



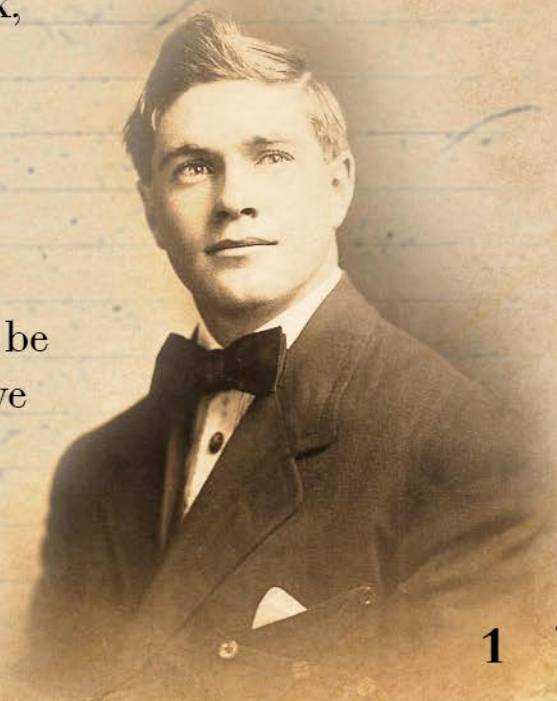
**WHEN TIMES AND BEING
TOGETHER GO AT A HAND by A.C.R.**


24th December 2022, Croft Manor.-

I quite do not venture into these kinds of intimacy moments since mostly all my life has been devoted to the Crofts. But it would be impolite to say that I do not devote myself to my writings whenever I have the chance to delve into.

Step by step, I have been completing what would be my greatest piece of work ever: a book of my life, hoping someone will find it enjoyable if it is come across at some point. Though I thought about making Lara inherit it once I depart and let her spread my legacy as she sees appropriate. That would be the easiest way for me to reach everyone, including my distant relative.

Because we have never been this distant. There was a time in which we used to have each other's back, and now it's like we have been drifting since then. As a matter of fact, the world was drifting in the past and it could have led us to this very unpleasant situation. I cannot blame him for certain things that happened at a certain time. Something to be told at another moment here. But I wish we could have worked it out better and stayed together.



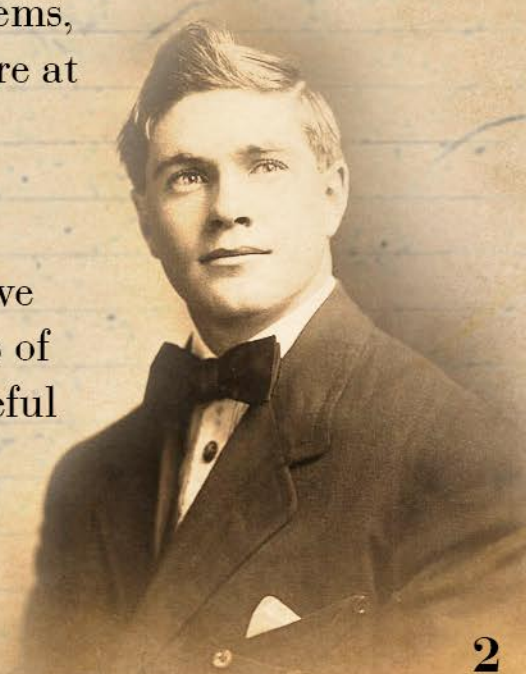



Even if we crave for it, we cannot control life nor time and how everything unfolds. Not at the level we would want to at least.

And it is when I see my dear Lara smile and leave her risky life aside, when I find some relief to connect with my inner feelings and let the feather write at ease. Technology has not been my cup of tea, I admit it. I have always been a more traditional man. So taking my old writing tools, the smell of weathered black ink, turning the pages of this beloved diary book... Old memories coming from an old man. A perfect combination to let your mind run free.

Oh yes, to let your mind run free... The cool breeze that leaks through the slightly open window, the ginger and orange taste of this hot tea, every snowflake that falls gently and lands on the windowsill... It all takes me back to my late twenties. Or was it in my early thirties? Either way, those were absolutely cherished times. It was like there were not any problems, which was obviously not the case as we were at war. But since there was a united family, nothing else mattered.

It was Christmas, not many of us were brave enough to run wild along the paved streets of my old county as bombs fell down as graceful rain drops. However, I recall having a strange peaceful time, as if there were no seen nor certified agreement to stop





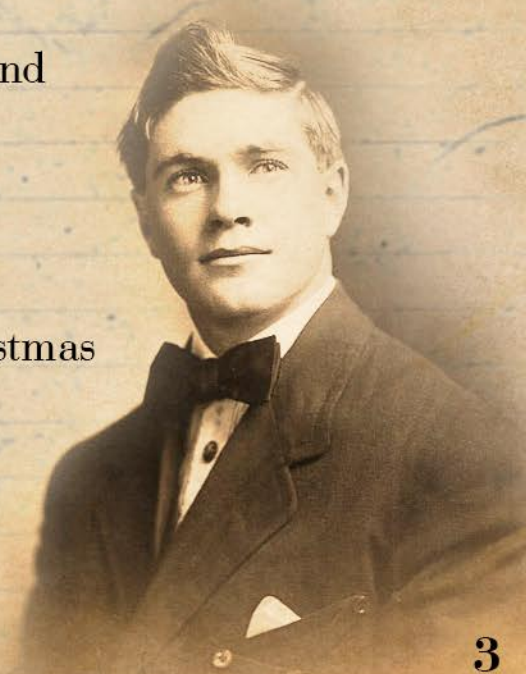
fighting and hating on others.


