

Aaron's Rod

By

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CONTENTS

- I. THE BLUE BALL
- II. ROYAL OAK
- III. "THE LIGHTED TREE"
- IV. "THE PILLAR OF SALT"
- V. AT THE OPERA
- VI. TALK
- VII. THE DARK SQUARE GARDEN
- VIII. A PUNCH IN THE WIND
- IX. LOW-WATER MARK
- X. THE WAR AGAIN
- XI. MORE PILLAR OF SALT
- XII. NOVARA
- XIII. WIE ES IHNEN GEFAELLT
- XIV. XX SETTEMBRE
- XV. A RAILWAY JOURNEY
- XVI. FLORENCE
- XVII. HIGH UP OVER THE CATHEDRAL SQUARE
- XVIII. THE MARCHESA
- XIX. CLEOPATRA, BUT NOT ANTHONY
- XX. THE BROKEN ROD
- XXI. WORDS

CHAPTER I. THE BLUE BALL

There was a large, brilliant evening star in the early twilight, and underfoot the earth was half frozen. It was Christmas Eve. Also the War was over, and there was a sense of relief that was almost a new menace. A man felt the violence of the nightmare released now into the general air. Also there had been another wrangle among the men on the pit-bank that evening.

Aaron Sisson was the last man on the little black railway-line climbing the hill home from work. He was late because he had attended a meeting of the men on the bank. He was secretary to the Miners Union for his colliery, and had heard a good deal of silly wrangling that left him nettled.

He strode over a stile, crossed two fields, strode another stile, and was in the long road of colliers' dwellings. Just across was his own house: he had built it himself. He went through the little gate, up past the side of the house to the back. There he hung a moment, glancing down the dark, wintry garden.

"My father--my father's come!" cried a child's excited voice, and two little girls in white pinafores ran out in front of his legs.

"Father, shall you set the Christmas Tree?" they cried. "We've got one!"

"Afore I have my dinner?" he answered amiably.

"Set it now. Set it now.--We got it through Fred Alton."

"Where is it?"

The little girls were dragging a rough, dark object out of a corner of the passage into the light of the kitchen door.

"It's a beauty!" exclaimed Millicent.

"Yes, it is," said Marjory.

"I should think so," he replied, striding over the dark bough. He went to the back kitchen to take off his coat.

"Set it now, Father. Set it now," clamoured the girls.

"You might as well. You've left your dinner so long, you might as well do it now before you have it," came a woman's plangent voice, out of the brilliant light of the middle room.

Aaron Sisson had taken off his coat and waistcoat and his cap. He stood bare-headed in his shirt and braces, contemplating the tree.

"What am I to put it in?" he queried. He picked up the tree, and held it erect by the topmost twig. He felt the cold as he stood in the yard coatless, and he twitched his shoulders.

"Isn't it a beauty!" repeated Millicent.

"Ay!--lop-sided though."

"Put something on, you two!" came the woman's high imperative voice, from the kitchen.

"We aren't cold," protested the girls from the yard.

"Come and put something on," insisted the voice. The man started off down the path, the little girls ran grumbling indoors. The sky was clear, there was still a crystalline, non-luminous light in the under air.

Aaron rummaged in his shed at the bottom of the garden, and found a spade and a box that was suitable. Then he came out to his neat, bare, wintry garden. The girls flew towards him, putting the elastic of their hats under their chins as they ran. The tree and the box lay on the frozen earth. The air breathed dark, frosty, electric.

"Hold it up straight," he said to Millicent, as he arranged the tree in

the box. She stood silent and held the top bough, he filled in round the roots.

When it was done, and pressed in, he went for the wheelbarrow. The girls were hovering excited round the tree. He dropped the barrow and stooped to the box. The girls watched him hold back his face--the boughs pricked him.

"Is it very heavy?" asked Millicent.

"Ay!" he replied, with a little grunt. Then the procession set off--the trundling wheel-barrow, the swinging hissing tree, the two excited little girls. They arrived at the door. Down went the legs of the wheel-barrow on the yard. The man looked at the box.

"Where are you going to have it?" he called.

"Put it in the back kitchen," cried his wife.

"You'd better have it where it's going to stop. I don't want to hawk it about."

"Put it on the floor against the dresser, Father. Put it there," urged Millicent.

"You come and put some paper down, then," called the mother hastily.

