

WHAT SO ★ PROUDLY ★ WE HAIL

The American Soul in Story, Speech, and Song

Madame Martel's Christmas Eve

KATE CHOPIN

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Kate Chopin (1850–1904) set many of her short stories in Louisiana, where her husband owned a small plantation. Written in 1896, after Chopin's own husband had died and she was forced to sell their home, this story concerns a Creole widow, Madame Martel, who spends Christmas Eve alone, pining for her dead husband.

Describe Madame Martel. Is she “selfish” in her grief for her husband? Why have her three children left her alone for Christmas? Are they right to do so? What moves Madame Martel to seek out her youngest child? Is this too, as the partygoers tell her, a selfish impulse? What brings Gustave home for Christmas? Is he right to say his motives were “purely selfish”? Do his motives even matter? Why is Christmas best celebrated with others?

Madame Martel was alone in the house. Even the servants upon one pretext and another had deserted her. She did not care; nothing mattered.

She was a slender, blonde woman, dressed in deep mourning. As she sat looking into the fire, holding in her hand an old letter that she had been reading, the naturally sorrowful expression of her face was sharpened by acute and vivid memories. The tears kept welling up to her eyes and she kept wiping them away with a fine, black-bordered cambric handkerchief. Occasionally she would turn to the table beside her and picking up an old ambrotype that lay there amid the pile of letters, she would gaze and gaze with misty eyes upon the picture; choking back sobs; seeming to hold them in with the black-bordered handkerchief that she pressed to her mouth.

The room in which she sat was cheerful, with its open wood-fire and its fine old-fashioned furniture that betokened taste as well as comfort and wealth. Over the mantle-piece hung the pleasing, handsome portrait of a man in his early prime.

But Madame Martel was alone. Not only the servants were absent but even her children were away. Instead of coming home for Christmas, Gustave had accepted the invitation of a college friend to spend the holidays in Assumption. He had learned by experience that his mother preferred to be alone at this season and he respected her

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wishes. Adelaide, his older sister, had of course gone to Iberville to be with her uncle Achilles' family, where there was no end of merrymaking all the year round. And even little Lulu was glad to get away for a few days from the depressing atmosphere which settled upon their home at the approach of Christmas.

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Madame Martel was one of those women—not rare among Creoles—who make a luxury of grief. Most people thought it peculiarly touching that she had never abandoned mourning for her husband, who had been dead six years, and that she never intended to lay it aside.

More than one woman had secretly resolved, in the event of a like bereavement, to model her own widowhood upon just such lines. And there were men who felt that death would lose half its sting if, in dying they might bear away with the assurance of being mourned so faithfully, so persistently as Madame Martel mourned her departed husband.

It was especially at the season of Christmas that she indulged to the utmost in her poignant memories and abandoned herself to a very intoxication of grief. For her husband had possessed a sunny, cheerful temperament—the children resembled him—and it had often seemed to her that he had chiefly welcomed in Christmas the pretext to give free rein to his own boyish exuberance of spirit. A thousand recollections crowded upon her. She could see his beaming face; she could hear the clear ring of his laughter, joining the little ones in their glee as every fresh delight of the day unfolded itself.

The room had grown oppressive; for it was really not cold out of doors—hardly cold enough for the fire that was burning there on the hearth. Madame Martel arose and went and poured herself a glass of water. Her throat was parched and her head was beginning to ache. The pitcher was heavy and her thin hand shook a little as she poured the water. She went into her sleeping-room for a fresh, dry handkerchief, and she cooled her face, which was hot and inflamed, with a few puffs of *poudre de riz*.

She was nervous and unstrung. She had been dwelling so persistently on the thought of her husband that she felt as if he must be there in the house. She felt as if the years had rolled backward and given her again her own. If she were to go into the playroom, surely she would find the Christmas-tree there, all ablaze, as it was that last Christmas that he was with them. He would be there holding little Lulu in his arms. She could almost hear the ring of voices and the patter of little feet.

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Madame Martel, suffocating with memories, threw a light shawl over her shoulders and stepped out upon the gallery, leaving the door ajar. There was a faint moonlight that seemed rather a misty effulgence enveloping the lights of the village a little distance away. And there were sounds that reached her: there was music somewhere; and occasional shouts of merriment and laughter; and someone was lustily blowing a horn not far away.

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She was slowly and with a measured tramp, up and down. She lingered awhile at the south end of the gallery where there were roses hanging still untouched by the frost, and she stayed there looking before her into the shadowy depths that seemed to picture the gloom of her own existence. Her acute grief of a while had passed, but a terrible loneliness had settled upon her spirit.

