

The Lighting of the Christmas Tree

THE VASSAR SERIES OF PLAYS

Every play in this series has been written by a member of the Play-Writing Class at Vassar College. But each play as printed is the product of a group-activity. Not merely an individual seated at a desk, but a community working together in a theater, is responsible for it in its final form.

Some of these plays have been “tried out” by the Vassar Dramatic Workshop and some by the Community Theatre of Poughkeepsie, New York. By the coöperative efforts of all who were associated in these enterprises—actors, committee workers and financial supporters—these plays have been given a sympathetic and intelligent production before audiences also intelligent and sympathetic, whose reaction has afforded the writers much valuable criticism. In the preliminary readings and rehearsals, also, occasional weak points which had escaped the ordeal of class criticism came to light and were strengthened by the author’s revision. In fact, the plays as they appear in this series are literally a collaboration of the writers with innumerable friendly critics in the play-writing class, the cast and the audience. And it would be ungracious to put the fruits of this collaboration at the service of the public without grateful acknowledgment to all those who have in any way helped to establish and carry on the Vassar Dramatic Workshop or the Community Theatre of Poughkeepsie.

In recent years there has been an increasing demand for well-written, dramatically effective one-act plays, suitable for production by semi-professional companies or by amateur organizations of serious purpose and some degree of training. To

aid in supplying this demand is the purpose of the Vassar Series of Plays. Other plays written by members of the Play-Writing Class at Vassar College may be secured in typewritten form by application to The Workshop Bureau of Plays, Vassar College.

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LIGHTING OF THE CHRISTMAS TREE PRODUCING THE PLAY

The beautiful Swedish national costumes should be used for this play. Any good reference book on the costumes of various nations and many books about travel in Sweden will furnish illustrations that may be copied, varying the colors when necessary to produce a harmonious relation with one another. Since this is a modern play, only the servants, who are, of course, peasants, would be likely to wear these costumes on ordinary occasions, but members of the upper classes sometimes assume them for the festivities of the Christmas season. We may, therefore, take advantage of this possibility, to increase the picturesqueness of our play by using the colorful Swedish dress for all the characters.

A real Swedish interior, carefully reproduced from trustworthy illustrations, would also be effective. Not all the furniture found in any illustration should, of course, be used for the stage setting. A few pieces only should be chosen, with a view to composing without unnecessary "clutter" into a beautiful and characteristically Swedish whole.

The lines of this play are exceptionally simple in their phrasing and yet so full of meaning that no word or syllable should be lost by the audience. An intelligent, sympathetic rendering of each speech is especially important, but clear-cut enunciation and a beautiful quality of voice are also very desirable, particularly for Olga, Liljekrona and the two children.

Olga is obviously the very heart of this play. She makes a charming picture with the little boys over the Christmas tree, the candle-lighting in the windows, and the story of the Christ-Child's wanderings. Her tender love for her home and her instinctive fear of any influence which may tend to lower its ideals or to draw Liljekrona away from it, must be so clearly brought out in the acting (as it is in the lines) that the audience will understand and even partially sympathize with her anxiety to be rid of the drunken vagrant, Ruster.

This anxiety is sharpened by the approach of the Christmas season, which she feels should be celebrated as a beautiful home festival, just by themselves. But even as Olga carries her point and Ruster is about to leave the house, she is assailed by remorse for the selfish impulse to protect her home at the unfortunate old man's expense. This should be clearly indicated in the tone and manner with which she asks Liljekrona to give Ruster something extra for Christmas and to lend him his fur coat.

The departure of Ruster ends the first stage of the play's action, in which Olga has attempted to secure happiness for herself and her household by the refusal of her hospitality to some one in sore need of it. Ruster had seemed to her a discordant element when present, but his absence seems to bring ten-fold more unhappiness. All the Christmas preparations go wrong. Sigurd's cookie-dough figure of the Christ-Child "doesn't look like anything," the E string of Liljekrona's fiddle has snapped and he has no new one, Torstein has gone to drive Ruster and they cannot dance without him, the sheaves for the sparrows have been forgotten, and finally Liljekrona withdraws to his own room to play the stormy music which Olga understands as a portent of his return to the old life of wandering.

In this section of the play, Liljekrona controls the action and should dominate the scene. Olga attempts, in vain, to infuse joy into the Christmas observances. Liljekrona's bitterly self-reproachful speech about the lonely and the hungry people,—“When they pass so close as to touch our sleeve,—we do not see them, we do not stop them, but let them plod their path alone,”—shows that he will no longer deceive himself as to the heartlessness of their own action. And when he says—“Your candles are too late. The door is closed. The voice is gone,”—Olga sees that on the eve of Christmas and in the name of its fitting observance, she has betrayed its very spirit of hospitality and kindness.

