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Title: The Christmas Peace

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Release date: November 16, 2007 [eBook #23511]
Most recently updated: February 24, 2021

Language: English

Credits: Produced by David Widger

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THE CHRISTMAS PEACE

By Thomas Nelson Page

Charles Scribner's Sons New York, 1908

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I

They had lived within a mile of each other for fifty-odd years, old Judge Hampden and old Colonel Drayton; that is, all their lives, for they had been born on adjoining plantations within a month of each other. But though they had thus lived and were accounted generally good men and good neighbors, to each other they had never been neighbors any more than the Lévite was neighbor to him who went down to Jericho.

Kindly to everyone else and ready to do their part by all other men, the Draytons and the Hampdens, whenever they met each other, always passed by on the other side.

It was an old story—the feud between the families—and, perhaps, no one now knew just how the trouble started. They had certainly been on opposite sides ever since they established themselves in early Colonial days on opposite hills in the old county from which the two mansions looked at each other across the stream like hostile forts. The earliest records of the county were those of a dispute between one Colonel Drayton and one Captain Hampden, growing out of some claim to land; but in which the chief bitterness appeared to have been injected by Captain Hampden's having claimed precedence over Colonel Drayton on the ground that his title of "Captain" was superior to Colonel Drayton's title, because he had held a real commission and had fought for it, whereas the Colonel's title was simply honorary and "Ye sayd Collonel had never smelled enough powder to kill a tom-cat."

However this might be and there was nothing in the records to show how this contention was adjudicated—in the time of Major Wilmer Drayton and Judge Oliver Hampden, the breach between the two families had been transmitted from father to son for several generations and showed no signs of abatement. Other neighborhood families intermarried, but not the Drayton-Hall and the Hampden-Hill families, and in time it came to be an accepted tradition that a Drayton and a Hampden would not mingle any more than would fire and water.

The Hampdens were dark and stout, hot-blooded, fierce, and impetuous. They were apparently vigorous; but many of them died young. The Draytons, on the other hand, were slender and fair, and usually lived to a round old age; a fact of which they were wont to boast in contrast with the briefer span of the Hampdens.

"Their tempers burn them out," the Major used to say of the Hampdens.

Moreover, the Draytons were generally cool-headed, deliberate, and self-contained. Thus, the Draytons had mainly prospered throughout the years.

Even the winding creek which ran down through the strip of meadow was a fruitful cause of dissension and litigation between the families. "It is as ungovernable as a Hampden's temper, sir," once said Major Drayton, "On the mere pretext of a thunder-storm, it would burst forth from its banks, tear the fences to pieces and even change its course, cutting a new channel, now to one side and now to the other through the soft and loamy soil. A lawsuit arose over the matter, in which the costs alone amounted to far more than the value of the whole land involved; but no one doubted that old Major Drayton spoke the truth when he declared that his father would rather have lost his entire estate with all its rolling hills and extensive forests than the acre or two which was finally awarded to Judge Hampden.

As neither owner would join the other even in keeping up a partition fence, there were two fences run within three feet of each other along the entire boundary line between the two places. With these double fences, there could hardly be peace between the two families; for neither owner ever saw the two lines running side by side without at once being reminded of his neighbor's obstinacy and—of his own.

Thus, in my time the quarrel between the Drayton-Hall people and the Hampden-Hill folks was a factor in every neighborhood problem or proposition from a "church dressing" or a "sewing society meeting" to a political campaign. It had to be considered in every invitation and in every discussion.

It is not meant that there was no intercourse between the two families. Major Drayton and Judge Hampden regularly paid each other a visit every year—and oftener when there was serious illness in one house or the other—but even on such occasions their differences were liable to crop out. One of them held an opinion that when one gentleman was spending the night in another gentleman's house, it was the part of the host to indicate when bedtime had arrived; whilst the other maintained with equal firmness the doctrine that no gentleman could inform his guest that he was fatigued: that this duty devolved upon the guest himself. This difference of opinion worked comfortably enough on both sides until an occasion when Judge Hampden, who held the former view, was spending the night at Colonel Drayton's. When bedtime arrived, the rest of the household retired quietly, leaving the two gentlemen conversing, and when the servants appeared in the morning to open the blinds and light the fires, the two gentlemen were still found seated opposite each other conversing together quite as if it were the ordinary thing to sit up and talk all night long.

On another occasion, it is said that Major Drayton, hearing of his neighbor's serious illness, rode over to make inquiry about him, and owing to a slip of the tongue, asked in a voice of deepest sympathy, "Any hopes of the old gentleman dying!"

II

Yet, they had once been friends.

Before Wilmer Drayton and Oliver Hampden were old enough to understand that by all the laws of heredity and custom they should be enemies, they had learned to like each other. When they were only a few years old, the little creek winding between the two plantations afforded in its strip of meadow a delightful neutral

territory where the two boys could enjoy themselves together, safe from the interference of their grave seniors; wading, sailing mimic fleets upon its uncertain currents, fishing together, or bathing in the deepest pools it offered in its winding course.