Her husband was forever gone, and now the children even seemed to be slipping out of her life, cut off by want of sympathy. Perhaps it was in the nature of things; she did not know; it was very hard to bear; and her heart suddenly turned savage and hungry within her for human companionship—for some expression of human love.

Little Lulu was not far away: on the other side of the village, about a half mile or so. She was staying there with old and intimate friends of her mother, in a big, hospitable house where there were lots of young people and much good cheer in store for the holidays.

With the thought of Lulu's nearness the desire came to Madame Martel to see the child, to have the little one with her again at home. She would go herself on the instant and fetch Lulu back. She wondered how she could ever have suffered the child to leave her.

Acting at once upon the impulse that moved her, Madame Martel hastily descended the stairs and walked hurriedly down the path that led between two lines of tall Magnolias to the outer road.

There was quite a bit of desolate road to traverse, but she did not fear. She knew every soul for miles around and was sure of not being molested.

The moon had grown brighter. It was not so misty now and she could see plainly ahead of her and all about her. There was the end of the plank walk a rod or so away.

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Here was the wedge of a cotton field to pass, still covered with its gaunt, dry stalks to which ragged shreds of cotton clung here and there. Off against the woods a mile away, a railroad train was approaching. She could not hear it yet; she could only see the swiftly moving lights against the dark backdrop of forest.

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Madame Martel had drawn her shawl up over her head and she looked like a slim nun moving along through the moonlight. A few stragglers on their way to the station made room for her; and the jest and laughter died on their lips as she passed by. People respected her as a sort of mystery; as something above them, and to be taken very seriously.

Old Uncle Wisdom made a profound bow as he stumbled down from the plank walk to give her the right of way. His wife was with him and he dragged his granddaughter, Tilly, by a willing hand. They were on their way to the station to meet Tilly's new "maw" who was coming to spend Christmas with them in the shanty yonder on the rim of the bayou.

Through the open door of a cabin that she passed came the scraping notes of a fiddle, and people were dancing within. The sounds were distressing to her sensitive, musical ear and she hurried by. A big wagon load of people swung into the country road, out for a moonlight drive. On the village proper there was much flitting about; people greeting each other or bidding goodbye in doorways and on steps and galleries. The very air seemed charged with a cheerful excitement.

When Madame Martel reached the big house at the far end of town, she made her way at once to the front door and entered, after a faint knock that never could have been heard amid the hubbub that reigned within.

There she stood within the entrance of the big hall that was thronged with people. Lights were hanging from the huge rafters; the whitewashed walls were decorated with cedar branches and mistletoe. Someone was playing a lively air upon the piano, to which no one was paying any attention except two young Convent girls who were waltzing together with much difficulty in one corner.

There were old ladies and gentlemen all seeming to be talking at once. There was a young mother, loath to quit the scene, foolishly striving to put her baby to sleep in the midst of it. A few little darkies were leaning against the whitewashed wall, clinging each to an orange which someone had given them. But above all there was laughter and voices

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of children; and just as Madame Martel appeared in the doorway, Lulu, with flaming cheeks and sparkling eyes, was twirling a plate in the middle of the room.

“*Tiens!* Madame Martel!!”

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If the cry had been “*tiens! un revenant*—a spirit from the other world!” it could not have had a more instantaneous, depressing effect upon the whole assembly. The piano ceased playing; the Convent girls stopped waltzing; the old people stopped talking and the young ones stopped laughing; only the plate in the middle of the floor seemed not to care and it went on whirling.

But the surprise—the suspense was only momentary. People crowded around Madame Martel with expressions of satisfaction at seeing her and all wanted her to do something: to take off her shawl; to sit down; to look at the baby; to accept a bit of refreshment.

“No, no!” in her gentle, deprecatory voice. She begged they would excuse her—she had only come—it was about Lulu. The child had not seemed entirely well in the morning when she left home. Madame Martel thought that she had better take her back; she hoped that Lulu would be willing to return with her.

A perfect storm of protest! And Lulu the very picture of despair! The child had approached her mother and clung to her, imploring to be permitted to remain as if begging for very existence.

“Of course your mama will let you stay, now that she sees you are well and amusing yourself,” asserted a comfortably fat old lady with a talent for arranging matters. “Your mama would never be so selfish.”

“Selfish!” She had not thought of it as selfish; and she at once felt willing to endure any suffering rather than afflict others with her own selfish desires.

Surely Lulu could remain if she wished to; and she gave the child a passionate embrace as she let her go. But she herself could not be induced to linger for a moment. She would not accept the offer of an escort home. She went as she had come—alone.

