

The Free Press' Christmas Story

THE SOUL OF A TREE

By HODOES MATHIES

FROM his office window on the twenty-second floor, Blake Mullins, attorney and counsellor, gazed down at the slushy pavements far below. The filing clerk, the stenographer, and the office boy had gone home, but the young lawyer lingered at the close of the dull December day. Presently turning back from the window, he began to look over a tray full of papers on his desk.

closure attorneys, including Blake Mullins, had quickly built up a lucrative practice that well-established and self-respecting law firms would not handle, furnishing defense counsel for as unprincipled a set of crooks and thugs as ever sat in the shadows of the prison and the gallows.

of the everyday romances of American life. In the gathering dusk he turned his swivel chair and again gazed out of the window at the dirty walls. A grim, cynical smile touched his lips. He was thinking of how easy it had been. He knew that back at home in the mountains he was referred to proudly as "that smart boy of Dave Mullins"—just grown up right here in Lost Cove, and now he's a big lawyer out yander."

In the dark woods far up the slopes of Big Bald, the light early-winter snow had disappeared except under the shady ledges and in the deep gorges where the sun penetrated only for the short mid-day hours.

School at the Lost Cove Academy, according to local custom, had closed at Thanksgiving, to open again in late January, allowing the mountain families to employ the intervening weeks in gathering forest evergreens for the holiday market. Hundreds of families depended on "galaxkin," as they called it, for their winter "cash money."

It was but a mile and a half from Dave Mullins' log house on Tumbling Fork to the galax beds on the steep ridge near the top of Big Bald. Save when the snow lay a half foot deep on the higher slopes, the whole family, including Mother and the two comely girls, Suddie and Sophie, would hurry through the early breakfast and with baskets, balls of twine and the old sled drawn by the gray mare Jenny, would set out at sundown on the winding trail to the big woods.

It was chilly work in mid-December. In the hush fern beds under the dripping cliffs, the snow would lie for days unbroken. Here the galax leaves grew six inches wide and the green-and-russet coloring was richest. The "galaxers" had to flick the ice crystals from the crisp leaves on top of the snow and dig deep into the frosty earth below to avoid breaking the long stems.

Suddie Mullins, nineteen and as pretty as a picture, was the champion "galaxer" of the family. Her nimble fingers had the trick of pulling the largest and slightest leaves with scarcely ever a broken stem. Her judgment in sorting and grading the day's "pull" was quick and accurate. In almost no time the shipping crates would be filled with tidy bundles, each with a hundred "number ones," "two's," or "three's," ready for the truck that daily plied between the picking grounds and the shipping point at the county seat.

"Every time hit gets nigh Christmas I keep thinkin' of Blake," declared Suddie with a sigh, as she finished her grading one evening.

"So do I Suddie," replied the mother. "I shore wish't we'd get another letter from him. We hain't heard sinst the middle of August. I reckon he's gittin' wended plumb off from Lost Cove."

"Looks sort of that wa'," agreed Dave. "Sometimes I'm afeared Blake has got so educated an' stilted that he's forgittin' his people an' the place whar he was borned and raised."

"I hope he ain't lettin' his feet go astray in the ways of wickedness an' evilment," said the mother, wistfully. "His last letter, back in the summer, said he was takin' a lot of cases for them racketeers. I don't rightly know jist what they air, but I've got a feelin' they ain't no high-class sort of folks to run with."

"But, Mother," argued Suddie, "we know Blake ain't the kind to get mixed up in no meanness. But I sure wish we could hear from him again. Here it is nigh Christmas an' not a scratch of a pen from him."

"Well, Suddie, I reckon ye ort to have writ him. Maybe they's time to send him a letter yet."

"But, Maw, don't ye remember his letter got burnt up in the stove, an' we hain't got his address?"

"That's too bad," answered the mother gloomily. "Folks ortn't to git lost from each other thataway."

"Looks like around Christmas time he would git to thinkin' about these ol' mountains an' get down an' write some-thing, anyhow," suggested Dave.

Suddie finished her grading and six big wicker hamper, stood ready for the truck in the morning. "Maw," she said, as she surveyed the completed task, "ain't it funny how city folks that never saw a mountain in their lives will pay good money for little bunches of stuff like that?"