It looked, indeed, for a time as if in the fellowship of these two lads the long-standing feud of the Hampdens and Draytons might be ended, at last. They went to school together at the academy, where their only contests were a generous rivalry. At college they were known as Damon and Pythias, and though a natural rivalry, which might in any event have existed between them, developed over the highest prize of the institution—the debater's medal—the generosity of youth saved them. It was even said that young Drayton, who for some time had apparently been certain of winning, had generously retired in order to defeat a third candidate and throw the prize to Oliver Hampden.

They came home and both went to the Bar, but with different results. Young Drayton was learned and unpractical. Oliver Hampden was clever, able, and successful, and soon had a thriving practice; while his neighbor's learning was hardly known outside the circle of the Bar.

Disappointed in his ambition, Drayton shortly retired from the Bar and lived the life of a country gentleman, while his former friend rapidly rose to be the head of the Bar.

The old friendship might have disappeared in any event, but a new cause arose which was certain to end it.

Lucy Fielding was, perhaps, the prettiest girl in all that region. Oliver Hampden had always been in love with her. However, Fortune, ever capricious, favored Wilmer Drayton, who entered the lists when it looked as if Miss Lucy were almost certain to marry her old lover. It appeared that Mr. Drayton's indifference had counted for more than the other's devotion. He carried off the prize with a dash.

If Oliver Hampden, however, was severely stricken by his disappointment, he masked it well; for he married not long afterward, and though some said it was from pique, there was no more happily married pair in all the county.

A year later a new Oliver came to keep up the name and tenets of the Hampdens. Oliver Hampden, now the head of the Bar, would not have envied any man on earth had not his wife died a few years later and left him alone with his boy in his big house.

Lucy Drayton was born two years after young Oliver Hampden.

The mammies of the two children, as the mammies of their parents had done before them, used to talk them over on the edge of the shaded meadow which divided the places, and thus young Oliver Hampden, a lusty boy of five, came to know little Lucy Drayton fully three years before his father ever laid eyes on her.

Mr. Hampden was riding around his fences one summer afternoon, and was making his way along the double division line with a cloud on his brow as the double rows recalled the wide breach with his neighbor and former friend, and many memories came trooping at the recollection. Passing through a small grove which had been allowed to grow up to shut off a part of his view of the Drayton place, as he came out into the meadow his eye fell on a scene which made him forget the present with all its wrongs. On the green turf before him where butter-cups speckled the ground with golden blossoms, was a little group of four persons busily engaged and wholly oblivious of the differences which divided the masters of the two estates. The two mammies were seated side by side on a bank, sewing and talking busily—their large aprons and caps making a splotch of white against the green willows beyond—and in front of them at a little distance a brown-haired boy of five and a yellow-ringed girl of three were at play on the turf, rolling over and over, shouting and laughing in their glee.

As the father rested his eyes on the group, the frown which had for a second lowered on his brow passed away and he pulled in his horse so as not to disturb them. He was about to turn back and leave them in their happiness when his black-eyed boy caught sight of him and ran toward him, shouting for a ride and calling over his shoulder for "Luthy" to "come on too." As there was no escape, Mr. Hampden went forward and, ignoring the confusion of the mammies at being caught together, took the boy up before him and gave him a ride up and down the meadow. Then nothing else would do for Master Oliver but he "must take Luthy up, too."

"Perhaps 'Luthy' may be afraid of the horse!" suggested Mr. Hampden with a smile.

But far from it. Led by the little boy who had run to fetch her, she came to Mr. Hampden as readily as his own son had done, and, though she gave him one of those quick searching glances with which childhood reads character, having made sure that he was friendly, she was no more afraid of his horse than the boy was.

Oliver tried to lift her, and as he tugged at her, the father sat and watched with a smile, then leant down and picked her up while the two mammies gasped with mingled astonishment and fear.

"I tell you, she's pretty heavy," said the little boy.

"Indeed, she is," said the father, gaily.

Mr. Hampden would have taken his son home with him, but the latter declined the invitation. He wished to "stay with Luthy." So, Mr. Hampden, having first set the nurses' minds at ease by complimenting the little girl in warm terms to her mammy, rode home alone with his face set in deep reflection.

The breach between the Hampdens and the Draytons was nearer being closed that evening than it had been in three generations, for as Oliver Hampden rode up the bridle path across his fields, he heard behind him the merry laughter of the two children in the quiet meadow below, and old memories of his childhood and college life softened his heart. He forgot the double-line fences and determined to go on the morrow to Drayton Hall and make up the quarrel. He would offer the first overture and a full declaration of regret, and this, he was quite sure, would make it up. Once he actually turned his horse around to go straight across the fields as he used to do in his boyhood, but there below him were the double-line fences stretching brown and clear. No horse could get over them, and around the road it was a good five miles, so he turned back again and rode home and the chance was lost.

On his arrival he found a summons in a suit which had been instituted that day by Wilmer Drayton for damages to his land by reason of his turning the water of the creek upon him.

