

PLET:
A CHRISTMAS TALE OF THE WASATCH

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Table of Contents

PART FIRST.

I.

II.

III.

PART SECOND.

IV.

V.

VI.

VII.

PART THIRD.

VIII.

IX.

X.

XI.

XII.

XIII.

FINALE.

XIV.

TO
HOLD FROM OBLIVION AWHILE, AND TO PRESENT
TO MY CHILDREN,
THE MEMORIES OF HOURS
PASSED AT THE PLACE DESCRIBED HEREIN AS
OUR HOME.

PLET: A CHRISTMAS TALE OF THE WASATCH.

tale from out my western life you say?
Something to while the Christmas Eve away;
And something, too, to suit this festal time,
With two old bachelors, long past their prime,
Who as they sip in solitude their wine,
Are filled with memories of Auld Lang Syne?
Well,—I grant it. Yet why did you add,
Something to suit the time? I shall be glad—
But was the last a tongue slip? Let it go.
Still, why I asked, the tale will clearly show.
As I proceed and still you care to hear,
You'll find it suits this night of all the year.
Oh, yes! to fill your wish I'm full inclined,
I need but voice the thoughts within my mind,
And then the task's completed. All comes back
On every Christmas Eve, I never lack
Of food for thought. That time I'll ne'er forget
In future years, though distant may be set
My time for going. When my younger mate—
But why as writers say—anticipate?
You'll find the tale, perhaps, a trifle sad,
When every dictum says it should be glad.
And—hope the last will not astonish you—
Once in a while a little preachy, too.
And mixed with love, a subject—well, heigh, ho!
Something that we are not supposed to know.

PART FIRST.

I.

rash! crash!! crash!!! A heavy, thunderous sound,
Re-echoed from the snow-clad mountains round.
Then shrieks and voices hoarse came through the night
And far below we saw the lantern's light,—
It was the slides again! Through misty damp,
We hastened downward to the stricken camp.

The Christmas Eve! Ill time had chosen Fate
To work her will and joy annihilate!
Women and children lay beneath that snow,
And many a bronzed cheek was touched with woe.
Think not those men who toil amid the hills
Lack generous fire that noble bosom fills.

Their hearts are tender and their hearts are true,
Their sympathies come quick as mountain dew.
I've been at many rescues; seen the tears
Fill manly eyes, when hope came after fears.
Seen cheeks turn pale, as from their prisons deep,
Crushed, lifeless forms were lifted in last sleep:
As some dear comrade, thought past hope, beneath
The hard-pack'd snow, was found to live—to breathe.
Oh, true those brawny delvers of the mines,
Though in their fashion they are rough at times!

Have you ever seen a snow-slide?—No?
Ah! oft I've wished their pictures to outgrow!

I've drunk a drop or two the thoughts to drown,
'Tis hard, sometimes, to keep emotion down.
Soon we had rescued four; and found three—dead;
A father, mother, child. The cradle-head
Stood by the shattered wall, and close there hung—
Not one but felt his heart with pity wrung—
The child's blue, tiny stocking. On the man
Lay the roof-tree; we hardly dared to scan
With sidelong glance the sight. But wife nor child
The snow had marr'd, for still the mother smiled;
The little hands were clasped as if in prayer—
As lisped words but echoed mother's there,
Or as the thoughts were filled with visions bright,
Of what the eyes should see at dawn of light.
Alas! those eyes would open never more;
How quick their time for smiles and tears was o'er!
The clasped hands that toy should never lift
Saint Nicholas had brought for Christmas gift.

And so we worked, and ere the darkness fled
Six others we had placed among the dead,
But none we found were living. Nine there lay
All stark upon the snow, that black night's prey.
Where it would end, there was no time to ask,
As steadily we held the grewsome task.
We did our best—I'm over sixty now,
And strife with Fortune early lined my brow—
So I, when overcome with labor sheer,
A lantern held or uttered words of cheer.