The two children ran indoors, the man stood contemplative in the cold, shrugging his uncovered shoulders slightly. The open inner door showed a bright linoleum on the floor, and the end of a brown side-board on which stood an aspidistra.

Again with a wrench Aaron Sisson lifted the box. The tree pricked and stung. His wife watched him as he entered staggering, with his face averted.

"Mind where you make a lot of dirt," she said.

He lowered the box with a little jerk on to the spread-out newspaper on the floor. Soil scattered.

"Sweep it up," he said to Millicent.

His ear was lingering over the sudden, clutching hiss of the tree-boughs.

A stark white incandescent light filled the room and made everything sharp and hard. In the open fire-place a hot fire burned red. All was scrupulously clean and perfect. A baby was cooing in a rocker-less wicker cradle by the hearth. The mother, a slim, neat woman with dark hair, was sewing a child's frock. She put this aside, rose, and began to take her husband's dinner from the oven.

"You stopped confabbing long enough tonight," she said.

"Yes," he answered, going to the back kitchen to wash his hands.

In a few minutes he came and sat down to his dinner. The doors were shut close, but there was a draught, because the settling of the mines under the house made the doors not fit. Aaron moved his chair, to get out of the draught. But he still sat in his shirt and trousers.

He was a good-looking man, fair, and pleasant, about thirty-two years old. He did not talk much, but seemed to think about something. His wife resumed her sewing. She was acutely aware of her husband, but he seemed not very much aware of her.

"What were they on about today, then?" she said.

"About the throw-in."

"And did they settle anything?"

"They're going to try it--and they'll come out if it isn't satisfactory."

"The butties won't have it, I know," she said. He gave a short laugh, and went on with his meal.

The two children were squatted on the floor by the tree. They had a wooden box, from which they had taken many little newspaper packets, which they were spreading out like wares.

"Don't open any. We won't open any of them till we've taken them all out--and then we'll undo one in our turns. Then we s'll both undo equal," Millicent was saying.

"Yes, we'll take them ALL out first," re-echoed Marjory.

"And what are they going to do about Job Arthur Freer? Do they want him?" A faint smile came on her husband's face.

"Nay, I don't know what they want.--Some of 'em want him--whether they're a majority, I don't know."

She watched him closely.

"Majority! I'd give 'em majority. They want to get rid of you, and make a fool of you, and you want to break your heart over it. Strikes me you need something to break your heart over."

He laughed silently.

"Nay," he said. "I s'll never break my heart."

"You'll go nearer to it over that, than over anything else: just because a lot of ignorant monkeys want a monkey of their own sort to do the Union work, and jabber to them, they want to get rid of you, and you eat your heart out about it. More fool you, that's all I say--more fool you. If you cared for your wife and children half what you care about your Union, you'd be a lot better pleased in the end. But you care about nothing but a lot of ignorant colliers, who don't know what they want except it's more money just for themselves. Self, self, self--that's all it is with them--and ignorance."

"You'd rather have self without ignorance?" he said, smiling finely.

"I would, if I've got to have it. But what I should like to see is a man that has thought for others, and isn't all self and politics."

Her color had risen, her hand trembled with anger as she sewed. A blank look had come over the man's face, as if he did not hear or heed any more. He drank his tea in a long draught, wiped his moustache with two fingers, and sat looking abstractedly at the children.

They had laid all the little packets on the floor, and Millicent was saying:

"Now I'll undo the first, and you can have the second. I'll take this--"

She unwrapped the bit of newspaper and disclosed a silvery ornament for a Christmas tree: a frail thing like a silver plum, with deep rosy indentations on each side.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. "Isn't it LOVELY!" Her fingers cautiously held the long bubble of silver and glowing rose, cleaving to it with a curious, irritating possession. The man's eyes moved away from her. The lesser child was fumbling with one of the little packets.

"Oh!"--a wail went up from Millicent. "You've taken one!--You didn't wait." Then her voice changed to a motherly admonition, and she began to interfere. "This is the way to do it, look! Let me help you."

But Marjory drew back with resentment.

"Don't, Millicent!--Don't!" came the childish cry. But Millicent's fingers itched.

At length Marjory had got out her treasure--a little silvery bell with a glass top hanging inside. The bell was made of frail glassy substance, light as air.

"Oh, the bell!" rang out Millicent's clanging voice. "The bell! It's my bell. My bell! It's mine! Don't break it, Marjory. Don't break it, will you?"