Mr. Hampden did not forbid old Lydia to take his boy down there again, but he went to the meadow no more himself, and when he and Wilmer Drayton met next, which was not for some time, they barely spoke.

III

Young Oliver Hampden grew up clear eyed, strong, and good to look at, and became shy where girls were concerned, and most of all appeared to be shy with Lucy Drayton. He went to college and as he got his broad shoulders and manly stride he got over his shyness with most girls, but not with Lucy Drayton. With her, he appeared to have become yet more reserved. She had inherited her mother's eyes and beauty, with the fairness of a lily; a slim, willowy figure; a straight back and a small head set on her shoulders in a way that showed both blood and pride. Moreover, she had character enough, as her friends knew: those gray eyes that smiled could grow haughty with disdain or flash with indignation, and she had taught many an uppish young man to feel her keen irony.

"She gets only her intellect from the Dray-tons; her beauty and her sweetness come from her mother," said a lady of the neighborhood to Judge Hampden, thinking to please him.

"She gets both her brains and beauty from her mother and only her name from her father," snapped the Judge, who had often seen her at church, and never without recalling Lucy Fielding as he knew her.

That she and young Oliver Hampden fought goes without saying. But no one knew why she was cruelly bitter to a young man who once spoke slightly of Oliver, or why Oliver, who rarely saw her except at church, took up a quarrel of hers so furiously.

The outbreak of the war, or rather the conditions preceding that outbreak, finally fixed forever the gulf between the two families. Judge Hampden was an ardent follower of Calhoun and "stumped" the State in behalf of Secession, whereas Major Drayton, as the cloud that had been gathering so long rolled nearer, emerged from his seclusion and became one of the sternest opponents of a step which he declared was not merely revolution, but actual rebellion. So earnest was he, that believing that slavery was the ultimate bone of contention, he emancipated his slaves on a system which he thought would secure their welfare. Nothing could have more deeply stirred Judge Hampden's wrath. He declared that such a measure at such a crisis was a blow at every Southern man. He denounced Major Drayton as "worse than Garrison, Phillips, and Greeley all put together."

They at last met in debate at the Court House. Major Drayton exasperated the Judge by his coolness, until the latter lost his temper and the crowd laughed.

"I do not get as hot as you do," said the Major, blandly. He looked as cool as a cucumber, but his voice betrayed him.

"Oh, yes, you do," snorted the Judge. "A mule gets as hot as a horse, but he does not sweat."

This saved him.

There came near being a duel. Everyone expected it. Only the interposition of friends prevented their meeting on the field. Only this and one other thing.

Though no one in the neighborhood knew it until long afterward—and then only in a conjectural way by piecing together fragments of rumors that floated about—young Oliver Hampden really prevented the duel. He told his father that he loved Lucy Drayton. There was a fierce outbreak on the Judge's part.

"Marry that girl!—the daughter of Wilmer Drayton! I will disinherit you if you but so much as——"

"Stop!" The younger man faced him and held up his hand with an imperious gesture. "Stop! Do not say a word against her or I may never forget it."

The father paused with his sentence unfinished, for his son stood before him suddenly revealed in a strength for which the Judge had never given him credit, and he recognized in his level eyes, tense features, and the sudden set of the square jaw, the Hampden firmness at its best or worst.

"I have nothing to say against her," said the Judge, with a sudden rush of recollection of Lucy Fielding. "I have no doubt she is in one way all you think her; but she is Wilmer Drayton's daughter. You will never win her."

"I will win her," said the young man.

That night Judge Hampden thought deeply over the matter, and before daylight he had despatched a note to Major Drayton making an apology for the words he had used.

Both Judge Hampden and his son went into the army immediately on the outbreak of hostilities. Major Drayton, who to the last opposed Secession bitterly, did not volunteer until after the State had seceded; but then he, also, went in, and later was desperately wounded.

A few nights before they went off to the war, Judge Hampden and his son rode over together to Major Drayton's to offer the olive-branch of peace in shape of young Oliver and all that he possessed.

Judge Hampden did not go all the way, for he had sworn never to put foot again in Major Drayton's house so long as he lived, and, moreover, he felt that his son would be the better ambassador alone. Accordingly, he waited in the darkness at the front gate while his son presented himself and laid at Lucy Drayton's feet what the Judge truly believed was more than had ever been offered to any other woman. He, however, sent the most conciliatory messages to Major Drayton.

"Tell him," he said, "that I will take down my fence and he shall run the line to suit himself." He could not have gone further.

The time that passed appeared unending to the Judge waiting in the darkness; but in truth it was not long,

for the interview was brief. It was with Major Drayton and not with his daughter.

Major Drayton declined, both on his daughter's part and on his own, the honor which had been proposed.

At this moment the door opened and Lucy herself appeared. She was a vision of loveliness. Her face was white, but her eyes were steady. If she knew what had occurred, she gave no sign of it in words. She walked straight to her father's side and took his hand.

"Lucy," he said, "Mr. Hampden has done us the honor to ask your hand and I have declined it."

