

# Unawares

By Hildegarde Hawthorne

“It’s going to be a real, old-fashioned Christmas Eve, Selina,” said her husband, looking out into the gray afternoon, fluttering with snowflakes. “It makes me think of the days when I used to drag you about in the little red sled with black horses painted on it—it’s up in the garret now, Selina, isn’t it? Well, well, that was a long while ago.”

“A long while ago,” answered the little white-haired lady, knitting by the wood fire. “A long while ago, Silas. The years between have been happy—and have been sad, too! But I’d willingly live them all over again, if it weren’t for just one thing.” And she gave a sigh, quickly followed by a smile as her husband turned towards her.

“Yes, dear?” he said, half inquiringly, half wistfully. “If we’d had the little child, Silas. A child to cherish, to guide, to—Oh, Silas, a little one to play about us, to love us, to grow up and have a little one of its own, that should gleam about our old age as the sunlight flickers and glows about the old oaks at our door. What a Christmas Eve we should have, getting the pretty toys and candy, lighting the tree, seeing the big blue eyes dance with happiness, hearing the sweet voice crying joyfully, ‘Grandpapa, grandmamma.’” She stopped, with a sudden movement of her hands to her throat. “Silas, *dearie*, don’t mind me—” she turned away to hide the tears in her eyes.

But Silas understood, and sitting beside her drew her close, their white hairs mingling together, while the firelight shone in kindly wise on their sweet old faces, wrinkled and worn, perhaps, but expressing in every line their gentle natures.

“We have had much, dear,” he whispered. “What a life, what a world would this have been for me without you—without you? Why, it is inconceivable!”

She laughed a tearful laugh and patted his hand.

“I couldn’t realize life without you any more than I could realize not being born at all,” she murmured.

For a while they sat silent, looking at the fire that danced and played on the hearth, even as the child they desired might have danced and played about the chamber.

“I knew I wanted too much for Earth,” went on Selina, presently. “but I have longed, dear, yes, and wept. You never knew, I would not tell even you. I know it is wrong, when the Lord has given me such happiness, such peace. But I—oh, just to clasp it close, just once to make a Christmas for it. First it was our own little child, now it is our own little grandchild I want—I wanted.”

“I knew, beloved wife. I knew. I too have not spoken, not told even you I too have longed to see you as a mother—to bless our child.”

They drew closer, with a sigh at once sad and happy. Selina looked up at last.

“I am content, dear,” she said, “we have had much—more than many, than most. We are old—perhaps this is our last Christmas Eve. Give me a kiss, dear husband. The Lord knows best, and I am content.”

They kissed each other, solemnly, smilingly. “Isn’t some one knocking?” replied Silas, going towards the door. Just as he reached it a decided knock made him throw it open, crying, “Come in, neighbor,” in his hearty old voice, full of friendly welcome.

On the threshold, blown by the wind, powdered by the snow, stood a little girl, smiling out of big blue eyes, her cheeks rosy as the dawn, her hair yellow as the ripened wheat.

“Why, come in, darling,” said the old man, drawing her inside and closing the door. “Whose little girl you are, out in such a stormy afternoon?”

The child shook off the snow laughingly, clasping one of his fingers in her little hand.

“Where’s your mother?” asked Silas, and then— “Look here, Selina, here’s a little girl come to see us.”

The laughing child ran eagerly across the room, throwing herself into Selina’s lap and putting up her rosy face for a kiss.

“Kiss me, G’anamma,” she cried, “kiss little Désirée.”

Selina turned pale and clasped the little one close—close.

“Little Désirée,” she whispered. “Little Désirée. But *I’m* not your grandmamma, dearie. Who are you? Where do you belong?”

The baby drew back, shaking her head and smiling.

“Is it *nearly* Ch’istmas?” she asked, eagerly. “Shall I soon have my sled and my dolly and my candies—dear g’anapapa, is it *nearly* Ch’istmas?”

Silas and Selina exchanged a look.

“She’s not one of the neighbor’s children, Silas,” said the old lady, presently, her eyes following the child, that had now seated itself on the hearthrug, and was holding out its little hands to the blaze. “I never saw her before—it is very strange.”

“Someone visiting over Christmas,” replied Silas. “I will go around among the neighbors presently and inquire. But in the meantime let us make the little creature at home—she shall have a Christmas here, too, Selina. I will get the little sled out of the garret—” Silas’s eyes lighted up, and he smiled eagerly at his wife—“and perhaps they will let us keep her a while— she came here so—” he stopped, and bending over the little head, kissed the clustering hair. “So like an angel,” he ended.