Marjory was shaking the bell against her ear. But it was dumb, it made no sound.

"You'll break it, I know you will.--You'll break it. Give it ME--"
cried Millicent, and she began to take away the bell. Marjory set up an
expostulation.

"LET HER ALONE," said the father.

Millicent let go as if she had been stung, but still her brassy,
impudent voice persisted:

"She'll break it. She'll break it. It's mine--"

"You undo another," said the mother, politic.

Millicent began with hasty, itching fingers to uncloset another package.

"Aw--aw Mother, my peacock--aw, my peacock, my green peacock!" Lavishly
she hovered over a sinuous greenish bird, with wings and tail of spun
glass, pearly, and body of deep electric green.

"It's mine--my green peacock! It's mine, because Marjory's had one wing
off, and mine hadn't. My green peacock that I love! I love it!" She
swung it softly from the little ring on its back. Then she went to her
mother.

"Look, Mother, isn't it a beauty?"

"Mind the ring doesn't come out," said her mother. "Yes, it's lovely!"

The girl passed on to her father.

"Look, Father, don't you love it!"

"Love it?" he re-echoed, ironical over the word love.

She stood for some moments, trying to force his attention. Then she went back to her place.

Marjory had brought forth a golden apple, red on one cheek, rather garish.

"Oh!" exclaimed Millicent feverishly, instantly seized with desire for what she had not got, indifferent to what she had. Her eye ran quickly over the packages. She took one.

"Now!" she exclaimed loudly, to attract attention. "Now! What's this?--What's this? What will this beauty be?"

With finicky fingers she removed the newspaper. Marjory watched her wide-eyed. Millicent was self-important.

"The blue ball!" she cried in a climax of rapture. "I've got THE BLUE BALL."

She held it gloating in the cup of her hands. It was a little globe of hardened glass, of a magnificent full dark blue color. She rose and went to her father.

"It was your blue ball, wasn't it, father?"

"Yes."

"And you had it when you were a little boy, and now I have it when I'm a little girl."

"Ay," he replied drily.

"And it's never been broken all those years."

"No, not yet."

"And perhaps it never will be broken." To this she received no answer.

"Won't it break?" she persisted. "Can't you break it?"

"Yes, if you hit it with a hammer," he said.

"Aw!" she cried. "I don't mean that. I mean if you just drop it. It won't break if you drop it, will it?"

"I dare say it won't."

"But WILL it?"

"I sh'd think not."

"Should I try?"

She proceeded gingerly to let the blue ball drop, it bounced dully on the floor-covering.

"Oh-h-h!" she cried, catching it up. "I love it."

"Let ME drop it," cried Marjory, and there was a performance of admonition and demonstration from the elder sister.

But Millicent must go further. She became excited.

"It won't break," she said, "even if you toss it up in the air."

She flung it up, it fell safely. But her father's brow knitted slightly. She tossed it wildly: it fell with a little splashing explosion: it had smashed. It had fallen on the sharp edge of the tiles that protruded

under the fender.

"NOW what have you done!" cried the mother.

The child stood with her lip between her teeth, a look, half, of pure misery and dismay, half of satisfaction, on her pretty sharp face.

"She wanted to break it," said the father.

"No, she didn't! What do you say that for!" said the mother. And Millicent burst into a flood of tears.

He rose to look at the fragments that lay splashed on the floor.

"You must mind the bits," he said, "and pick 'em all up."

He took one of the pieces to examine it. It was fine and thin and hard, lined with pure silver, brilliant. He looked at it closely. So--this was what it was. And this was the end of it. He felt the curious soft explosion of its breaking still in his ears. He threw his piece in the fire.

"Pick all the bits up," he said. "Give over! give over! Don't cry any more." The good-natured tone of his voice quieted the child, as he intended it should.

He went away into the back kitchen to wash himself. As he was bending his head over the sink before the little mirror, lathering to shave, there came from outside the dissonant voices of boys, pouring out the dregs of carol-singing.

"While Shep-ep-ep-ep-herds watched--"

He held his soapy brush suspended for a minute. They called this singing! His mind flitted back to early carol music. Then again he heard the vocal violence outside.

"Aren't you off there!" he called out, in masculine menace. The noise stopped, there was a scuffle. But the feet returned and the voices resumed. Almost immediately the door opened, boys were heard muttering among themselves. Millicent had given them a penny. Feet scraped on the yard, then went thudding along the side of the house, to the street.

