

# **The Amazing Interlude**

**by**

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# Chapter 1

The stage on which we play our little dramas of life and love has for most of us but one setting. It is furnished out with approximately the same things. Characters come, move about and make their final exits through long-familiar doors. And the back drop remains approximately the same from beginning to end. Palace or hovel, forest or sea, it is the background for the moving figures of the play.

So Sara Lee Kennedy had a back drop that had every appearance of permanency. The great Scene Painter apparently intended that there should be no change of set for her. Sara Lee herself certainly expected none.

But now and then amazing things are done on this great stage of ours: lights go down; the back drop, which had given the illusion of solidity, reveals itself transparent. A sort of fairyland transformation takes place. Beyond the once solid wall strange figures move on--a new mise en scene, with the old blotted out in darkness. The lady, whom we left knitting by the fire, becomes a fairy--Sara Lee became a fairy, of a sort--and meets the prince. Adventure, too; and love, of course. And then the lights go out, and it is the same old back drop again, and the lady is back by the fire--but with a memory.

This is the story of Sara Lee Kennedy's memory--and of something more.

The early days of the great war saw Sara Lee playing her part in the setting of a city in Pennsylvania. An ugly city, but a wealthy one. It is only fair to Sara Lee to say that she shared in neither quality. She was far from ugly, and very, very far from rich. She had started her part with a full stage, to carry on the figure, but one by one they had gone away into the wings and had not come back. At nineteen she was alone knitting by the fire, with no idea whatever that the back drop was of painted net, and that beyond it, waiting for its moment, was the forest of adventure. A strange forest, too--one that Sara Lee would not have recognised as a forest. And a prince of course--but a prince as strange and mysterious as the forest.

The end of December, 1914, found Sara Lee quite contented. If it was resignation rather than content, no one but Sara Lee knew the difference. Knitting, too; but not for soldiers. She was, to be candid, knitting an afghan against an interesting event which involved a friend of hers.

Sara Lee rather deplored the event--in her own mind, of course, for in her small circle young unmarried women accepted the major events of life without question, and certainly without conversation. She never, for instance, allowed her Uncle James, with whom she lived, to see her working at the afghan; and even her Aunt Harriet had supposed it to be a sweater until it assumed uncompromising proportions.

Sara Lee's days, up to the twentieth of December, 1914, had been much alike. In the mornings she straightened up her room, which she had copied from one in a woman's

magazine, with the result that it gave somehow the impression of a baby's bassinet, being largely dotted Swiss and ribbon. Yet in a way it was a perfect setting for Sara Lee herself. It was fresh and virginal, and very, very neat and white. A resigned little room, like Sara Lee, resigned to being tucked away in a corner and to having no particular outlook. Peaceful, too.

Sometimes in the morning between straightening her room and going to the market for Aunt Harriet, Sara Lee looked at a newspaper. So she knew there was a war. She read the headings, and when the matter came up for mention at the little afternoon bridge club, as it did now and then after the prizes were distributed, she always said "Isn't it horrible!" and changed the subject.

On the night of the nineteenth of December Sara Lee had read her chapter in the Bible--she read it through once each year--and had braided down her hair, which was as smooth and shining and lovely as Sara Lee herself, and had raised her window for the night when Aunt Harriet came in. Sara Lee did not know, at first, that she had a visitor. She stood looking out toward the east, until Aunt Harriet touched her on the arm.

"What in the world!" said Aunt Harriet. "A body would suppose it was August."

"I was just thinking," said Sara Lee.

"You'd better do your thinking in bed. Jump in and I'll put out your light."

So Sara Lee got into her white bed with the dotted Swiss valance, and drew the covers to her chin, and looked a scant sixteen. Aunt Harriet, who was an unsentimental woman, childless and diffident, found her suddenly very appealing there in her smooth bed, and did an unexpected thing. She kissed her. Then feeling extremely uncomfortable she put out the light and went to the door. There she paused.

"Thinking!" she said. "What about, Sara Lee?"

Perhaps it was because the light was out that Sara Lee became articulate. Perhaps it was because things that had been forming in her young mind for weeks had at last crystallized into words. Perhaps it was because of a picture she had happened on that day, of a boy lying wounded somewhere on a battlefield and calling "Mother!"

"About--over there," she said rather hesitatingly. "And about Anna."

"Over there?"

"The war," said Sara Lee. "I was just thinking about all those women over there--like Anna, you know. They--they had babies, and got everything ready for them. And then the babies grew up, and they're all getting killed."

"It's horrible," said Aunt Harriet. "Do you want another blanket? It's cold to-night."

Sara Lee did not wish another blanket.

"I'm a little worried about your Uncle James," said Aunt Harriet, at the door. "He's got indigestion. I think I'll make him a mustard plaster."

She prepared to go out then, but Sara Lee spoke from her white bed.

"Aunt Harriet," she said, "I don't think I'll ever get married."