"Yes, papa." Her eyelids fluttered and her bosom heaved, but she did not move, and Lucy was too much a Drayton to unsay what her father had said, or to undo what he had done.

Oliver Hampden's eyes did not leave her face. For him the Major had disappeared, and he saw only the girl who stood before him with a face as white as the dress she wore.

"Lucy, I love you. Will you ever care for me? I am going—going away to-morrow, and I shall not see you any more; but I would like to know if there is any hope." The young man's voice was strangely calm.

The girl held out her hand to him.

"I will never marry anyone else."

"I will wait for you all my life," said the young man.

Bending low, he kissed her hand in the palm, and with a bow to her father, strode from the room.

The Judge, waiting at the gate in the darkness, heard the far-off, monotonous galloping of Oliver's horse on the hard plantation road. He rode forward to meet him.

"Well!"

It was only a word.

"They declined."

The father scarcely knew his son's voice, it was so wretched.

"What! Who declined? Did you see—"

"Both!"

Out in the darkness Judge Hampden broke forth into such a torrent of rage that his son was afraid for his life and had to devote all his attention to soothing him. He threatened to ride straight to Drayton's house and horsewhip him on the spot. This, however, the young man prevented, and the two rode home together in a silence which was unbroken until they had dismounted at their own gate and given their horses to the waiting servants. As they entered the house, Judge Hampden spoke.

"I hope you are satisfied," he said, sternly. "I make but one request of you—that from this time forth, you will never mention the name of Drayton to me again as long as you live."

"I suppose I should hate her," said the son, bitterly, "but I do not. I love her and I believe she cares for me."

His father turned in the door-way and faced him.

"Cares for you! Not so much as she cares for the smallest negro on that place. If you ever marry her, I will disinherit you."

"Disinherit me!" burst from the young man. "Do you think I care for this place? What has it ever brought to us but unhappiness? I have seen your life embittered by a feud with your nearest neighbor, and now it wrecks my happiness and robs me of what I would give all the rest of the world for."

Judge Hampden looked at him curiously. He started to say, "Before I would let her enter this house, I would burn it with my own hands"; but as he met his son's steadfast gaze there was that in it which made him pause. The Hampden look was in his eyes. The father knew that another word might sever them forever.

If ever a man tried to court death, young Oliver Hampden did. But Death, that struck many a happier man, passed him by, and he secured instead only a reputation for reckless courage and was promoted on the field.

His father rose to the command of a brigade, and Oliver himself became a captain.

At last the bullet Oliver had sought found him; but it spared his life and only incapacitated him for service.

There were no trained nurses during the war, and Lucy Drayton, like so many girls, when the war grew fiercer, went into the hospitals, and by devotion supplied their place.

Believing that life was ended for her, she had devoted herself wholly to the cause, and self-repression had given to her face the gentleness and consecration of a nun.

It was said that once as she bent over a wounded common soldier, he returned to consciousness, and after gazing up at her a moment, asked vaguely, "Who are you, Miss?"

"I am one of the sisters whom our Father has sent to nurse you and help you to get well. But you must not talk."

The wounded man closed his eyes and then opened them with a faint smile.

"All right; just one word. Will you please ask your pa if I may be his son-in-law?"

Into the hospital was brought one day a soldier so broken and bandaged that no one but Lucy Drayton might have recognized Oliver Hampden.

For a long time his life was despaired of; but he survived.

When consciousness returned to him, the first sound he heard was a voice which had often haunted him in his dreams, but which he had never expected to hear again.

"Who is that!" he asked, feebly.

"It is I, Oliver—it is Lucy."

The wounded man moved slightly and the girl bending over him caught the words, whispered brokenly to himself:

"I am dreaming."

But he was not dreaming.

Lucy Drayton's devotion probably brought him back from death and saved his life.

In the hell of that hospital one man at least found the balm for his wounds. When he knew how broken he was he offered Lucy her release. Her reply was in the words of the English girl to the wounded Napier, "If there is enough of you left to hold your soul, I will marry you."

As soon as he was sufficiently convalescent, they were married.

Lucy insisted that General Hampden should be informed, but the young man knew his father's bitterness, and refused. He relied on securing his consent later, and Lucy, fearing for her patient's life, and having secured her own father's consent, yielded.

It was a mistake.

Oliver Hampden misjudged the depth of his father's feeling, and General Hampden was mortally offended by his having married without informing him.

Oliver adored his father and he sent him a present in token of his desire for forgiveness; but the General had been struck deeply. The present was returned. He wrote: "I want obedience; not sacrifice."

Confident of his wife's ability to overcome any obstacle, the young man bided his time. His wounds, however, and his breach with his father affected his health so much that he went with his wife to the far South, where Major Drayton, now a colonel, had a remnant of what had once been a fine property. Here, for a time, amid the live-oaks and magnolias he appeared to improve. But his father's obdurate refusal to forgive his disobedience preyed on his health, and just after the war closed, he died a few months before his son was born.

In his last days he dwelt much on his father. He made excuses for him, over which his wife simply tightened her lips, while her gray eyes burned with deep resentment.