To Aaron Sisson, this was home, this was Christmas: the unspeakably familiar. The war over, nothing was changed. Yet everything changed. The scullery in which he stood was painted green, quite fresh, very clean, the floor was red tiles. The wash-copper of red bricks was very red, the mangle with its put-up board was white-scrubbed, the American oil-cloth on the table had a gay pattern, there was a warm fire, the water in the boiler hissed faintly. And in front of him, beneath him as he leaned forward shaving, a drop of water fell with strange, incalculable rhythm from the bright brass tap into the white enamelled bowl, which was now

half full of pure, quivering water. The war was over, and everything just the same. The acute familiarity of this house, which he had built for his marriage twelve years ago, the changeless pleasantness of it all seemed unthinkable. It prevented his thinking.

When he went into the middle room to comb his hair he found the Christmas tree sparkling, his wife was making pastry at the table, the baby was sitting up propped in cushions.

"Father," said Millicent, approaching him with a flat blue-and-white angel of cotton-wool, and two ends of cotton--"tie the angel at the top."

"Tie it at the top?" he said, looking down.

"Yes. At the very top--because it's just come down from the sky."

"Ay my word!" he laughed. And he tied the angel.

Coming downstairs after changing he went into the icy cold parlour, and took his music and a small handbag. With this he retreated again to the back kitchen. He was still in trousers and shirt and slippers: but now it was a clean white shirt, and his best black trousers, and new pink and white braces. He sat under the gas-jet of the back kitchen, looking through his music. Then he opened the bag, in which were sections of a flute and a piccolo. He took out the flute, and adjusted it. As he sat

he was physically aware of the sounds of the night: the bubbling of water in the boiler, the faint sound of the gas, the sudden crying of the baby in the next room, then noises outside, distant boys shouting, distant rags of carols, fragments of voices of men. The whole country was roused and excited.

The little room was hot. Aaron rose and opened a square ventilator over the copper, letting in a stream of cold air, which was grateful to him. Then he cocked his eye over the sheet of music spread out on the table before him. He tried his flute. And then at last, with the odd gesture of a diver taking a plunge, he swung his head and began to play. A stream of music, soft and rich and fluid, came out of the flute. He played beautifully. He moved his head and his raised bare arms with slight, intense movements, as the delicate music poured out. It was sixteenth-century Christmas melody, very limpid and delicate.

The pure, mindless, exquisite motion and fluidity of the music delighted him with a strange exasperation. There was something tense, exasperated to the point of intolerable anger, in his good-humored breast, as he played the finely-spun peace-music. The more exquisite the music, the more perfectly he produced it, in sheer bliss; and at the same time, the more intense was the maddened exasperation within him.

Millicent appeared in the room. She fidgetted at the sink. The music was a bugbear to her, because it prevented her from saying what was on her own mind. At length it ended, her father was turning over the various

books and sheets. She looked at him quickly, seizing her opportunity.

"Are you going out, Father?" she said.

"Eh?"

"Are you going out?" She twisted nervously.

"What do you want to know for?"

He made no other answer, and turned again to the music. His eye went down a sheet--then over it again--then more closely over it again.

"Are you?" persisted the child, balancing on one foot.

He looked at her, and his eyes were angry under knitted brows.

"What are you bothering about?" he said.

"I'm not bothering--I only wanted to know if you were going out," she pouted, quivering to cry.

"I expect I am," he said quietly.

She recovered at once, but still with timidity asked:

"We haven't got any candles for the Christmas tree--shall you buy some, because mother isn't going out?"

"Candles!" he repeated, settling his music and taking up the piccolo.

"Yes--shall you buy us some, Father? Shall you?"

"Candles!" he repeated, putting the piccolo to his mouth and blowing a few piercing, preparatory notes.

"Yes, little Christmas-tree candles--blue ones and red ones, in boxes--Shall you, Father?"

"We'll see--if I see any--"

"But SHALL you?" she insisted desperately. She wisely mistrusted his vagueness.

But he was looking unheeding at the music. Then suddenly the piccolo broke forth, wild, shrill, brilliant. He was playing Mozart. The child's face went pale with anger at the sound. She turned, and went out, closing both doors behind her to shut out the noise.

