

MISTLETOE

A Christmas Eve Love Story

ALICE BROWN

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*“I’ll tell you
what it is.
It’s
mistletoe,
John,
mistletoe,
and it’s
Christmas
Eve.”*

Mistletoe—A Christmas Eve Love Story

By ALICE BROWN

ILLUSTRATED BY EMLEN McCONNELL

IT WAS the warmest day of the winter, this day before Christmas, with all the glitter left from a week of frost, and so bright a sun that shadows lay violet-blue in hollows everywhere. The wintering birds had come renewedly awake to a sense of quickened life, and men and women in the Tenterden neighborhood looked out of the windows and involuntarily planned for spring. Celia Eastman had come home from her two months' visit the day before, and she and her mother were in the kitchen, this forenoon, talking things over. There was a great deal to tell, and Mrs. Eastman was embarking with delight on the full flood of things happened. She was a large, soft woman with a delicate pink skin, thin gold hair drawn back from a wide part to a tiny knot screwed up behind, a benevolent, garrulous woman, who never could be reconciled to it that her daughter was so still. It was plain she took after the Eastmans, who never had a word to say for themselves, though her exquisite coloring and the gold of her hair were direct in line of inheritance from her mother. But Celia had her father's severer profile and his symmetrical slenderness, and, Mrs. Eastman sometimes said, with an exasperation half real and half humorous, all his knack of keeping his thoughts to himself. And now Celia, while she wiped the cooking dishes with swift, capable motions, was listening while her mother talked and splashed the dish-water meantime, as if she could work more joyously in a heavy sea.

“**S**O,” MRS. EASTMAN was saying, “I thought mebbe you'd been away so long—two months it is, I told John Thurston yesterday, two months 'most to a day—it would be kinder nice if we should have in two-three o' the neighbors to-night, bein' Christmas Eve an' all, and get you kinder started right off. Old acquaintance, you know, takin' things up where you left 'em an' gettin' caught up.”

Here she splashed vigorously and Celia was quite aware that her mother avoided looking at her. Mother often had her plans. Celia smiled a little, showing white teeth and an unexpected dimple.

“I don't need to get started,” she said. “I've come home, that's all, and I guess that's start enough.”

“Folks'll want to see you,” said Mrs. Eastman. “An' it's a good deal easier to have 'em come all in a bunch than dribblin' along, runnin' in 'fore breakfast mebbe an' not stoppin' to set. There's been a great to-do to know when you was comin'. I guess you'd be surprised to know how many friends you've got. John was in here yesterday mornin', John Thurston. ‘When's she comin'?’ says he. ‘She comin' for good?’”

Celia made no answer, but her mother, glancing round at her in a sly inquiry, saw that the red had run into her cheeks. Mrs. Eastman never knew

quite how far to venture with Celia, any more than with her husband. They never rebuffed her, it was true, but she was always chary of pursuing them into that inner citadel of their inexplicable reserve, because, as she frankly told herself, it made her so everlastin' mad to see them fenced in there where she couldn't get nothin' out of 'em. But sometimes, in desperation, she did lose control of herself to the point of saying more than she should, even before that certainty of a resultant silence.

"John was terrible interested, Celia," she went on, in spite of herself, and tossing overboard her memory of similar indiscretions which had never failed to breed the silence she deplored. "He asked all manner o' questions, how you'd ben an' if you wouldn't feel contented now to stay round here a spell."

"Ain't this a new yeller nappy?" asked Celia, regarding the little dish with disproportioned interest. "Where do you keep it, in with the bakin' dishes or the china?"

But Mrs. Eastman had fairly started now and paid no attention.

"An' if there's any trouble, Celia," said she, lashed on by her own impetuosity and unable to stop, "an' whatever trouble there's ben to make you pack an' go off an' make that visit, it was your fault more'n 'twas John's, an' that I'll wage. I've told Father so more'n once, when we've set here these two months, talkin' it over, and he'll tell you—or he would if he'd ever open his head—'twas because Lindy Blake moved here an' made a set at John an' instead o' you showin' him you prized him more'n tongue can tell, you just froze up an' went off and left him to be gethered up—" here she paused for a simile and caught helplessly at one she had heard Parson read from the pulpit, the Sunday before—"by the snare o' the fowler."