"He was brought up that way. He cannot help it. He never had anyone to gainsay him. Do not be hard on him. And if he ever sues for pardon, be merciful to him for my sake."

His end came too suddenly for his wife to notify his father in advance, even if she would have done so; for he had been fading gradually and at the last the flame had flared up a little.

Lucy Hampden was too upright a woman not to do what she believed her duty, however contrary to her feelings it might be. So, although it was a bitter thing to her, she wrote to inform General Hampden of his son's death.

It happened by one of the malign chances of fortune that this letter never reached its destination, General Hampden did not learn of Oliver's death until some weeks later, when he heard of it by accident. It was a terrible blow to him, for time was softening the asperity of his temper, and he had just made up his mind to make friends with his son. He attributed the failure to inform him of Oliver's illness and death to the malignity of his wife.

Thus it happened that when her son was born, Lucy Hampden made no announcement of his birth to the General, and he remained in ignorance of it.

IV

The war closed, and about the only thing that appeared to remain unchanged was the relation between General Hampden and Colonel Drayton. Everything else underwent a change, for war eats up a land.

General Hampden, soured and embittered by his domestic troubles, but stern in his resolve and vigorous in his intellect, was driven by his loneliness to adapt himself to the new conditions. He applied his unabated energies to building up a new fortune. His decision, his force, and his ability soon placed him at the head of one of the earliest new enterprises in the State—a broken-down railway—which he re-organized and brought to a full measure of success.

Colonel Drayton, on the other hand, broken in body and in fortunes, found it impossible to adapt himself to the new conditions. He possessed none of the practical qualities of General Hampden. With a mind richly stored with the wisdom of others, he had the temperament of a dreamer and poet and was unable to apply it to any practical end. As shy and reserved as his neighbor was bold and aggressive, he lived in his books and had never been what is known as a successful man. Even before the war he had not been able to hold his own. The exactions of hospitality and of what he deemed his obligations to others had consumed a considerable part of the handsome estate he had inherited, and his plantation was mortgaged. What had been thus begun, the war had completed.

When his plantation was sold, his old neighbor and enemy bought it, and the Colonel had the mortification of knowing that Drayton Hall was at last in the hands of a Hampden. What he did not know was that General Hampden, true to his vow, never put his foot on the plantation except to ride down the road and see that all his orders for its proper cultivation were carried out.

Colonel Drayton tried teaching school, but it appeared that everyone else was teaching at that time, and after attempting it for a year or two, he gave it up and confined himself to writing philosophical treatises for the press, which were as much out of date as the Latin and Greek names which he signed to them. As these contributions were usually returned, he finally devoted himself to writing agricultural essays for an agricultural paper, in which he met with more success than he had done when he was applying his principles himself.

"If farms were made of paper he 'd beat Cincinnatus," said the General.

Lucy Hampden, thrown on her own resources, in the town in the South in which her husband had died, had

for some time been supporting herself and her child by teaching. She had long urged her father to come to them, but he had always declined, maintaining that a man was himself only in the country, and in town was merely a unit. When, however, the plantation was sold and his daughter wrote for him, he went to her, and the first time that the little boy was put in his arms, both he and she knew that he would never go away again. That evening as they sat together in the fading light on the veranda of the little house which Lucy had taken, amid the clambering roses and jasmine, the old fellow said, "I used to think that I ought to have been killed in battle at the head of my men when I was shot, but perhaps, I may have been saved to bring up this young man."

His daughter's smile, as she leant over and kissed him, showed very clearly what she thought of it, and before a week was out, the Colonel felt that he was not only still of use, but was, perhaps, the most necessary, and, with one exception, the most important member of the family.

Nevertheless, there were hard times before them. The Colonel was too old-fashioned; too slow for the new movement of life, and just enough behind the times to be always expecting to succeed and always failing.

But where the father failed the daughter succeeded. She soon came to be known as one of the efficient women of the community, as her father, who was now spoken of as "the old Colonel," came to be recognized as one of the picturesque figures of that period. He was always thought of in connection with the boy. The two were hardly ever apart, and they were soon known throughout the town—the tall, thin old gentleman who looked out on the world with his mild blue eyes and kindly face, and the chubby, red-cheeked, black-eyed boy, whose tongue was always prattling, and who looked out with his bright eyes on all the curious things which, common-place to the world, are so wonderful to a boy.

The friendship between an old man and a little child is always touching; they grow nearer together day by day, and the old Colonel and little Oliver soon appeared to understand each other, and to be as dependent on each other as if they had both been of the same age. The child, somewhat reserved with others, was bold enough with his grandfather. They held long discussions together over things that interested the boy; went sight-seeing in company to where the water ran over an old mill-wheel, or where a hen and her chickens lived in a neighbor's yard, or a litter of puppies gamboled under an outhouse, or a bird had her nest and little ones in a jasmine in an old garden, and Colonel Drayton told the boy wonderful stories of the world which was as unknown to him as the present world was to the Colonel.

