CHRISTMAS

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ZONA GALE

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About Author:



Zona Gale (1874 –1938) was an American author, and playwright. Gale was born in Portage, Wisconsin, which she often used as a setting in her writing, and attended Wayland Academy in Beaver Dam, Wisconsin. Later she entered the University of

Wisconsin-Madison, from which she received a Bachelor of Literature degree in 1895, and four years later a Master's degree. After graduation, Gale wrote for newspapers in Milwaukee and New York City. However, before long she gave up journalism to focus on fiction writing.

She then published her first novel, Romance Island (1906), and began the very popular series of "Friendship Village" stories. In 1912, Gale moved back to Portage, which she would call home for the rest of her life, although alternating with trips to New York. In 1920, she published the novel Miss Lulu Bett, which depicts life in the Midwestern United States. She adapted it as a play, which was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1921. In the same year, Gale took an active role in the creation of the Wisconsin Equal Rights Law, which prohibits discrimination against women.

Chapter 1

It was in October that Mary Chavah burned over the grass of her lawn, and the flame ran free across the place where in Spring her wild flower bed was made. Two weeks later she had there a great patch of purple violets. And all Old Trail Town, which takes account of its neighbours' flowers, of the migratory birds, of eclipses, and the like, came to see the wonder.

"Mary Chavah!" said most of the village, "you're the luckiest woman alive. If a miracle was bound to happen, it'd get itself happened to you."

"I don't believe in miracles, though," Mary wrote to Jenny Wing. "These come just natural—only we don't know how."

"That *is* miracles," Jenny wrote back. "They do come natural—we don't know how."

"At this rate," said Ellen Bourne, one of Mary's neighbours, "you'll be having roses bloom in your yard about Christmas time. For a Christmas present."

"I don't believe in Christmas," Mary said. "I thought you knew that. But I'll take the roses, though, if they come in the Winter," she added, with her queer flash of smile.

When it was dusk, or early in the morning, Mary Chavah, with her long shawl over her head, stooped beside the violets and loosened the earth about them with her whole hand, and as if she reverenced violets more than finger tips. And she thought:—

"Ain't it just as if Spring was right over back of the air all the time—and it could come if we knew how to call it? But we don't know."

But whatever she thought about it, Mary kept in her heart. For it was as if not only Spring, but new life, or some other holy thing were nearer than one thought and had spoken to her, there on the edge of Winter.

And Old Trail Town asked itself:—

"Ain't Mary Chavah the funniest? Look how nice she is about everything—and yet you know she won't never keep Christmas at all. No, sir. She ain't kept a single Christmas in years. I donno why… ."

Chapter 2

Moving about on his little lawn in the dark, Ebenezer Rule was aware of two deeper shadows before him. They were between him and the leafless lilacs and mulberries that lined the street wall. A moment before he had been looking at that darkness and remembering how, once, as a little boy, he had slept there under the wall and had dreamed that he had a kingdom.

"Who is't?" he asked sharply.

"Hello, Ebenezer," said Simeon Buck, "it's only me and Abel. We're all."

Ebenezer Rule came toward them. It was so dark that they could barely distinguish each other. Their voices had to do it all.

"What you doing out here?" one of the deeper shadows demanded.

"Oh, nothing," said Ebenezer, irritably, "not a thing."

He did not ask them to go in the house, and the three stood there awkwardly, handling the time like a blunt instrument. Then Simeon Buck, proprietor of the

Simeon Buck North American Dry Goods Exchange, plunged into what they had come to say.

"Ebenezer," he said, with those variations of intonation which mean an effort to be delicate, "is—is there any likelihood that the factory will open up this Fall?"

"No, there ain't," Ebenezer said, like something shutting.

"Nor—nor this Winter?" Simeon pursued.

"No, sir," said Ebenezer, like something opening again to shut with a bang.

"Well, if you're sure—" said Simeon.

Ebenezer cut him short. "I'm dead sure," he said. "I've turned over my orders to my brother's house in the City. He can handle 'em all and not have to pay his men a cent more wages." And this was as if something had been locked.

"Well," said Simeon, "then, Abel, I move we go ahead."

Abel Ames, proprietor of the Granger County Merchandise Emporium ("The A. T. Stewart's of the Middle West," he advertised it), sighed heavily—a vast, triple sigh, that seemed to sigh both in and out, as a schoolboy whistles.

"Well," he said, "I hate to do it. But I'll be billblowed if I want to think of paying for a third or so

of this town's Christmas presents and carrying 'em right through the Winter. I done that last year, and Fourth of July I had all I could do to keep from wishing most of the crowd Merry Christmas, 'count of their still owing me. I'm a merchant and a citizen, but I ain't no patent adjustable Christmas tree."

"Me neither," Simeon said. "Last year it was *me* give a silk cloak and a Five Dollar umbrella and a fur bore and a bushel of knick-knicks to the folks in this town. My name wa'n't on the cards, but it's me that's paid for 'em—*up* to now. I'm sick of it. The storekeepers of this town may make a good thing out of Christmas, but they'd ought to get some of the credit instead of giving it all, by Josh."

"What you going to do?" inquired Ebenezer, dryly.

"Well, of course last year was an exceptional year," said Abel, "owing—"

He hesitated to say "owing to the failure of the Ebenezer Rule Factory Company," and so stammered with the utmost delicacy, and skipped a measure.

"And we thought," Simeon finished, "that if the factory wasn't going to open up this Winter, we'd work things so's to have little or no Christmas in town this year—being so much of the present giving falls on us to carry on our books."