"**W**ELL," said Celia with an elaborate carelessness, "if anybody can be gethered up I guess they better be. Anyways, I guess they will for all me."

This was far more of a concession to a human emotion than her mother had expected, and she felt momentarily triumphant and justified in going on.

"You don't know how to deal with a high-flyer like Lindy, nor John didn't, neither. Why, when she come here to stay with Gramma Blake, don't you s'pose she knew what handle she could make o' the Blakes not keepin' any horse? An' 'twas, 'John, be you goin' here an' be you goin' there? An' let me come along an' do a few arrants.'"

"John Thurston's got a right to take anybody to ride, anybody he wants to," said Celia coldly.

“Well, do you know what he done, the week arter you went away? I’ll tell you what he done. I wouldn’t write it to you, I was so provoked with you, flyin’ off the way you did. I wouldn’t give you the satisfaction o’ knowin’. He went off himself, over to his uncle Samwel’s choppin’, an’ he ain’t but just got back. An’ I don’t lay claim to readin’ the minds o’ men, but some things I know. He see Lindy Blake was baitin’ her trap for him, an’ he couldn’t get you out o’ his mind, no matter how froze up you was, an’ he just lit out, that’s what he done, an’ put himself out o’ the way o’ temptation.”

“Temptation!” said Celia, with the smallest scornful curve of the lip.

But her mother, in another probing glance, saw that her eyes were wet, and she was emboldened to go on.

“**Y**ES, I know all about that,” she said ruthlessly. “You don’t mean to have anything to do with a man that’s even so much as looked away from you when he see another girl goin’ by. That’s pride, Celia. It’s sinful pride. Lindy’s as bold as brass, but she’s got a good warm heart, when all’s said an’ done, an’ men-folks kinder hanker after that, same’s you would settin’ by a fire when there’s a March wind blowin’. You an’ your father’s exactly alike, as like as two peas in a pod, an’ I tell you as I stan’ here I wouldn’t no more ha’ married your father—why, when he come courtin’ you’d ha’ thought he was buyin’ a pound o’ butter or a dozen eggs—I wouldn’t no more ha’ married him if there hadn’t been that picnic an’ I fell into the water an’ ’most got drowned an’ he jumped in an’ fetched me ashore, an’ he said—well, there, that was the first time I ever knew how your father felt, or whether he’d got any feelin’s at all.”

Celia might be silent, but she did cherish a pretty sense of fun. Her face creased up now into charming lines that helped the dimple along immensely in its task of sweet beguiling.

“I never heard about the picnic, Mother,” she said. “Where was it an’ what did Father say?”

Now Mrs. Eastman was flushing all over her pink face. She laughed a little shamefacedly.

“I guess you never did hear of it,” she said, “an’ I guess you won’t hear no more now. I dunno what’s started me on that road to old times. Yes, I do, too. It’s John an’ his comin’ right back here soon’s he heard you was expected home.”

“How’d he hear I was comin’?” asked Celia quietly.

“Well, there,” said Mrs. Eastman helplessly. “I dunno’s I can say. Yes, I do, too. He wrote to your father an’ asked him about showin’ a man over the wood-lot, in case he come to look at the lumber whilst John’s away, an’ he

asked your father, toward the end o' the letter, asked him right out when you was comin' home."

"Did Father tell him?" inquired Celia, still in that even tone which meant, her mother knew, that she would keep on asking until the answer came.

"No, he didn't," said Mrs. Eastman. "I asked him, after he'd got the letter sealed up, an' he said, no, he didn't think 'twas any importance an' he never wrote a word."