The shrill, rapid movement of the piccolo music seemed to possess the air, it was useless to try to shut it out. The man went on playing to himself, measured and insistent. In the frosty evening the sound

carried. People passing down the street hesitated, listening. The neighbours knew it was Aaron practising his piccolo. He was esteemed a good player: was in request at concerts and dances, also at swell balls. So the vivid piping sound tickled the darkness.

He played on till about seven o'clock; he did not want to go out too soon, in spite of the early closing of the public houses. He never went with the stream, but made a side current of his own. His wife said he was contrary. When he went into the middle room to put on his collar and tie, the two little girls were having their hair brushed, the baby was in bed, there was a hot smell of mince-pies baking in the oven.

"You won't forget our candles, will you, Father?" asked Millicent, with assurance now.

"I'll see," he answered.

His wife watched him as he put on his overcoat and hat. He was well-dressed, handsome-looking. She felt there was a curious glamour about him. It made her feel bitter. He had an unfair advantage--he was free to go off, while she must stay at home with the children.

"There's no knowing what time you'll be home," she said.

"I shan't be late," he answered.

"It's easy to say so," she retorted, with some contempt. He took his stick, and turned towards the door.

"Bring the children some candles for their tree, and don't be so selfish," she said.

"All right," he said, going out.

"Don't say ALL RIGHT if you never mean to do it," she cried, with sudden anger, following him to the door.

His figure stood large and shadowy in the darkness.

"How many do you want?" he said.

"A dozen," she said. "And holders too, if you can get them," she added, with barren bitterness.

"Yes--all right," he turned and melted into the darkness. She went indoors, worn with a strange and bitter flame.

He crossed the fields towards the little town, which once more fumed its lights under the night. The country ran away, rising on his right hand. It was no longer a great bank of darkness. Lights twinkled freely here and there, though forlornly, now that the war-time restrictions were removed. It was no glitter of pre-war nights, pit-heads glittering

far-off with electricity. Neither was it the black gulf of the war darkness: instead, this forlorn sporadic twinkling.

Everybody seemed to be out of doors. The hollow dark countryside re-echoed like a shell with shouts and calls and excited voices.

Restlessness and nervous excitement, nervous hilarity were in the air. There was a sense of electric surcharge everywhere, frictional, a neurasthenic haste for excitement.

Every moment Aaron Sisson was greeted with Good-night--Good-night, Aaron--Good-night, Mr. Sisson. People carrying parcels, children, women, thronged home on the dark paths. They were all talking loudly, declaiming loudly about what they could and could not get, and what this or the other had lost.

When he got into the main street, the only street of shops, it was crowded. There seemed to have been some violent but quiet contest, a subdued fight, going on all the afternoon and evening: people struggling to buy things, to get things. Money was spent like water, there was a frenzy of money-spending. Though the necessities of life were in abundance, still the people struggled in frenzy for cheese, sweets, raisins, pork-stuff, even for flowers and holly, all of which were scarce, and for toys and knick-knacks, which were sold out. There was a wild grumbling, but a deep satisfaction in the fight, the struggle. The same fight and the same satisfaction in the fight was witnessed whenever a tram-car stopped, or when it heaved its way into sight. Then the

struggle to mount on board became desperate and savage, but stimulating. Souls surcharged with hostility found now some outlet for their feelings.

As he came near the little market-place he bethought himself of the Christmas-tree candles. He did not intend to trouble himself. And yet, when he glanced in passing into the sweet-shop window, and saw it bare as a board, the very fact that he probably could not buy the things made him hesitate, and try.

"Have you got any Christmas-tree candles?" he asked as he entered the shop.

"How many do you want?"

"A dozen."

"Can't let you have a dozen. You can have two boxes--four in a box--eight. Six-pence a box."

"Got any holders?"

"Holders? Don't ask. Haven't seen one this year."

"Got any toffee--?"

"Cough-drops--two-pence an ounce--nothing else left."

"Give me four ounces."

He watched her weighing them in the little brass scales.

"You've not got much of a Christmas show," he said.

"Don't talk about Christmas, as far as sweets is concerned. They ought to have allowed us six times the quantity--there's plenty of sugar, why didn't they? We s'll have to enjoy ourselves with what we've got. We mean to, anyhow."

"Ay," he said.

"Time we had a bit of enjoyment, THIS Christmas. They ought to have made things more plentiful."

"Yes," he said, stuffing his package in his pocket.