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Hardly had Madame Martel turned her back than she could hear that they were at it again. The piano began playing and all noises started up afresh.

The simple and rather natural choice of the child to remain with her young companions, took somewhat the aspect of a tragedy to Madame Martel as she made her way homeward. It was not so much the fact itself as the significance of the fact. She felt as if she had driven love out of her life and she kept repeating to herself: "I have driven love away; I have driven it away." And at the same time she seemed to feel a reproach from her dear, dead husband that she had looked for consolation and hoped for comfort aside from his cherished memory.

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She would go back home now to her old letters, to her thoughts, to her tears. How he and he alone had always understood her! It seemed as if he understood her now; as if he were with her now in spirit as she hurried through the night back to her desolate home.

Madame Martel, upon quitting the sitting-room where she had been poring over her old letters, had lowered the light on the table. Now, as she mounted the front stairs, the room appeared to her to be brighter than the flare of the dying embers could make it; and mechanically approaching the window that opened the gallery, she looked in.

She did not scream, or cry out at what she saw. She only gave a gasp that seemed to wrench her whole body and she clutched blindly at the window jamb for support. She saw that the light under its tempered shade had been raised; the embers had fallen into a dull, glowing heap between the andirons. And there before the fire, in her own armchair, sat her husband. How well she knew him!

She could not see his face, but his leg was stretched out toward the fire, his head was bent, and he sat motionless looking at something that he held in his hand.

She closed her eyes; she knew that when she opened them the vision would be gone. With swift retrospection she remembered all the stories she had ever heard of optical illusions: all the tricks that an over-excited brain is apt to play upon one. She realized that she had been nervous, overwrought, and this was the revenge of her senses: disclosing to her this vision of her husband. How familiar to her was the poise of his head, the sweep of arm and set of his shoulder. And when she opened her eyes he would no longer be there; the chair would again be empty. She pressed her fingers for an instant upon her eyeballs, then looked again.

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The chair was not empty! He was still there but his face was turned now toward the table, completely away from her and a hand rested upon the pile of letters there. How significant the action!

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Madame Martel straightened, steeling herself. “I am losing my mind,” she whispered hoarsely, “I am seeing visions.”

It did not occur to her to call for help. Help? Against what! She knew the servants were away, and even if they were not she shrank from disclosing what she believed to be this morbid condition of mind to the ignorant and unsympathetic.

“I will go in,” she resolved, “place my hand upon—the shoulder; and it will be over; the illusion will vanish.”

In fancy she went through the whole sensation of placing her hand upon a visible, intangible something that would melt away, vanish like smoke before her eyes. An involuntary shudder passed through her frame from head to foot.

As she glided noiselessly into the room in her black garb, Madame Martel, with that light, filmy hair, her wide-open, fearful blue eyes, looked far more like a “spirit” than the substantial figure seated in her armchair before the fire.

She had not time to place her hand upon the shoulder of her ghastly visitant. Before she reached the chair he had turned. She tottered, and springing forward he seized her in his arms.

“Mother! Mother! Mother! What is it? Are you ill?” He was kissing her hair, her forehead, and closed, quivering eyes.

“Wait, Gustave. In a moment, dear son—it will be all right.” She was, in fact, rather faint from the shock. He placed her upon the sofa and after bringing her a glass of water seated himself beside her.

“Idiot that I am!” he exclaimed. “I wanted to surprise you and here I’ve almost thrown you into a swoon.” She was looking at him with eyes full of tenderness but for some reason she did not tell him the whole story of her surprise.

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How glad she was to see him—her big, manly son of nineteen. And how like his father at that age! The age at which the old ambrotype had been taken; the picture that she had been weeping over and that Gustave was looking at when she first discovered him there.

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“Of course you came on the evening train, Gustave?” she asked him quietly.

“Yes, only awhile ago. I got to thinking—well, I had enough of Assumption last year. And after all there’s no place for a fellow at Christmas like home.”

“You knew that I wanted you, Gustave. Confess; you knew it.” Madame was hoping for a little disclosure of thought transference—mental telepathy—occultism in short. But he disabused her.

“No,” he said. “I’m afraid I was purely selfish, mother. I know that you prefer to alone at this season,” in that tone of subdued respect which was always assumed in approaching the subject of Madame Martel’s sorrow. “I came because I couldn’t help it; because I couldn’t stay away. I wanted to see you, to be with you, mother.”

“You know, Gustave, it won’t be gay here at home,” she said nestling closer to him.

“Oh well, if we can’t be gay, there’s nothing to keep us from being happy, mom.”

And she was very, very happy as she rubbed her cheek against his rough coat sleeve and felt the warm, firm pressure of his hand.