"Then," said Celia, "I don't see—"

"Oh, law!" cried Mrs. Eastman, driven to the wall, "yes, you do, too, an' I might as well tell you an' have it over. I told him myself. 'Course I did. I put the letter over the kittle an' steamed it open, an' I wrote down to the bottom, after what Father'd said about the lot—'She's comin' the day before Christmas.'"

"Well," said Celia, still quietly, "he must think we're queer folks."

"**H**E may think some of us be," said Mrs. Eastman, emboldened by her exasperation at having been dragged before the bars of confession, "anybody that's afraid to show they've got human feelin's, an' when they set their life by a man are too proud to show it."

"I don't set my life—" interrupted Celia, so hotly that her mother exulted, finding she was stirred at last. And then, hearing a step at the kitchen door, Celia stopped and was glad to seize the pretext. For after all, her inner mind asked her, was it true there was nobody she did set her life by? The door opened and her father came in, a tall, spare man with a lank cheek and thin, beautiful mouth. He had an unconscious dignity that kept everybody at a distance, they scarcely knew why. And he himself was the last to know it. There was always a little space about him, of cool air and serene silences. He was by choice a silent man, yet there had been moments in his life when he had felt the fanning of the great flames of being, and had been so moved by them that he had turned away to his cool silences again. He and Celia had a deep and perfect understanding, and now, after he had thrown down the armful of wood he had brought, he turned to her with a quick smile she read perfectly as his testimony to renewed delight in her being home again. And she realized anew that she was the gladder to see him in that he had interrupted her just in time. She smiled back at him, a smile of another type, full of mischief and provocation.

"Father," said she, "tell me about the picnic when you saved Mother's life."

Jared Eastman stood perfectly still for a moment, looking at her, the smile of welcome he had given her turning to one exactly like her own, of

provocative mischief. Then he turned to his wife, but she was setting the table, with a deft rapidity, and looked at neither of them. But there was a fine flush on her soft cheeks, and she contented herself with the general observation. "I'd be ashamed!" evidently including them both and directed to nobody in particular.

"Tell me about it," said Celia, enjoying Mother's discomfiture, and perfectly sure Father would not add to it unduly.

"The picnic?" said Jared.

He got his pipe and stood by the stove, filling the pipe with a mechanical care, the while you might see how his mind searched back over the road of old recollection. "Well, seems to me 'twas much like all the other picnics, as I recall. There was cake enough to sink a ship, an' lemon pies with emmets in 'em—"

"Why, Jared, how you talk!" said his wife, glad to divert him from her own confusion. "Emmets in pies? Who ever heard o' such a thing?"

"There always is, at picnics," said Jared placidly. "It's as much as your life's wuth to eat your supper without swallerin' down all the bugs that went into the ark."

"Yes," said Celia, "but I want to know about Mother. How'd she fall in, and how'd you fish her out?"

"Well," said Jared, still placidly and now not looking at his wife, "as I remember, 'twas a lonesome part o' the lake—we was all alone huntin' for gold-thread, so's your mother could make root beer the next day—an' we come on an old punt, an' your mother jumped into it an' pushed off an', fust thing I knew, she was overboard."

"Well," said Celia, "what'd you do then?"

She hardly understood why she was asking so persistently. Somehow love and the ways of love were bewitching to her to-day.

"WELL," said her father slowly, "I don't hardly know. I guess I walked out an' fetched her in. 'Twa'n't very deep there."

"Celia," said mother, in a brisk tone of authority, "you've begun to leave your things round every which way, same's you did before you went away. You take your sweater an' hang it up in the entry, an' le's see if we can't keep the chairs without their lookin' as if they're ridin' out, suthin' in every individual one."

Celia went into the hall with her sweater and stood there a moment, after she had hung it up, wondering absently if she did seem frozen, if girls like Lindy, red-cheeked and "bold as brass," could make a man happier than the shy ways of her own softnesses, and her misery when they were not understood. As

she stood there, she heard her father say, with a laugh in his voice, a laugh that was never for her, much as they played together:

“I dunno when I’ve thought o’ them old times.”