So matters went, until the Christmas when the boy was seven years old.

V

Meantime, General Hampden was facing a new foe. His health had suddenly given way, and he was in danger of becoming blind. His doctor had given him his orders—orders which possibly he might not have taken had not the spectre of a lonely old man in total darkness begun to haunt him. He had been "working too hard," the doctor told him.

"Working hard! Of course, I have been working hard!" snapped the General, fiercely, with his black eyes glowering. "What else have I to do but work? I shall always work hard."

The doctor knew something of the General's trouble. He had been a surgeon in the hospital where young Oliver Hampden had been when Lucy Drayton found him.

"You must stop," he said, quietly. "You will not last long unless you do."

"How long!" demanded the General, quite calmly.

"Oh! I cannot say that. Perhaps, a year—perhaps, less. You have burned your candle too fast." He glanced at the other's unmoved face. "You need change. You ought to go South this winter."

"I should only change my skies and not my thoughts," said the General, his memory swinging back to the past.

The doctor gazed at him curiously. "What is the use of putting out your eyes and working yourself to death when you have everything that money can give?"

"I have nothing! I work to forget that," snarled the General, fiercely.

The doctor remained silent.

The General thought over the doctor's advice and finally followed it, though not for the reason the physician supposed.

Something led him to select the place where his son had gone and where his body lay amid the magnolias. If he was going to die, he would carry out a plan which he had formed in the lonely hours when he lay awake between the strokes of the clock. He would go and see that his son's grave was cared for, and if he could, would bring him back home at last. Doubtless, "that woman's" consent could be bought. She had possibly married again. He hoped she had.

VI

Christmas is always the saddest of seasons to a lonely man, and General Hampden, when he landed in that old Southern town on the afternoon of Christmas Eve, would not have been lonelier in a desert. The signs of Christmas preparation and the sounds of Christmas cheer but made him lonelier. For years, flying from the

Furies, he had immersed himself in work and so, in part, had forgotten his troubles; but the removal of this prop let him fall flat to the earth.

As soon as the old fellow had gotten settled in his room at the hotel he paid a visit to his son's grave, piloted to the cemetery by a friendly and garrulous old negro hackman, who talked much about Christmas and "the holidays."

"Yes, suh, dat he had known Cap'n Ham'n. He used to drive him out long as he could drive out. He had been at his funeral. He knew Mrs. Ham'n, too. She sutney is a fine lady," he wound up in sincere eulogy.

The General gave a grunt.

He was nearer to his son than he had ever been since the day he last saw him in all the pride and beauty of a gallant young soldier.

The grave, at least, was not neglected. It was marked by a modest cross, on which was the Hampden coat-of-arms and the motto, "*Loyal*," and it was banked in fresh evergreens, and some flowers had been placed on it only that afternoon. It set the General to thinking.

When he returned to his hotel, he found the loneliness unbearable. His visit to his son's grave had opened the old wound and awakened all his memories. He knew now that he had ruined his life. The sooner the doctor's forecast came true, the better. He had no care to live longer. He would return to work and die in harness.

He sent his servant to the office and arranged for his car to be put on the first train next morning.

Then, to escape from his thoughts, he strolled out in the street where the shopping crowds streamed along, old and young, poor and well-to-do, their arms full of bundles, their faces eager, and their eyes alight.

General Hampden seemed to himself to be walking among ghosts.

As he stalked on, bitter and lonely, he was suddenly run into by a very little boy, in whose small arms was so big a bundle that he could scarcely see over it. The shock of the collision knocked the little fellow down, sitting flat on the pavement, still clutching his bundle. But his face after the first shadow of surprise lit up again.

"I beg your pardon, sir—that was my fault," he said, with so quaint an imitation of an old person that the General could not help smiling. With a cheery laugh, he tried to rise to his feet, but the bundle was too heavy, and he would not let it go.

The General bent over him and, with an apology, set him on his feet.

"I beg *your* pardon, sir. That was *my* fault. That is a pretty big bundle you have."

"Yes, sir; and I tell you, it is pretty heavy, too," the manikin said, proudly. "It 's a Christmas gift." He started on, and the General turned with him.

"A Christmas gift! It must be a fine one. Who gave it to you?" demanded the General, with a smile at the little fellow's confidence.

"It is a fine one! Did n't anybody give it to me. We 're giving it to somebody."

"Oh! You are? To whom?"

"I 'll tell you; but you must promise not to tell."

"I promise I will not tell a soul. I cross my heart."

He made a sign as he remembered he used to do in his boyhood.

The boy looked up at him doubtfully with a shade of disapproval.

"My grandfather says that you must not cross your heart—'t a gentleman's word is enough," he said, quaintly.

"Oh, he does? Well, I give my word."

"Well—" He glanced around to see that no one was listening, and sidling a little nearer, lowered his voice: "It 's a great-coat for grandfather!"

"A great-coat! That's famous!" exclaimed the General.

"Yes, is n't it? You see—he 's mighty old and he 's got a bad cough—he caught it in the army, and I have to take care of him. Don't you think that's right?"