The sound of the music from Liljekrona's room, full of the old, wild passion for the open road, brings to Olga realization of the price she must pay for this mistake, “if God does not work a miracle in the night.” Her intense suffering at this point marks the crucial moment in the play and must be conveyed by action and facial expression as well as by a poignant rendering of the lines. The moment must be held perceptibly, after she sinks into her chair, until the sound of sleighbells, at first far off and gradually approaching, breaks the spell.

The bells usher in the third stage of the action, which is markedly different in feeling-tone from the other two. Instead of the fear and the cloaked unkindness of the first scene and the growing self-reproach of the second, we have the exaltation of complete surrender to generous impulse. Olga's joy in the “miracle” which she so little deserved or expected must shine from her face and from every word and action, as soon as she realizes that Ruster has indeed returned and she has a chance to repair the wrong she has done. Her inspiration to ask Ruster to look after the children while she is out of the room should be so acted as to show that there is

something behind her simple request. She will prove her gratitude for this chance to atone, by trusting her dearest treasures to the man she had feared to have remain in the house with them.

The scene of the children with Ruster gives the actor an opportunity to show the battered, dissipated old man, afraid of the innocent eyes of the children, but gradually put at his ease by their complete unconsciousness and their real interest in the one thing he knows,—flute-playing. Ruster's complete collapse when the children's absorption in reading allows him to realize his own desolate situation, and Olga's offer to make him their tutor, need only be played with entire simplicity and sincerity by both actors, to bring tears to the eyes of many people in the audience.

Olga's explanation to Liljekrona of her plans for Ruster and why she is taking this great risk, bring her once more into a position of leadership. This is emphasized by the action, as first Liljekrona, then the children and finally Ruster, kiss Olga's hand, while her curtain speech to Ruster gives the needed touch of humility and graciousness to her exaltation.

The curtain should be raised quickly after it has been lowered, so as to make the tableau of the lighting of the tree seem, as it is, an essential part of the play.

GERTRUDE BUCK.

CHARACTERS

LITTLE RUSTER: a flute-player.

LILJEKRONA: a violinist, host of Lofdala.

OLGA: his wife.

OSWALD }
SIGURD } his little sons.

HALLA: the cook.

TORSTEIN: the man-servant.

First produced by the Vassar Dramatic Workshop, December 16,
1916.

THE LIGHTING OF THE CHRISTMAS TREE

SCENE: The living-room of LOFDALA, a Swedish manor house. It is the afternoon before Christmas and the room has an atmosphere of comfort and warmth; outside it is snowing. To the left is a large Swedish fireplace, with its hanging black chimney-hood, crane and shining kettles. A high wooden bench, a table and armchair are drawn close to the fire. A heavy, iron-hinged door opens outdoors at the center back. On either side are windows. At the left a door leads into the kitchen, and at the right a flight of stairs leads to the bedrooms. By the stairs stands a Christmas tree as yet unlighted. There is a music cabinet against the back wall, left; and an oblong table at the right; a carved wooden chest stands beside the fireplace.

TIME: about 1890.

OLGA is discovered arranging candles on the tree. She is slender and moderately tall, with large eyes and rich dark hair braided about her head. She wears Swedish holiday dress.

(Enter OSWALD and SIGURD, running downstairs with their hands full of cotton. They are six and four years old, OSWALD being a little the taller. They are bright-faced, tow-headed little boys, and are dressed in their embroidered holiday suits. OSWALD stops halfway down, and leaning over the banisters drops bits of cotton on the tree.)

OSWALD. See, Mother, it's snowing.

SIGURD. Look, Mother—it's snowing. (Turns at the foot of the stairs and runs back to OSWALD.)

OSWALD. Don't make such big flakes, Sigurd.

SIGURD. But I'm making it snow hard.

OSWALD. Oh, look, that fell on a candle.

OLGA. We need some more snow over here. Come down and make it snow on these branches.

OSWALD. But, Mother, we need some most on this side—like this.

SIGURD. Where is Father?

OLGA. He has gone out with Torstein in the sledge to gather green boughs to make the house look like Christmas.

SIGURD. It'll soon be Christmas, Mother. When can we light the candles?

OLGA. When Father comes home. Have we used up all the snow, Oswald?

OSWALD. Yes, I will get some more. (Starts upstairs.) Oh! (Draws back as he discovers RUSTER, who has just entered and is standing on the landing. He is unkempt and his shabby, black coat is buttoned up to his chin. His eyes are small and blurred and his dark hair stands out like a cloud about his head. But he is not wholly unattractive. His features are well-formed and his black mustache is twirled at a proud angle. He carries his music pen and manuscript. His voice is cracked and harsh.)