“No,” said her mother, in a voice as strange to Celia as if she had not thought herself familiar with its every tone, “I dunno when I have, either.”

“About that fallin’ overboard,” said Father, still with the ripple of laughter in his voice, “I dunno’s I ever said it afore, but I kinder had it in mind you fell over a-purpose—anyways that’s the conclusion I come to arter I got over my scare an’ got thinkin’ on’t that night when I laid awake studyin’ how we could get married an’ not wait till spring.”

“I’d be ashamed!” said Mother.

But she laughed, and then she and Father, as it seemed to be by one impulse, came to each other and met in the middle of the kitchen, and Father put his hands on her soft, heavy shoulders and drew her to him and they kissed, a solemn kiss, it seemed to Celia, and Mother’s face, as she saw it, looked as she had never seen it in all her life before. Then they parted and each went quietly away on the track of homespun tasks, and Celia, understanding, with a new amazement, that they had forgotten all about her, slipped out of the hall up-stairs, and stayed there over her unpacking. She felt curiously abashed, as if she had entered a room sacred to big emotions she scarcely understood, and that were yet challenging her to come and read their faces in some room that would be sacred, in her turn, to her alone, to her and one other. When she went down-stairs again, the kitchen was full of savory smells, the pot was boiling, and Mother, with a perfectly commonplace sobriety of interest in her household deeds, was getting dinner.

“WHAT you got there?” she called as Celia entered, a branch of berries in one hand and her apron, with broken twigs and fallen berries, held up in the other.

“It’s bayberries,” said Celia, looking down at the dull blue branch. “I got a lot more, but they broke, comin’. I was bewitched with ’em. Uncle said they’d keep all winter. I wish we had ’em up here—I wanted him to send me a root in the spring—but he said they never liked to grow fur from the sea.”

“Yes, they’re real handsome,” said Mrs. Eastman, admiringly. “Where you goin’ to put ’em? There’s that copper vase in the upper cupboard. I dunno’s it’s big enough, though. Don’t you have it so top-heavy it’ll fall over.”

Celia reached up to the shelf and found the vase, and arranged her berries in it with a delicate care. They were a little top-heavy, but she loved the look of the copper and the blue, and she set them on the parlor mantel where no one

would touch them unawares. Then Father came in with a big knot and built a fire in the parlor stove. The whole house was to be warmed, so far as might be, for the party that night.

At seven o'clock everything was ready. They had had an early supper, and Mrs. Eastman, in her watered silk that had been great-grandmother's before her, and a prodigious white apron, was cutting cake in the pantry, in a great state of excitement, because parties were not every day, and Father was going on a last tour of inspection of the fires, throwing in a knot here and "brashing up" there, and Celia, her cheeks scarlet with an excitement she would not recognize, looked in the parlor mirror for the last time, and wondered why her eyes, that always took the color of her blue dress, looked so black, and whether her cheeks were unladylike, they were so red. Suddenly the side door burst open and somebody came flying in, and she heard a voice she knew, a woman's voice, high, full and not unmusical and with a laugh braided through the words.

"Celia got home, Mis' Eastman? I want to leave my slippers whilst I run along an' carry this molasses jug to the Thurstons'. John's goin' to the street to-morrow. Comin' to the party? I guess I be. I wouldn't miss it for a farm. I've thought up more'n a dozen games I ain't played since I was knee-high to a pint o' cider, as old Mr. Thurston says. An' I wish I had some mistletoe to bring. You know 'bout mistletoe, don't you?"

HER laugh rang out again, full and rich, and Celia, moved, in spite of herself, by the climbing tones, wondered if that was the way people showed other people they were not frozen and proud. Lindy was calling again, through the closed window this time:

"I'll be back in fifteen minutes or so, tell Celia. Maybe I'll bring John with me."