"Of course, I do," said the General, envying one grandfather.

"That's what I tell him. So mamma and I have bought this for him."

"He must be a proud grandfather," said the General, with envy biting deeper at his heart.

"I have another grandfather; but I don't like *him*," continued the little fellow.

"I am sorry for that," said the General, sincerely. "Why is that?"

"He was mean to my father, and he is mean to my mother." His voice conveyed a sudden bitterness.

"Oh!"

"Mamma says I must like him; but I do not. I just can't. You would not like a man who was mean to your mother, would you!"

"I would not," declared the General, truthfully.

"And I am not going to like him," asserted the boy, with firmness.

The General suddenly pitied one grandfather.

They had come to a well-lighted corner, and as the boy lifted his face, the light fell on it. Something about the bright, sturdy countenance with its frank, dark eyes and brown hair suddenly sent the General back thirty years to a strip of meadow on which two children were playing: one a dark-eyed boy as sturdy as this one. It was like an arrow in his heart. "With a gasp he came back to the present. His thoughts pursued him even here.

"What is your name?" he asked as he was feeling in his pocket for a coin.

"Oliver Drayton Hampden, sir."

The words were perfectly clear.

The General's heart stopped beating and then gave a bound. The skies suddenly opened for him and then shut up again.

His exclamation brought the child to a stop and he glanced up at him in vague wonder. The General stooped and gazed at him searchingly, almost fiercely. The next second he had pounced upon him and lifted him in his arms while the bundle fell to the pavement.

"My boy! I am your grandfather," he cried, kissing him violently. "I am your grandfather Hampden."

The child was lost in amazement for a moment, and then, putting his hands against the General's face, he pushed him slowly away.

"Put me down, please," he said, with that gravity which in a child means so much.

General Hampden set him down on the pavement. The boy looked at him searchingly for a second, and then turned in silence and lifted his bundle. The General's face wore a puzzled look—he had solved many problems, but he had never had one more difficult than this. His heart yearned toward the child, and he knew that on his own wisdom at that moment might depend his future happiness. On his next words might hang for him life or death. The expression on the boy's face, and the very set of his little back as he sturdily tugged at his burden, recalled his father, and with it the General recognized the obstinacy which he knew lurked in the Hampden blood, which had once been his pride.

"Oliver," he said, gravely, leaning down over the boy and putting his hand on him gently, "there has been a great mistake. I am going home with you to your mother and tell her so. I want to see her and your grandfather, and I think I can explain everything."

The child turned and gazed at him seriously, and then his face relaxed. He recognized his deep sincerity.

"All right." He turned and walked down the street, bending under his burden. The General offered to carry it for him, but he declined.

"I can carry it," was the only answer he made except once when, as the General rather insisted, he said firmly, "I want to carry it myself," and tottered on.

A silence fell on them for a moment. A young man passing them spoke to the child cheerily.

"Hullo, Oliver! A Christmas present?—That 's a great boy," he said, in sheer friendliness to the General, and passed on. The boy was evidently well known.

Oliver nodded; then feeling that some civility was due on his part to his companion, he said briefly, "That 's a friend of mine."

"Evidently."

The General, even in his perplexity, smiled at the quaint way the child imitated the manners of older men.

Just then they came to a little gate and the boy's manner changed.

"If you will wait, I will run around and put my bundle down. I am afraid my grandfather might see it." He lowered his voice for the first time since the General had introduced himself. Then he disappeared around the house.

Oliver, having slipped in at the back door and carefully reconnoitred the premises, tripped up stairs with his bundle to his mother's room. He was so excited over his present that he failed to observe her confusion at his sudden entrance, or her hasty hiding away of something on which she was working. Colonel Drayton was not the only member of that household that Christmas who was to receive a great-coat.

When Oliver had untied his bundle, nothing would serve but he must put on the coat to show his mother how his grandfather would look in it. As even with the sleeves rolled up and with his arms held out to keep it from falling off him, the tails dragged for some distance on the floor and only the top of his head was visible above the collar, the resemblance was possibly not wholly exact. But it appeared to satisfy the boy. He was showing how his grandfather walked, when he suddenly recalled his new acquaintance.

"I met my other grandfather, on the street, mamma, and he came home with me." He spoke quite naturally.

"Met your other grandfather!" Mrs. Hampden looked mystified.

"He says he is my grandfather, and he looks like papa. I reckon he 's my other grandfather. He ran against me in the street and knocked me down, and then came home with me."

"Came home with you!" repeated Mrs. Hampden, still in a maze, and with a vague trouble dawning in her face.

"Yes 'm."

Oliver went over the meeting again.

His mother's face meantime showed the tumult of emotion that was sweeping over her. Why had General Hampden come? What had he come for? To try and take her boy from her?

At the thought her face and form took on something of the lioness that guards her whelp. Then as the little boy repeated what his grandfather had said of his reason for coming home with him, her face softened again. She heard a voice saying, "If he ever sues for pardon, be merciful to him for my sake." She remembered what day it was: the Eve of the day of Peace and Good-will toward all men. He must have come for Peace, and Peace it should be. She would not bring up her boy under the shadow of that feud which had blighted both sides of his race so long.