OLGA. *(Looking up)* Why, Ruster!

RUSTER. (*Shivering*) I thought you might be having punch. My bones are frozen working up in that cold room. It would take a taste of hell-fire to warm me up. (*Drinking from his flask.*)

OLGA. (*Turning toward the boys—raising her hand as if to silence RUSTER*) The punch has not been made yet, Ruster. Children, have you forgotten your Christmas cookies? Halla will help you make them if you run out to her.

OSWALD. Oh, I know what I want to make.

SIGURD. What, Oswald?—What?

OSWALD. I want a raisin in mine. (*Pushing open the door.*) Can I, Halla?

(Exeunt to kitchen. OLGA crosses to RUSTER.)

OLGA. If you are cold, Ruster, why not stay here by the fire and copy your music? Is there much more to do?

RUSTER. (*Seating himself and arranging pages*) Liljekrona says there is no hurry. When will he be home?

OLGA. As soon as he has filled the sledge with boughs, for he knows we need him here on Christmas Eve. (She goes to the window. Sleighbells are heard.) There they are, coming up the drive. We must have some place to put the branches. (She spreads a cloth on the floor. RUSTER steals a drink from his flask. The door opens. Enter LILJEKRONA. He is a tall, finely erect man, clad in a heavy fur coat that is covered with snow. As he takes off his cap, he discloses a mass of light hair brushed back from an unusually high forehead. His face is at once sensitive and strong. He carries a load of boughs.) Well, what an armful you have!

LILJEKRONA. (*Gaily*) Tell the children I have brought home the whole forest for our Christmas.

OLGA. Put down your forest over here. Was it very cold?

LILJEKRONA. There has been a fine flurry all morning. (OLGA *helps him off with his coat.*) But the fire feels good!

RUSTER. This is the warmest place in the house.

LILJEKRONA. How is it going? (*Looking over RUSTER's shoulder.*) You haven't forgotten how a page ought to look, have you, Ruster?

RUSTER. No, I can copy, but I cannot play. I have almost forgotten the sound of my flute. Nobody wants a flute-player nowadays! They do not care for music any more in Varmland and they do not want to learn.

LILJEKRONA. Yes, Varmland is not like Ekeby when we knew it.

RUSTER. It's a pity we ever left there, Liljekrona! We have never had such playing since—you with your violin and I with my flute. Old Torwaldson waving his angry stick! By Heaven, he called the souls out of us!

LILJEKRONA. Yes, the violins sobbing—then the horns, the winds, the basses—each breaking over the other in thundering waves.

RUSTER. Holy Mother!—that was living!

LILJEKRONA. And from one patron off on the road to another, and along the way, what gay evenings in the tent and at the inn when a man was free from care!

RUSTER. How you could play then! Shall I forget that night in Olaf's garden? You made your fiddle sing as though your heart were in tune with its strings. But now, Christ's blood! you never play like that.

OLGA. He plays more beautifully now than he ever did at Ekeby.

LILJEKRONA. No, there is not so much time for practice here.

RUSTER. And the old spirit has gone out of you.

LILJEKRONA. I sometimes think so myself. It is hard to settle down after a life of wandering. Something wild keeps crying in my soul, bidding me be off again.

OLGA. Why is not home the place for music, Liljekrona? Surely those who love you most care most to hear. Must you seek your inspiration from strangers?

LILJEKRONA. No, Olga, you are more to me than a world of strangers. It is you alone who hold me here.

RUSTER. Yes—you have a warm fire and a full cellar to keep you at home. (LILJEKRONA *shrugs and turns away impatiently.*) But what about the man who has not money enough to fill his flask? (*Bitterly.*) My horse, and carriage, and fur coat—they're all gone! (*Drinks, then laughs boisterously.*) But still I have friends—lots of friends in Varmland, and they're always glad to see me and give me a cup of cheer! (*He drains his flask and wipes his mustache with the back of his hand.* LILJEKRONA *risks disgustedly and crosses the room.*)

OLGA. (*Pointedly*) Have you more copying to do still, Ruster?

RUSTER. (*Blinking at her*) The “Folksong” is almost finished. I was thinking, Liljekrona—that when that is done, there are two others you showed me yesterday, that would go well with this.

LILJEKRONA. It is better alone.

RUSTER. But those two shepherd songs. I took the book to my room. Wait till I bring it down. (*He rises unsteadily. Exit.*)

OLGA. (*Going to LILJEKRONA*) Liljekrona, don’t give him more copying, or we shall be obliged to keep him over Christmas.