And at this last Celia felt herself harden, and again she was stiff and proud. Now, as she stood there, absently disposing the bayberries to a safer advantage in their vase and thinking about girls with a warm, full laugh, she heard her father and mother in the east room on their tour of inspecting fires. There was a fireplace there, with an enormous log, and she heard her mother say:

"I'll get a candle, an' we'll go up attic and see if we can find that old wire fire screen, used to be down here. I'm kind o' 'fraid o' sparks, ain't you?"

Then she heard their footsteps on the stairs, Mother talking volubly all the way. And she seemed to be alone, not only in the house but in the house of life, where nobody was likely to understand how it was that you could love people enough to find your heart aching, day and night, because they were not beside you and yet, in spite of yourself, seem stiff and proud. And then the side door

again opened and another step, light but yet, in some subtle implication, not a woman's, came striding in. Before she knew what she was doing, Celia put her hand to her heart and stood there, her head set eagerly forward, her breath coming fast. The step came on through the kitchen, the door opened, and there he stood, framed in the doorway, John Thurston, tall and supple, with every charm of beauty, her eyes told her, that were ever the dower of a young man in his strength. He was all brown where she was blond and golden, and now, from his eager haste, he looked to her ten times as strong and splendid as he had ever looked. He stepped into the room and closed the door behind him.

"Well, Celia," he said, and stood there waiting.

"Well," said Celia. Even in the midst of her tumultuous recognition she wondered if she spoke coldly.

"There ain't any of 'em come, have they?" asked John.

And now his calm seemed to shatter, and he spoke as if there were things to say in haste. Celia felt the old hateful sensation that always turned her to stone whenever she was reminded of Lindy Blake. And she scarcely needed to be reminded. Lindy had been with her night and day all the weeks of these two months.

"I'S POSE LINDY'S come," she said perversely, and her voice seemed to freeze as it touched the air. She felt that, and hated it. "I heard her tell Mother she's goin' over to your house and you'd come back with her."

"Yes," said John, "I heard her comin' in the back door, an' I went out the front."

He spoke so innocently, in such good faith, that Celia suddenly wondered if he had ever suspected her raging jealousy. That was well, her angry pride told her. If she was to lose him, not even he should know how terribly she cared.

"I wanted to see you," said John, "alone, 'fore any of 'em come. I felt as if I couldn't see you talkin' an' laughin' with one an' another, same as you did that night 'fore you went away, an' not know how things were goin' to be betwixt us."

"The night 'fore I went away?" repeated Celia, in her turn innocently, though her quietude was elaborately forced. "Let me see, that was the Blakes' party, wa'n't it? An' Lindy wore her pink dress."

"What do you keep harpin' on Lindy Blake for?" asked John violently. "'Course she was there. 'Twas her grandmother give the party, an' give it for her, to get her acquainted with us an' all. She hadn't been there more'n a fortnight then."

“Harpin’ on her?” inquired Celia. “I don’t know’s I’m harpin’. I only remember it, that’s all, she looked so handsome in her pink dress. I remember just how she looked when you two were dancin’ together, goin’ down the middle.”

“Yes, I did dance with her,” said John, “an’ mighty glad to get her, too. I asked you, didn’t I? asked you twice, an’ you turned your back on me, though I knew you wa’n’t engaged, an’ held out your hand to Sam Gilchrist, an’ he was so tickled he swelled up like a frog.”

“Did I?” said Celia carelessly. “Sam’s a real nice dancer. He’s light on his feet, same’s all them heavy men.”

“Is he comin’ here to-night?” demanded John.

“Comin’ here? I guess so. Mother asked the folks, you know, an’ I ain’t had time to find out who’s comin’ an’ who ain’t. I don’t know whether she even spoke o’ your comin’—or Lindy.”

THE last she had not meant to add, and she instantly repented, for he was silent, looking at her sharply. But Celia instantly plucked up heart. She fancied herself a match for John Thurston’s wits. It was a very different case from Father, who could draw a conclusion and keep it hidden twenty-five years or so, and then bring it out to confound Mother with the accusation of deliberately falling overboard to prove his love.

“Celia,” said John, and stopped.