"I said that too, once," said Aunt Harriet complacently. "What's got into your head now?"

"I don't know," Sara Lee replied vaguely. "I just--What's the use?"

Aunt Harriet was conscious of a hazy impression of indelicacy. Coming from Sara Lee it was startling and revolutionary. In Aunt Harriet's world young women did not question their duty, which was to marry, preferably some one in the neighborhood, and bear children, who would be wheeled about that same neighborhood in perambulators and who would ultimately grow up and look after themselves.

"The use?" she asked tartly.

"Of having babies, and getting to care about them, and then--There will always be wars, won't there?"

"You turn over and go to sleep," counseled Aunt Harriet. "And stop looking twenty years or more ahead." She hesitated. "You haven't quarreled with Harvey, have you?"

Sara Lee turned over obediently.

"No. It's not that," she said. And the door closed.

Perhaps, had she ever had time during the crowded months that followed, Sara Lee would have dated certain things from that cold frosty night in December when she began to question things. For after all that was what it came to. She did not revolt. She questioned.

She lay in her white bed and looked at things for the first time. The sky had seemed low that night. Things were nearer. The horizon was close. And beyond that peaceful horizon, to the east, something was going on that could not be ignored. Men were dying. Killing and dying. Men who had been waited for as Anna watched for her child.

Downstairs she could hear Aunt Harriet moving about. The street was quiet, until a crowd of young people--she knew them by their voices-- went by, laughing.

"It's horrible," said Sara Lee to herself. There was a change in her, but she was still inarticulate. Somewhere in her mind, but not formulated, was the feeling that she was too

comfortable. Her peace was a cheap peace, bought at no price. Her last waking determination was to finish the afghan quickly and to knit for the men at the war.

Uncle James was ill the next morning. Sara Lee went for the doctor, but Anna's hour had come and he was with her. Late in the afternoon he came, however looking a bit gray round the mouth with fatigue, but triumphant. He had on these occasions always a sense of victory; even, in a way, a feeling of being part of a great purpose. He talked at such times of the race, as one may who is doing his best by it.

"Well," he said when Sara Lee opened the door, "it's a boy. Eight pounds. Going to be red-headed, too." He chuckled.

"A boy!" said Sara Lee. "I--don't you bring any girl babies any more?"

The doctor put down his hat and glanced at her.

"Wanted a girl, to be named for you?"

"No. It's not that. It's only--" She checked herself. He wouldn't understand. The race required girl babies. "I've put a blue bow on my afghan. Pink is for boys," she said, and led the way upstairs.

Very simple and orderly was the small house, as simple and orderly as Sara Lee's days in it. Time was to come when Sara Lee, having left it, ached for it with every fiber of her body and her soul--for its bright curtains and fresh paint, its regularity, its shining brasses and growing plants, its very kitchen pans and green-and-white oilcloth. She was to ache, too, for her friends--their small engrossing cares, their kindly interest, their familiar faces.

Time was to come, too, when she came back, not to the little house, it is true, but to her friends, to Anna and the others. But they had not grown and Sara Lee had. And that is the story.

Uncle James died the next day. One moment he was there, an uneasy figure, under the tulip quilt, and the next he had gone away entirely, leaving a terrible quiet behind him. He had been the center of the little house, a big and cheery and not over-orderly center. Followed his going not only quiet, but a wretched tidiness. There was nothing for Sara Lee to do but to think.

And, in the way of mourning women, things that Uncle James had said which had passed unheeded came back to her. One of them was when he had proposed to adopt a Belgian child, and Aunt Harriet had offered horrified protest.

"All right," he had said. "Of course, if you feel that way about it--! But I feel kind of mean, sometimes, sitting here doing nothing when there's such a lot to be done."

Then he had gone for a walk and had come back cheerful enough but rather quiet.

There was that other time, too, when the German Army was hurling itself, wave after wave, across the Yser--only of course Sara Lee knew nothing of the Yser then--and when it seemed as though the attenuated Allied line must surely crack and give. He had said then that if he were only twenty years younger he would go across and help.

"And what about me?" Aunt Harriet had asked. "But I suppose I wouldn't matter."

"You could go to Jennie's, couldn't you?"

There had followed one of those absurd wrangles as to whether or not Aunt Harriet would go to Jennie's in the rather remote contingency of Uncle James' becoming twenty years younger and going away.

And now Uncle James had taken on the wings of the morning and was indeed gone away. And again it became a question of Jennie's. Aunt Harriet, rather dazed at first, took to arguing it pro and con.

"Of course she has room for me," she would say in her thin voice. "There's that little room that was Edgar's. There's nobody in it now. But there's only room for a single bed, Sara Lee."

Sara Lee was knitting socks now, all a trifle tight as to heel. "I know," she would say. "I'll get along. Don't you worry about me."

Always these talks ended on a note of exasperation for Aunt Harriet. For Sara Lee's statement that she could manage would draw forth a plaintive burst from the older woman.