At last we reached them—all too late it seemed,
So pale their faces as the cold morn gleamed.
Around the father's neck her arms were flung,
As if in terror from her couch she sprung,
When first upon her ears came, faint and low,
The distant rumble of the loosened snow.
Lovely she lay in her long, broidered robe,
Her brown hair rippling o'er each argent globe
Of her ripe bosom's wealth. A long lash press'd
Silken on either cheek. Even when oppressed
By death's close presence—she was lovely then,
But still more lovely as those days came when
Her cheeks with health were red, and in her eye
The light of friendship shone, and, by and by,
The tender look of love. No wonder Jo
Lost then and there his heart. The girl to know
Was prelude sure to loving. Wonderful
Indeed, had he not loved her. And a full
And generous destiny appeared to say,
You'll stand together on your Wedding Day.
Whene'er I saw them happy side by side,
My foolish heart said, "Jo has found his bride."
Perhaps when heart's for heart, there is a link
We do not understand. I sometimes think
Love called to love from Death's dark portico—
Or else what urged the lad to labor so?
'Twas he who, reverent, raised her in his arms,
All mute at her sweet face and maiden charms.
My full belief it was that from the grave
The girl had come to wed my boy so brave.

But not so fast, old Time has chastened me,
For who can tell what Fate will say, shall be!

Yes, once again the story all revives—
Strange part the Christmas Eve played in their lives!

II.

ur Home—that is our cabin, Jo's and mine,
A single room to dwell in, sleep or dine,
Stood in a hollow near the mountain top,
Where massive walls the blue sky seemed to prop.
A stern, bleak, strange, a lonely rugged place
From whence down-looking one could distant trace
The far-sunk canon and the ledges damp
That sloped toward the little mining camp.
A Babylonish pile at one end rose
On which lay through the year the spiral snows;
And at the other, lichened, richly mossed,
Inlaid by nature's hand, all wild up-tossed,
A mass of terraces did steeply lean,
While tumbled debris lay these heights between.
And higher still the hoary mountain passed
Into a peak, all naked, pale, and vast;
Bleached into gray, but marked with mineral stain—
The source of which it was our hope to gain.
So thus we tunneled and did slow proceed,
Striving from day to day to reach "the lead."
Across the debris lay a zig-zag track
Our feet had made in climbing up and back.
And 'tween our claim and cabin, lost in sleep,
A mountain lake lay cold, and dark, and deep.

Three years we lived there—in that hollow stern,
The mountain's sights and voices well did learn.

Peered down the ledges sunk in watery gloom,
Beheld the flowers that exhaled rich perfume.
By the lake margin they in myriads grew—
Unfolded there the starry asters blue;
Around each boulder, ere the snow was old,
Came gleaming buttercups in rings of gold;
Where swift the gathered waters fell away,
Forget-me-nots were drenched in crystal spray.
The mimulus, the brush, geraniums bright,
Lit up the shadows with a sunny light.
These sounds we heard—the new-born torrent's plaint,
The bird-like chirp of hidden squirrel faint;
And others, too, uncanny, savage, wild—
The wind that fiend-like shrieked 'mong rocks all aisled,
Anon, oh, dreadful sound! the thunder-peal,
When e'en the giant mountain seemed to reel.
Sometimes the echo of a distant blast—
Which sound of promise made our hearts beat fast—
Full many a sound that made our bosoms swell;
Oh, yes, we learned to know the mountains well!

But who was Jo? We met upon the slope
When I, at least, was well-nigh without hope.
I'd struggled long—it was my fate, you see—
Had been held down by dark adversity.
But from the moment I met Jo—'twas change,
Then for my life began an upward range.
Upon the cliffs of purple, iron-gray,
Heavy and wan, the clouds held fast that day.
The Tower of Babel, in the thick murk gloom'd,
Like to a mighty, spectral shadow loom'd

Dim, black, gigantic, save for lines of snow
Reflected vaguely in the lake below.
And clouds as heavy on the peak did rest,
While vapors white lay wild along each crest.
'Twas ominous truly, but sudden—lo, behold!
The sunbeams darted through the thick enfold.
And then was transformation! 'Twas a sign—
An omen surely good, I did divine.
We stood and gazed in silence. All the moss
Seemed turned to emerald fire by the cross
Of slanting sunbeams. Silver flash they gave
To edge of every shoreward lapping wave.
And then the flowers! As by magic turned,
Each rain-wet leaf as topaz, ruby, burned!
Oh, 'twas inspiring! But why more recite?
Our friendship dated from that glorious sight.
I thought that Fortune dealt anew the cards,
When Jo consented to try luck as "pards."