He was not going on, she saw, until she was paying full attention. She in turn waited, but the silence seemed to call on her heart to beat louder and faster, and to forestall his hearing it she had to answer.

“Well?” said she.

“Celia,” said John again, and in so soft a voice, so gravely set to such beguiling intervals, that involuntarily she glanced at him and thought she had never seen him look just that way before. “Sometimes I feel as if I don’t know you. I wonder if I ever knew you? An’ I come home here when I found you were comin’, to find out what kind of a girl you be.”

This seemed to her ungenerous. What had she done, that he should question what sort of girl she was? She had not danced three times in one evening, unprovoked, with Sam Gilchrist, nor had she been at anybody’s beck and call to do errands at the store.

“What kind of a girl I be?” she repeated. “What difference does it make what kind I be?”

“It makes a good deal of difference to me,” said John, still in that grave, moved tone. “A girl grows up into the kind of a woman she was when she’s a

girl. If she's been hard an' cold when she's young"—here his eyes lingered upon her bright hair, and Celia thought, with awe and almost a terror of emotion so great in a man so gay as John, that they seemed to dim with tears—"when her hair's like gold an' her cheeks are redder'n roses, she'll be hard to the end. I've seen women with no love in 'em, women with husbands an' children, an' seen 'em in this very town, too, an' I ain't a-goin' to give over my life into any such hands."

And for the first time in Celia's remembrance, she was afraid of a man's strength and virile mastery. Her memory of him, all through their childhood and youth, had been of games and chaffing and foolish speech, and his humble deference to her, his patient hope of pleasing. Yet still she had to counter once more, the feminine in her rising up to meet the masculine in him.

"I don't know," she said weakly, "as anybody's asked you to give over your life into anybody's hands."

Again he stood looking at her, and again Celia felt her heart beating too hard for her to bear.

"No," he said at last, slowly and so sadly that again her eyes were drawn to him, "I don't s'pose anybody has. Nor I don't s'pose they'd care a continental whatever happened to me. An' I say again, as I've said to myself forty thousand times in these two months, if a girl can turn her back on a man without a word or listenin' to a 'Why do ye so?' she's got a cold heart, an' all the yellor hair an' pink cheeks under the canopy won't make up for that."

CELIA felt herself freezing colder and colder with misery, but she could only stand there, looking down at her feet now and wondering that he could bear to stay there in the room with her, even for the righteous pleasure of freezing her stiffer, if this was the sort of girl he found her. She thought of her father up there in the attic, hunting for the fine screen. Father always understood her. They were just alike, he and she. He always knew what she meant, even before she had time to speak. What would he tell her to say to this man who was so sure she was cold of heart? Or was it Mother who would know, Mother who had seen how to challenge her lover into telling her he loved her, and had been game enough to jump into the water to prove it? But John had not said quite all he came to say, or, if he had, there was still left the miserable climax of taking his leave.

"It's no use, Celia," he said. "I'm goin'. I can't stay to no parties an' play games an' cut round an' pretend everything's well with me when it ain't. I thought mebber if I should see you a minute alone before the others come, you'd seem different toward me, glad to see me, mebber, after all this time, an' we could forget what's past an' gone an' mebber begin over. But it's no use.

You're just the same an' so be I. I wish to God I wa'n't. I wish I could say I'd go away an' forget you. But half on't I can do. I can go away."

He turned with a quick swing of his shoulders and opened the door. It was a hasty sweep of motion, and the vase of bayberries, caught by the wind of it, fell. Involuntarily he turned back.

"What's that?" he called sharply.

For the minute it seemed to him that something swift and disastrous had happened to Celia, and that he had brought it on her by his going. She had darted to the scattered bayberry branches and seized one and lifted it high over her head. He could not choose but look at her, she was so beautiful in her blue dress, her eyes shining and the red in her cheeks, the sleeve fallen back from the white arm that upheld the branch.

