Ted declined a cup of coffee and he and Caroline apologized for making a “breakfast” date at the Murdocks’.

“Sis and I both thought you’d be having dinner at seven, as usual.”

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“We’ve always had it at one o’clock on Christmas,” said Tom.

“I’d forgotten it was Christmas,” said Ted.

“Well, those stockings ought to remind you.”

Ted and Caroline looked at the bulging stockings.

“Isn’t there a tree?” asked Caroline.

“Of course,” said her mother. “But the stockings come first.”

“We’ve only a little time,” said Caroline. “We’ll be terribly late as it is. So can’t we see the tree now?”

“I guess so,” said Grace, and led the way into the music-room.

The servants were summoned and the tree stared at and admired.

“You must open your presents,” said Grace to her daughter.

“I can’t open them all now,” said Caroline. “Tell me which is special.”

The cover was removed from the huge box and Grace held up the coat.

“Oh, Mother!” said Caroline. “A sealskin coat!”

“Put it on,” said her father.

“Not now. We haven’t time.”

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“Then look at this!” said Grace, and opened the case of jewels.

“Oh, Mother! Opals!” said Caroline.

“They’re my favorite stone,” said Grace quietly.

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“If nobody minds,” said Ted, “I’ll postpone my personal investigation till we get back. I know I’ll like everything you’ve given me. But if we have no car in working order, I’ve got to call a taxi and catch a train.”

“You can drive in,” said his father.

“Did you fix the brake?”

“I think it’s all right. Come up to the garage and we’ll see.”

Ted got his hat and coat and kissed his mother good-by.

“Mother,” he said, “I know you’ll forgive me for not having any presents for you and Dad. I was so rushed the last three days at school. And I thought I’d have time to shop a little when we got in yesterday, but I was in too much of a hurry to be home. Last night, everything was closed.”

“Don’t worry,” said Grace. “Christmas is for young people. Dad and I have everything we want.”

The servants had found their gifts and disappeared, expressing effusive Scandinavian thanks.

Caroline and her mother were left alone.

“Mother, where did the coat come from?”

“Lloyd and Henry’s.”

“They keep all kinds of furs, don’t they?”

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“Yes.”

“Would you mind horribly if I exchanged this?”

“Certainly not, dear. You pick out anything you like, and if it’s a little more expensive, it won’t make any difference. We can go in town tomorrow or next day. But don’t you want to wear your opals to the Murdocks’?”

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“I don’t believe so. They might get lost or something. And I’m not—well, I’m not so crazy about—”

“I think they can be exchanged, too,” said Grace. “You run along now and get ready to start.”

Caroline obeyed with alacrity, and Grace spent a welcome moment by herself.

Tom opened the garage door.

“Why, you’ve got two cars!” said Ted.

“The new one isn’t mine,” said Tom.

“Whose is it?”

“Yours. It’s the new model.”

“Dad, that’s wonderful! But it looks just like the old one.”

“Well, the old one’s pretty good. Just the same, yours is better. You’ll find that out when you drive it. Hop in and get started. I had her filled with gas.”

“I think I’d rather drive the old one.”

“Why?”

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“Well, what I really wanted, Dad, was a Barnes sport roadster, something like Paul Murdock’s, only a different color scheme. And if I don’t drive this Gorham at all, maybe you could get them to take it back or make some kind of a deal with the Barnes people.”

Tom didn’t speak till he was sure of his voice. Then: “All right, son. Take my car and I’ll see what can be done about yours.” Page | 12

Caroline, waiting for Ted, remembered something and called to her mother. “Here’s what I got for you and Dad,” she said. “It’s two tickets to ‘Jolly Jane,’ the play I saw last night. You’ll love it!”

“When are they for?” asked Grace.

“Tonight,” said Caroline.

“But dearie,” said her mother, “we don’t want to go out tonight, when you promised to stay home.”

“We’ll keep our promise,” said Caroline, “but the Murdocks may drop in and bring some friends and we’ll dance and there’ll be music. And Ted and I both thought you’d rather be away somewhere so our noise wouldn’t disturb you.”

“It was sweet of you to do this,” said her mother, “but your father and I don’t mind noise as long as you’re enjoying yourselves.”

“It’s time anyway that you and Dad had a treat.”

“The real treat,” said Grace, “would be to spend a quiet evening here with just you two.”

“The Murdocks practically invited themselves and I couldn’t say no after they’d been so nice to me. And honestly, Mother, you’ll love this play!”

“Will you be home for supper?”

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“I’m pretty sure we will, but if we’re a little late, don’t you and Dad wait for us. Take the seven-twenty so you won’t miss anything. The first act is really the best. We probably won’t be hungry, but have Signe leave something out for us in case we are.”

Tom and Grace sat down to the elaborate Christmas dinner and didn’t make much impression on it. Even if they had had any appetite, the sixteen-pound turkey would have looked almost like new when they had eaten their fill. Conversation was intermittent and related chiefly to Signe’s excellence as a cook and the mildness of the weather. Children and Christmas were barely touched on.

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Tom merely suggested that on account of its being a holiday and their having theatre tickets, they ought to take the six-ten and eat supper at the Metropole. His wife said no; Ted and Caroline might come home and be disappointed at not finding them. Tom seemed about to make some remark, but changed his mind.

The afternoon was the longest Grace had ever known. The children were still absent at seven and she and Tom taxied to the train. Neither talked much on the way to town. As for the play, which Grace was sure to love, it turned out to be a rehash of “Cradle Snatchers” and “Sex,” retaining the worst features of each.

When it was over, Tom said: “Now I’m inviting you to the Cove Club. You didn’t eat any breakfast or dinner or supper and I can’t have you starving to death on a feast-day. Besides, I’m thirsty as well as hungry.”

They ordered the special *table d’hôte* and struggled hard to get away with it. Tom drank six high-balls, but they failed to produce the usual effect of making him jovial. Grace had one high-ball and some kind of cordial that gave her a warm, contented feeling for a moment. But the warmth and contentment left her before the train was half way home.

The living-room looked as if Von Kluck’s army had just passed through. Ted and Caroline had kept their promise up to a certain point. They had spent part of the evening at home, and the Murdocks must have brought all their own friends and everybody else’s, judging from the results. The tables and floors were strewn with empty glasses, ashes and cigaret stubs. The stockings had been torn off their nails and the wrecked contents were all over the place. Two sizable holes had been burnt in Grace’s favorite rug.

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Tom took his wife by the arm and led her into the music-room.

“You never took the trouble to open your own present,” he said.

“And I think there’s one for you, too,” said Grace. “They didn’t come in here,” she added, “so I guess there wasn’t much dancing or music.”

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Tom found his gift from Grace, a set of diamond studs and cuff buttons for festive wear. Grace’s present from him was an opal ring.

“Oh, Tom!” she said.

“We’ll have to go out somewhere tomorrow night, so I can break these in,” said Tom.

“Well, if we do that, we’d better get a good night’s rest.”

“I’ll beat you upstairs,” said Tom.