"If only you'd marry Harvey," she would say. "I don't know what's come over you. You used to like him well enough."

"I still like him."

"I've seen you jump when the telephone bell rang. Your Uncle James often spoke about it. He noticed more than most people thought." She followed Sara Lee's eyes down the street to where Anna was wheeling her baby slowly up and down. Even from that distance Sara Lee could see the bit of pink which was the bow on her afghan. "I believe you're afraid."

"Afraid?"

"Of having children," accused Aunt Harriet fretfully.

Sara Lee colored.



"Perhaps I am," she said; "but not the sort of thing you think. I just don't see the use of it, that's all. Aunt Harriet, how long does it take to become a hospital nurse?"

"Mabel Andrews was three years. It spoiled her looks too. She used to be a right pretty girl."

"Three years," Sara Lee reflected. "By that time--"

The house was very quiet and still those days. There was an interlude of emptiness and order, of long days during which Aunt Harriet alternately grieved and planned, and Sara Lee thought of many things. At the Red Cross meetings all sorts of stories were circulated; the Belgian atrocity tales had just reached the country, and were spreading like wildfire. There were arguments and disagreements. A girl named Schmidt was militant against them and soon found herself a small island of defiance entirely surrounded by disapproval. Mabel Andrews came once to a meeting and in businesslike fashion explained the Red Cross dressings and gave a lesson in bandaging. Forerunner of the many first-aid classes to come was that hour of Mabel's, and made memorable by one thing she said.

"You might as well all get busy and learn to do such things," she stated in her brisk voice. "One of our internes is over there, and he says we'll be in it before spring."

After the meeting Sara Lee went up to Mabel and put a hand on her arm.

"Are you going?" she asked.

"Leaving day after to-morrow. Why?"

"I--couldn't I be useful over there?"

Mabel smiled rather grimly. "What can you do?"

"I can cook."

"Only men cooks, my dear. What else?"

"I could clean up, couldn't I? There must be something. I'd do anything I could. Don't they have people to wash dishes and--all that?"

Mabel was on doubtful ground there. She knew of a woman who had been permitted to take over her own automobile, paying all her expenses and buying her own tires and gasoline.

"She carries supplies to small hospitals in out-of-the-way places," she said. "But I don't suppose you can do that, Sara Lee, can you?"

However, she gave Sara Lee a New York address, and Sara Lee wrote and offered herself. She said nothing to Aunt Harriet, who had by that time elected to take Edgar's room at Cousin Jennie's and was putting Uncle James' clothes in tearful order to send to Belgium. After a time she received a reply.

"We have put your name on our list of volunteers," said the letter, "but of course you understand that only trained workers are needed now. France and England are full of untrained women who are eager to help."

It was that night that Sara Lee became engaged to Harvey.

Sara Lee's attitude toward Harvey was one that she never tried to analyze. When he was not with her she thought of him tenderly, romantically. This was perhaps due to the photograph of him on her mantel. There was a dash about the picture rather lacking in the original, for it was a profile, and in it the young man's longish hair, worn pompadour, the slight thrust forward of the head, the arch of the nostrils,--gave him a sort of tense eagerness, a look of running against the wind. From the photograph Harvey might have been a gladiator; as a matter of fact he was a bond salesman.

So during the daytime Sara Lee looked--at intervals--at the photograph, and got that feel of drive and force. And in the evenings Harvey came, and she lost it. For, outside of a frame, he became a rather sturdy figure, of no romance, but of a comforting solidity. A kindly young man, with a rather wide face and hands disfigured as to fingers by much early baseball. He had heavy shoulders, the sort a girl might rely on to carry many burdens. A younger and tidier Uncle James, indeed--the same cheery manner, the same robust integrity, and the same small ambition.

To earn enough to keep those dependent on him, and to do it fairly; to tell the truth and wear clean linen and not run into debt; and to marry Sara Lee and love and cherish her all his life--this was Harvey. A plain and likable man, a lover and husband to be sure of. But-

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He came that night to see Sara Lee. There was nothing unusual about that. He came every night. But he came that night full of determination. That was not unusual, either, but it had not carried him far. He had no idea that his picture was romantic. He would have demanded it back had he so much as suspected it. He wore his hair in a pompadour because of the prosaic fact that he had a cow-lick. He was very humble about himself, and Sara Lee was to him as wonderful as his picture was to her.

Sara Lee was in the parlor, waiting for him. The one electric lamp was lighted, so that the phonograph in one corner became only a bit of reflected light. There was a gas fire going, and in front of it was a white fur rug. In Aunt Harriet's circle there were few orientals. The Encyclopaedia Britannica, not yet entirely paid for, stood against the wall, and a leather chair, hollowed by Uncle James' solid body, was by the fire. It was just such a tidy, rather vulgar and homelike room as no doubt Harvey would picture for his own home. He had of course never seen the white simplicity of Sara Lee's bedroom.

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