"It ain't only the factory wages, of course," Abel interposed, "it's the folks's savings being et up in—"

"—the failure," he would have added, but skipped a mere beat instead.

"—and we want to try to give 'em a chance to pay us up for last Christmas before they come on to themselves with another celebration," he added reasonably.

Ebenezer Rule laughed—a descending scale of laughter that seemed to have no organs wherewith to function in the open, and so never got beyond the gutturals.

"How you going to fix it?" he inquired again.

"Why," said Simeon, "everybody in town's talking that they ain't going to give anybody anything for Christmas. Some means it and some don't. Some'll do it and some'll back out. But the churches has decided to omit Christmas exercises altogether this year. Some thought to have speaking pieces, but everybody concluded if they had exercises without oranges and candy the children'd go home disappointed, so they've left the whole thing slide—"

"It don't seem just right for 'em not to celebrate the birth of our Lord just because they can't afford the candy," Abel Ames observed mildly, but Simeon hurried on:—

"—slide, and my idea and Abel's is to get the town meeting to vote a petition to the same effect asking the town not to try to do anything with their Christmas this

year. We heard the factory wasn't going to open, and we thought if we could tell 'em that for sure, it would settle it—and save him and me and all the rest of 'em. Would—would you be willing for us to tell the town meeting that? It's to-night—we're on the way there."

"Sure," said Ebenezer Rule, "tell 'em. And you might point out to 'em," he added, with his spasm of gutturals, "that failures is often salutary measures. Public benefactions. Fixes folks so's they can't spend their money fool."

He walked with them across the lawn, going between them and guiding them among the empty aster beds.

"They think I et up their savings in the failure," he went on, "when all I done is to bring 'em face to face with the fact that for years they've been overspending themselves. It takes Christmas to show that up. This whole Christmas business is about wore out, anyhow. Ain't it?"

"That's what," Simeon said, "it's a spendin' sham, from edge to edge."

Abel Ames was silent. The three skirted the flower beds and came out on the level sweep of turf before the house that was no house in the darkness, save that they remembered how it looked: a square, smoked thing, with a beard of dead creepers and white shades lidded over its never-lighted windows—a fit home for this man least-liked of the three hundred neighbours who

made Old Trail Town. He touched the elbows of the other two men as they walked in the dark, but he rarely touched any human being. And now Abel Ames suddenly put his hand down on that of Ebenezer, where it lay in the crook of Abel's elbow.

"What you got there?" he asked.

"Nothing much," Ebenezer answered, irritably again. "It's an old glass. I was looking over some rubbish, and I found it—over back. It's a field glass."

"What you got a field glass out in the dark for?" Abel demanded.

"I used to fool with it some when I was a little shaver," Ebenezer said. He put the glass in Abel's hand. "On the sky," he added.

Abel lifted the glass and turned it on the heavens. There, above the little side lawn, the firmament had unclothed itself of branches and lay in a glorious nakedness to three horizons.

"Thunder," Abel said, "look at 'em look."

Sweeping the field with the lens, Abel spoke meanwhile.

"Seems as if I'd kind of miss all the fuss in the store around Christmas," he said,—"the extra rush and the trimming up and all."

"Abel'll miss lavishin' his store with cut paper, I guess," said Simeon; "he dotes on tassels."

"Last year," Abel went on, not lowering the glass, "I had a little kid come in the store Christmas Eve, that I'd never see before. He ask' me if he could get warm—and he set down on the edge of a chair by the stove, and he took in everything in the place. I ask' him his name, and he just smiled. I ask' him if he was glad it was Christmas, and he says, Was I. I was goin' to give him some cough drops, but when I come back from waiting on somebody he was gone. I never could find out who he was, nor see anybody that saw him. I thought mebbe this Christmas he'd come back. Lord, don't it look like a pasture of buttercups up there? Here, Simeon."

Simeon, talking, took the glass and lifted it to the stars.

"Cut paper doin's is all very well," he said, "but the worst nightmare of the year to the stores is Christmas. I always think it's come to be 'Peace on earth, good will to men and extravagance of women.' Quite a nice little till of gold pieces up there in the sky, ain't there? I'd kind o' like to stake a claim out up there—eh? Lay it out along about around that bright one down there—by Josh," he broke off, "look at that bright one."

Simeon kept looking through the glass, and he leaned a little forward to try to see the better.

"What is it?" he repeated, "what's that one? It's the biggest star I ever see—"

The other two looked where he was looking, low in the east. But they saw nothing save boughs indeterminately moving and a spatter of sparkling points not more bright than those of the upper field.

"You look," Simeon bade the vague presence that was his host; but through the glass, Ebenezer still saw nothing that challenged his sight.

"I don't know the name of a star in the sky, except the dipper," he grumbled, "but I don't see anything out of the ordinary, anyhow."

"It is," Simeon protested; "I tell you, it's the biggest star I ever saw. It's blue and purple and green and yellow—"

Abel had the glass now, and he had looked hardly sooner than he had recognized.

"Sure," he said, "I've got it. It *is* blue and purple and green and yellow, and it's as big as most stars put together. It twinkles—yes, sir, and it swings … " he broke off, laughing at the mystification of the others, and laughed so that he could not go on.

"Is it a comet, do you s'pose?" said Simeon.

"No," said Abel, "no. It's come to stay. It's our individual private star. It's the arc light in front of the Town Hall you two are looking at."

They moved to where Abel stood, and from there, up the rise of ground to the east, they could see Simeon's star, shining softly and throwing long rays, it