LILJEKRONA. He must be somewhere.

OLGA. Our Christmas is spoiled if he stays. He is so dirty and he drinks so. And think how bad it is for the children.

LILJEKRONA. But he is an old friend.

OLGA. Yet on Christmas Eve—we have kept thinking how happy we should be, telling stories and dancing about the tree. And you would play our favorite tunes. (*She looks wistfully about the partly decorated room.*) But now all the pleasure is gone if Ruster stays!

LILJEKRONA. Formerly you were glad to see him.

OLGA. Yes—we all were. But not since he has become a drunkard. And, Liljekrona, I am afraid——

LILJEKRONA. Afraid of what, dear?

OLGA. (*Impetuously*) Let him go somewhere else for Christmas.

LILJEKRONA. How can we send him away? It would be inhospitable. Nobody wants him any more than we do.

OLGA. But the children, Liljekrona.

(Enter RUSTER with book.)

RUSTER. HERE IT IS. *(HANDING BOOK TO LILJEKRONA.)*

LILJEKRONA. Yes, I remember.

RUSTER. Shall I copy them?

LILJEKRONA. No—I can play these from the book.

RUSTER. This is a poor transcription. It should be written in D instead of F.

LILJEKRONA. Well, I can transpose it.

RUSTER. I have not copied the words for the “Folksong.” Do you want it done?

LILJEKRONA. No, it will do as it is.

RUSTER. Well then, it is finished. *(Half-heartedly.)* I suppose I must be going. *(Glances toward the window.)*

LILJEKRONA. *(Indifferently)* You had better stay where you are over Christmas.

RUSTER. *(Catching the note in LILJEKRONA’S voice, and with indignant pride.)* What do you mean, Liljekrona, shall I stay here because I have nowhere else to go? Why, only think how they are standing and waiting for me in the big ironworks in the parish of Bro. The guest-room will be already in order and the glass of welcome filled. I must hurry. I only do not know to whom I should go first.

LILJEKRONA. Very well, you may go if you will.

RUSTER. (*Emphatically*) Yes, I must go—at once.

(*Enter TORSTEIN with logs for the fire.*)

OLGA. If you wish, Torstein will drive you down. Are the horses still harnessed, Torstein?

TORSTEIN. Yes, Ma'am.

OLGA. Then bring the sledge around.

RUSTER. And bring it at once. I have only to get my treasures and I am ready. (*Picks up his music pen and exits upstairs.*)

TORSTEIN. He's not going to stay over Christmas?

OLGA. You must hurry back, Torstein. The snow is getting deep.

(*Exit TORSTEIN. LILJEKRONA looks over the music sheets on table, and takes money from his pocket.*)

OLGA. You will slip in something for Christmas?

LILJEKRONA. OF COURSE.

OLGA. (*Taking down fur coat and warming it*) Will you lend him your big coat? Torstein can bring it back. (*After a pause.*) As long as he wishes to go himself, it is as well to let him.

(*Enter RUSTER with his belongings tied up in a blue-striped cotton handkerchief, and his flute under his arm.*)

LILJEKRONA. (*Meeting him and giving him what he has earned*) That is always poor payment for art, Ruster, but it may serve you, somehow.

RUSTER. (*Dazedly*) Yes.

OLGA. Will you put on this coat, Ruster? (*Helping him into coat.*) You must keep warm, and watch that your hands and face are well covered. And tell Torstein where to take you in Bro.

RUSTER. (*Shaking himself together and going toward door*) I'll be there in time for a glass of punch and the Christmas tree at Erickson's—or Oscar's—or——

(*LILJEKRONA opens the door for him and he goes out slowly.*)

OLGA. (*Calling after him*) A happy Christmas to you!

LILJEKRONA. (*Faintly*) Good luck, Ruster.

RUSTER. (*Dully, from without*) Good-bye.

(*LILJEKRONA closes the door and they look out the window until the sleighbells jingle off. OLGA turns back to the room.*)

OLGA. Now as soon as the boughs are up, we shall be ready for our Christmas tree. Don't you think some holly would be nice for the table, Liljekrona? (*As LILJEKRONA does not answer, she stoops and picks up sprigs of holly from the pile of branches, then goes to the kitchen door and calls.*) Children, what are you doing? Come and bring your play in here. (*She arranges the holly in a brass bowl on the long table. LILJEKRONA begins to put the boughs up over the door.*)

(*Enter OSWALD, carrying with great care a board with some dough on it, and SIGURD running ahead with his fingers covered with dough.*)

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