"City folks has queer notions," observed one of the younger boys sagely. "I've noticed 'em come in here an' spend a whole week trampin' an' 'wastlin' about, lookin' at the sun goin' down an' savin' over hit like hit was the first time his ever did go down!"

"Anyhow," Suddie went on, "I often set and wonder jist where these baskets go to, an' what folks say an' think when they buy 'em."

Before she went to bed Suddie cut a sheet of letter paper into narrow strips, on each of which, by the light of the smoky oil lamp, she wrote her name and address. She tucked the slips away, each in the middle of a bunch of galax leaves. It was an unusual expression of sentiment on the part of the mountain girl, used as she had been in the stolidness of the hill folk, and she was half ashamed of the act of weakness and loneliness. She would not have had the rest of the family see her do it for anything in the world.

them had been a typewritten balance sheet with an itemized list of fees and commissions since the first of the month. "Not bad," he chuckled. "Three hundred dollar less than the corresponding month last year, and this only the twentieth. Not half bad, I'll say."

Suddenly the door of the office was pushed open and a frumpy woman looked timidly within. "Another bum's wife wanting me to get her husband out of jail," was Mullins' inward comment. For once, however, he was wrong.

"Please, Meester," the woman wheedled in a queer foreign accent, "buy some de Christmas greens. Only one dolla de basket. Verce beauty my art!"

Mullins glanced at the old-fashioned wicker basket in which the assorted greenery was packed. It had the familiar marks of the southern mountaineer's primitive handicraft. "I'll take 'this basket," he said, handing the woman a dollar.

He set the basket on a stand near the window; where the last rays of the day-light fell upon the glistening galax leaves. It must have been that bit of justice that suddenly brought him both upright with eager curiosity. "Why," he exclaimed aloud, "that never grew in any nursery! That came from the hills of Tennessee!"

Sitting there in the falling darkness, Blake Mullins, sophisticated attorney for the underworld, felt like an unwelcome visitor. There would be snow in the Unakas by now, he reflected.

It would not be like this gray snow that lay on the roofs and the streets of the city. Back home in the mountains the snow would be dazzling-white under the dark firs until the last flake should be alchemized into an immaculate crystal droplet by the soft magic of the southern sun. Pure as snow—the words meant something down there.

Stooping himself, he rose and put on his overcoat to go to the bachelor apartment that he called home. He had stooped to pick up a bundle of galax leaves that had fallen to the floor, when his eye caught the end of a slip of paper. "Hello—what's this?" he unrolled the slip and held it under the desk lamp.

"Packed by Suddie Mullins, Lost Cove, Tennessee."

His face went ashy white, and Blake Mullins sat down limply in his chair. "I might have known! No galax ever grew like that anywhere except on the Big Bald."

He fingered the slip of paper tenderly. "Dear little sister! She sent her big brother a Christmas greeting. I'll wire this very minute!"

He reached for the telephone, hesitated, and pushed it away; then he picked up a railway time-table instead. "I'm going to spend Christmas, a clean white Christmas down in the hills with the folks. And if I ever come back to this town, I'm going to stay out of the muck of it and help to make it a clean place—clean enough for Lost Cove folks to live in—so help me God!"

ENCOUNTERS SLEEPWALKER

A motorist driving along the Liverpool road, Warrington, in the early morning, saw a man, clad only in a shirt, walking in the middle of the road. He stopped his motor car and found that the man was asleep. The sleepwalker could not be awakened, and as he going in the direction of the canal, the motorist turned him around in the opposite direction and then hurried to find a policeman. The motorist met Police Constable Jaffer, and drove him back to the scene. They found that the man had walked some distance, and had finally collapsed in the road. He was taken to hospital, suffering from exposure. When he recovered he said that, following a cycling accident a week before, he had, several times found himself wandering on the road after going to bed.

IMPOSSIBLE

"I can't possibly stay in this company after the way the manager has treated me," solemnly declared the tragedian.

"What's he done now?" demanded the squibrette.

"Taken my name off the salary list," retorted the mummer.

HOLIDAY SPIRIT DESSERT

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