"What is it?" she cried desperately, for now no adequate words would come to her and she had to depend on woman's inherited guile of act. "I'll tell you what it is. It's mistletoe, John, mistletoe, and it's Christmas Eve."

He turned back into the room, shutting the door behind him, and came up to her and took the branch out of her hand.

"Is that what you mean, Celia?" he asked her. "Do you care about me like that?"

"Yes," said Celia. "I care about you every way—every way in the world. Don't you know I care about you every way in the world?"

When he had kissed her he held her away from him a pace and they looked at each other, both of them pale now and curiously shaken, and he said to her:

"You know what this means, Celia. It's no Christmas prank of mistletoe"—he smiled a little as he glanced at the branch fallen between them—"an' kissing a girl for fun. It's for good an' all."

Celia began to catch her breath, in a choking, half-angry way.

"Of course it's for good an' all," she said. "An' I ain't hard an' cold an' froze up inside. An' when I'm as old as Mother I'll tell you what I've done this minute to get you back, because I couldn't rest night nor day if you didn't see how much I set by you. No, I'll tell you now. I ain't goin' to have you think I'm better'n I am. I told you 'twas mistletoe—"

"Hark!" said John. There was a sound of sleigh bells coming into the yard. "The folks have begun to gether. Come here. Oh, Celia, kiss me—a kiss to dream on! I don't care anything about your mistletoe, nor what you've said about it nor what you ain't. Only we won't have any more talk about it when they come. It's our'n, for we kissed under it an' nobody on this earth shall set eyes on it but us."

In the moment of his releasing her he stooped and gathered up the fallen branches, lifted the stove top and dropped them in. And the next instant there

came incursions from two directions. Mother, brushing the front of her watered silk and vowing she would clean the attic without waiting for spring, it was a sin and shame to find such dust under the eaves, and half a dozen neighbors, all talking together and loudly chorusing their delight in having Celia home again. Lindy had come with them, but she stopped in the kitchen to take off her things and put on the slippers that showed her plump foot to perfection. Suddenly she appeared at Celia's side.

"Hullo, Celia," said she. "Here you are, large as life an' twice as handsome. My! ain't that an elegant shade o' blue."

Celia turned and looked at her and smiled, and Lindy made honest comment to herself that she had never seen Celia so pretty, her eyes shining and her cheeks a crimson glow. She seemed to have lost that prim, stand-off look, Lindy thought, and it 'peared as if you might get along well with her, now she didn't act as if she thought herself such a terrible sight better'n anybody else. But all Celia said was, and rather shyly, too, as if she wanted to say something gently kind: "Yours is pretty, too. It's brighter'n your pink. That's the last I see you in. I never forgot it."

"That old thing?" said Lindy carelessly. "I burnt a hole in it that night o' Gramma's party, an' I give it to her for her drawn-in rugs."

Then Celia went away to the east bedroom to show the ladies where to put their things, and Lindy was left alone with John, standing on the hearth rug as he and Celia had been standing but the moment before.

"Well, John," said Lindy, regarding him with a merry eye. "It's a month o' Sundays, ain't it, since we met."

"Consid'able of a spell," said John composedly. "It's the day before Christmas now, an' 'twas the last of October then."

"You seem to remember the date pretty well," said Lindy, challengingly.

"Yes," said John soberly. "I had cause to remember it. An' I guess, takin' everything by an' large, it's a date I ain't ever likely to forget."

Lindy was bewildered. He seemed to be talking to her, and yet, from the look of his absent, shining glance, not of anything that could possibly concern her. But her own interest was ever in the present, and glancing down to see if her slipped foot was favorably disposed, she began to laugh.

"Why," said she, "look o' there. What's that? A sprig o' berries down there by your foot. Well, if ever! It's Christmas Eve, an' I vow I b'lieve it's mistletoe!"

"It ain't mistletoe," said John quietly. He stooped and picked it up, took out his pocketbook and laid the spray carefully within. "That's bayberry."

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *Mistletoe—A Christmas Eve Love Story* by Alice Brown]