"Oliver," she said, "you must go down and let him in. Say I will come down."

"I will not like him," said the child, his eyes on her face.

"Oh, yes, you must; he is your grandfather."

"You do not love him, and I will not." The sturdy little figure and the serious face with the chin already firm for such a child, the dark, grave eyes and the determined speech, were so like his father that the widow gave half a cry.

"You must, my son, and I will try. Your father would wish it."

The little boy pondered for a second.

"Very well, mamma; but he must be good to you."

As the little fellow left the room, the widow threw herself on her knees.

VII

As General Hampden stood and waited in the dusk, he felt that his whole life and future depended on the issue of the next few moments. He determined to take matters in his own hand. Every moment might tell against him and might decide his fate. So, without waiting longer, he rang the bell. A minute later he heard steps within, and the door was opened by one who he knew must be Colonel Drayton, though had he met him elsewhere he should not have recognized the white hair and the thin, bent form as that of his old friend and enemy. Colonel Drayton had evidently not seen his grandson yet, for he spoke as to a stranger.

"Will you not walk in, sir!" he said cordially. "I was expecting my little grandson who went out a short while ago." He peered up the street. "Did you wish to see my daughter? You will find us in a little confusion—Christinas time is always a busy season with us on account of our young man: my grandson." He lingered with pride over the words.

The General stepped into the light.

"Wilmer Drayton! Don't you know me? I am Oliver Hampden, and I have come to apologize to you for all I have done which has offended you, and to ask you to be friends with me." He held out his hand.

The old Colonel stepped back, and under the shock of surprise paused for a moment.

"Oliver Hampden!" The next moment he stepped forward and took his hand.

"Come in, Oliver," he said, gently, and putting his other arm around the General's shoulder, he handed him into the little cosey, fire-lighted room as though nothing had happened since he had done the same the last time fifty years before.

At this moment the door opened and the little boy entered with mingled mysteriousness and importance. Seeing the two gentlemen standing together, he paused with a mystified look in his wide-open eyes, trying to comprehend the situation.

"Oliver, come here," said the Colonel, quietly. "This is your other grandfather."

The boy came forward, and, wheeling, stood close beside the Colonel, facing General Hampden, like a soldier dressing by his file-closer.

"*You* are my grandfather," he said, glancing up at the Colonel.

The Colonel's eyes glowed with a soft light.

"Yes, my boy; and so is he. We are friends again, and you must love him—just as you do me."

"I will not love him as much," was the sturdy answer.

It was the General who spoke next.

"That is right, my boy. All I ask is that you will love me some." He was pleading with this young commissioner.

"I will, if you are good to my mother." His eyes were fastened on him without a tremor, and the General's deep-set eyes began to glow with hope.

"That 's a bargain," he said holding out his hand. The boy took it gravely.

Just then the door opened and Lucy Hampden entered. Her face was calm and her form was straight. Her eyes, deep and burning, showed that she was prepared either for peace or war. It was well for the General that he had chosen peace. Better otherwise had he charged once more the deadliest battle line he had ever faced. For a moment the General saw only Lucy Fielding.

With a woman's instinct the young widow comprehended at the first glance what had taken place, and although her face was white, her eyes softened as she advanced. The General had turned and faced her. He could not utter a word, but the boy sprang towards her and, wheeling, stood by her side.

Taking his hand, she led him forward.

"Oliver," she said, gently, "this is your father's father." Then to the General, in a dead silence—"Father, this is your son's son."

The General clasped them both in his arms.

"Forgive me. Forgive me. I have prayed for *his* forgiveness, for I can never forgive myself."

"He forgave you," said the widow, simply.

VIII

No young king was ever put to bed with more ceremony or more devotion than was that little boy that night. Two old gentlemen were his grooms of the bedchamber and saw him to bed together.

The talk was all of Christmas, and the General envied the ease with which the other grandfather carried on

the conversation. But when the boy, having kissed his grandfather, said of his own accord, "Now, I must kiss my *other* grandfather," he envied no man on earth.

The next morning when Oliver Hampden, before the first peep of light, waked in his little bed, which stood at the foot of his grandfather's bed in the tiny room which they occupied together, and standing up, peeped over the footboard to catch his grandfather's "Christmas gift," he was surprised to find that the bed was empty and undisturbed. Then having tiptoed in and caught his mother, he stole down the stairs and softly opened the sitting-room door where he heard the murmur of voices. The fire was burning dim, and on either side sat the two old gentlemen in their easy chairs, talking amicably and earnestly as they had been talking when he kissed them "good-night." Neither one had made the suggestion that it was bedtime; but when at the first break of day the rosy boy in his night-clothes burst in upon them with his shout of "Christmas gift," and his ringing laughter, they both knew that the long feud was at last ended, and peace was established forever.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK THE CHRISTMAS PEACE ***

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