“Dear g’anapapa,” murmured the child, putting up a hand to stroke his cheek.

“Take off Désirée’s coat,” she added, struggling up. Selina began slipping off her things. Such a pretty fur-trimmed coat, so white and warm and soft.

“You look like a transfigured snowflake yourself, pet,” she said, as the child, freed from her outer garments, danced in the flickering shadows thrown by the leaping flames. Her dress was as white and soft as her coat, and she fluttered back and forth like a bird, too light and free to stay on the dull earth while such a medium of pure air existed to float or fly in.

“Ch’istmas is coming, Ch’istmas is coming,” she chanted, and suddenly clambered to Selina’s lap. “Tell me a story,” she implored, snuggling down and laying her sweet face against Selina’s gentle breast. “Tell me a story, g’anamma.”

Silas stood looking at the group a moment, and then, with a smile like the singing of birds in spring, sat down beside them.

“A story, precious? G’anmother hasn’t told many stories to little girls, but perhaps— perhaps—” she paused, looking dreamily into the fire.

The child lay warm against her, its fair curls spread over her arm, its soft breathing perceptible to her ear, its clasping hands on her wrists. So holding it, her mind drifted back to the golden days of her young womanhood, her young wifhood. The dreams, the fancies, the hope—never, alas, fulfilled—of that time transmuted themselves into words, and fell quietly, gently, on the listening ears of the two. As Selina sat there, talking out the long-hidden desire of her heart, her husband occasionally whispered a word of love. She seemed not to hear him. Her words came

with a sort of rhythm; it was as though they moved to unheard music. All the pent-up mother love of her heart expressed itself nobly, exquisitely, self forgetting, earth forgetting, inspired by the heavenly regions of her soul. Finally she stopped, still looking at the fire, now fallen into a smoldering glow, still clasping the child to her heart. Then she bent and kissed her.

“Precious darling,” she murmured, “mother’s own dearest.”

The child threw its little arms about her neck, in a quick, enchanting embrace. Then slipping to the floor— “See, mamma, papa has a sled for me,” she cried, clapping her hands. “A red sled for little Désirée.”

Selina laughed gayly, and presently Silas joined in, and soon the three of them were shouting together while the rafters of the unaccustomed room fairly quivered in sympathy.

“How young you look, dear Silas,” observed his wife, smiling at him rather roguishly. “And why don’t you bring little Désirée the pretty dolly we have for her, and the Christmas candies?”

“If I look young, you look beautiful, Selina,” replied Silas, with his gentle smile—“Doesn’t mother look beautiful?” he asked the baby, laughingly, catching her up in his arms. “Come, kiss papa for the red sled and the Christmas candies, that are hidden there in the cupboard all ready for our little Désirée.”

And Désirée kissed him and kissed Selina, and crowed over the candy. Then Selina brought out a doll with rosy cheeks and golden hair, even like Désirée’s own. And they threw fresh wood on the fire, and put apples to roast. And Désirée played on the hearthrug, while the couple sat hand in hand smiling and watching her.

“Isn’t she pretty?” said Selina. “See, she seems to throw a light of her own as she moves. Silas dear, how absurd we’ve been, thinking we were old and worn out. *You* old, beloved!” She laid her hand over his, gazing up at him. “I never saw you look so well before.”

“Old, sweetheart? The child would be enough to keep us young, even without our immortal love to safeguard us.”

Again the child, tired of play, climbed into Selina’s lap. The light faded outdoors, the snow still fell, whitening all the land. Inside the room the long shadows drew together, but the fire still leaped about the huge logs, cheery as a laugh.

“You must go to bed soon, baby,” said Selina. “Soon mother must tuck you in, to wake up and play with your red sled in the snow on Christmas Day.”

“Let her stay with us a little longer, sweetheart,” pleaded Silas. “Christmas Eve comes so seldom, and we are so happy, we three.”

“So happy,” murmured his wife, leaning towards him, gathering the sleeping child close. “So happy.”

“Hold the horse a moment, Sally,” said her lover, “and I’ll just run in with the basket and wish Silas and Selina a Merry Christmas—dear old people.” He vanished within the house, but the next moment came back again.

“Sally,” he called, gravely, “come here—something has happened.”

Before the cold hearth the old couple were sitting, hand in hand, their white heads close together, a tender smile on their faces.

For a little while Sally regarded them, the tears filling her eyes, then turning to her lover, she whispered, “It must have been a happy death. See, dear, how beautiful they look.”