Nor did I rue it. 'Twas a well-fought game.
Ere that day ended we had staked a claim.
Led by a hope not easy to dispel,
We built our hut by that deep mountain well.
And there we lived. All gloomy thoughts we quelled,
Believed success was in the future held.
Oft we would sit beside our cabin door,
Each chance of winning look at o'er and o'er;
And as we lit and smoked a friendly pipe,
We'd boast how Fortune's hair we'd tightly gripe.
We saw the yellow twilight in the west
Grow dim and fade upon the mountain's breast.

Oft when the lake and crags had turned to jet,
The moon came up and found us watchers yet.
Dear lad, I loved him truly as my life,—
In those three years we passed no word of strife;
I played the father, he was like a son.
Alas! the end to that so well begun!

A curious fact—and why not tell it here?
Though you may think it just a little queer—
I wished when my time came, and I lay dead,
Within that hollow, Jo should make my bed.
In some strange way—I scarce can make it clear,
Nor in my hopefulness should it appear—
That one of us would live to see his mate,
The labors of his life there terminate.
And so, in shelter that a dwarfed pine gave
With mental sight I saw my cone-strewn grave.
Yet nothing said to give to Jo distress,
And—let an ending come to this digress—
I wish to make this truth appear quite plain,
'Twas Jo I thought of more than hope of gain.
Brave lad! There shone within his honest eye
A daring will to conquer or to die.
Perhaps 'twas that endeared him to me so,
His fiery youth—and I so tame and slow.
Besides my past had all been a mistake,
While golden promise said to him, Awake!
We started different, I had lost my chance,
The future bade him boldly to advance.
It seemed to me to take but little guess
To know that Jo would make of life success.

III.

nd Plet—for later so we found her name—
The very idol of the camp became;
A roguish, wilful, tomboy, sparkling girl,
As ever set a lover's brain aw whirl.
Full of all tricks, yet gold without alloy,
The pride of all, and all her father's joy.
And modest, too. Her cheek with blushes burned,
That day we heard how she her pet name earned.
"You see," her father said, in merry mood,
While Plet sought quick our glances to elude,
"'Twas this way," here her face he downward drew,
"We found it well to cut your name in two.
Yes, darling, in those days that now are fled
We Pretty called you, 'Pletty' your lips said.
As Pretty were you, 'Pletty' you became,
And soon would answer to no other name.
But in good time the 'Pletty' came to 'Plet,'
The name we christened you I half forget.
This hair of brown was then all golden curls,
Ere you had grown most naughty of all girls.
Before this time, when you all care repay,
With wicked guiles that turn my old head gray."

Then Plet indulged in charming smile and pout—
That she was "papa's darling" none could doubt.
She was his all upon life's pilgrimage,
A golden letter saved from vanished page,

The promised solace of his closing years,
A hope that came from out a time of tears:
Of children born to him the first and last,
The image of her well-loved mother passed.

Such Plet—whose noble, sympathetic heart
Had others caused to live a better part;
A petticoated, pranksome, daring scamp,
The dainty hoyden of a mining camp.



PART SECOND.



IV.

o was pure-minded. He possessed a force
That kept him always from the low and coarse;
If ugly vice and sin upon him frowned,
With head erect he firmly held his ground.
When siren Pleasure spread her silken net
He was not caught, nor made a conscience debt.
They found he was not of their kind—those men,
Who sought the brothel, drink-shop, gambling-den.
No goody-goody—it was known at length
His action came from courage and from strength,
And those who make a test were sure to find
His virtues were not of the meaner kind,
They came from purity and clean desires.
Not lack of passions strong, nor manly fires.

'Twas on a bright and noble summer day,
When fast the winter snow-drifts ebbed away;
The cloudless sky was like a crystal dome,
When Plet and father stood within "Our Home."
All nature blended in one vast, grand hymn
What time their nags came o'er the hollow's rim.

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