I went out too late from home straight to my grandparents'. It was Sunday and my loved ones and I used to spend the day there. All the family, in fact, along with my two uncles with their respective wives reunited to prepare dinner for Christmas Eve. It was for sure a very special year, not only for our social situation, but also for the arrival of a new member to our dynasty.

Jake and his wife, Emily, adopted a child who was wandering soulless the streets of the region of Clinton Shores. Blond, like gold, haired boy with intense blue sea eyes... How such an impressive lad could have been left alone and helpless was out of our comprehension. But uncle Jake and aunt Emily decided not to leave him wandering anymore.

It was not an easy task, lots of bureaucratic paperwork complicated things more (as if with war everything was simple). But they made it and Hugo became our newest sensation and a much appreciated one.

That day, I was dozing off on grandma's favourite couch, dreaming of a white Christmas full of surprises, when the doorbell rang. That's when we first met little five-year-old Hugo. So small and shy, hiding behind his new parents.



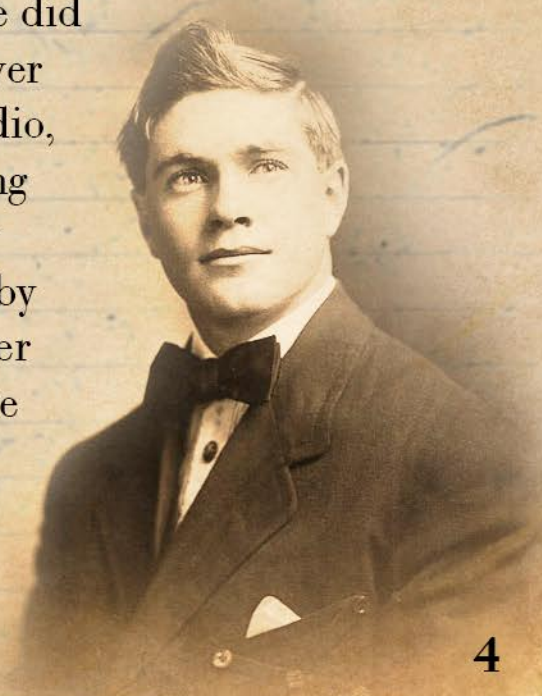


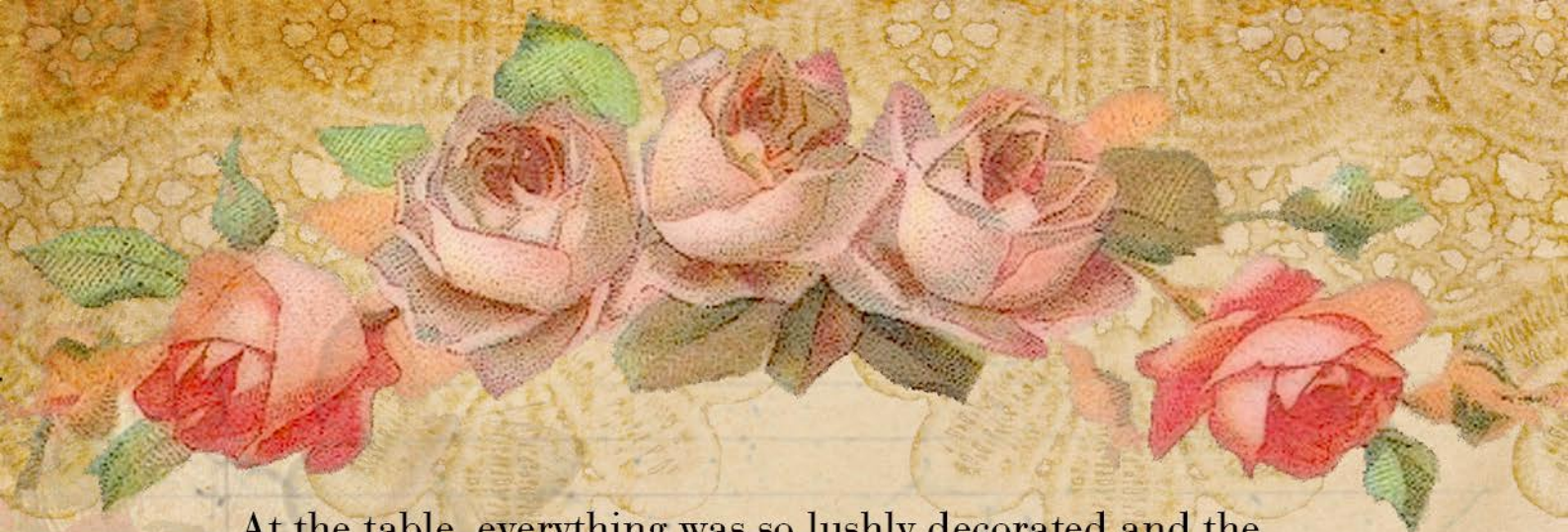
It only took a few minutes until he reached us and shared his first kiss and hug, he felt way more relaxed and accessible. It was all new to him at the end of the day.

Inside the house, there were also uncle Fred and his wife, Carol. They were never able to have children, but that didn't stop them from having a healthy and lovable life together. And when they saw the new family member coming from the living-room door, they rushed and showered him with even more kisses.

We wanted to make him feel at home as much as possible. We spent the little we have on presents and the best food we could get from the scarce supplies. However, you really don't need to have that much to enjoy life as long as you have the ones you love with you and that day proved my words.

I was so excited, it was the first time I had a cousin and I wanted to spend as much time as possible with him. I took my watercolours and my drawing book and we did some beautiful art together. He was so clever and skilled! No one wanted to hear the radio, even that night, terrible news was spreading across the country, so I started singing our favourite Christmas Carols, accompanied by my father at the piano. And my grandfather built some toys from wood blocks before we dined. At least there was peace there.



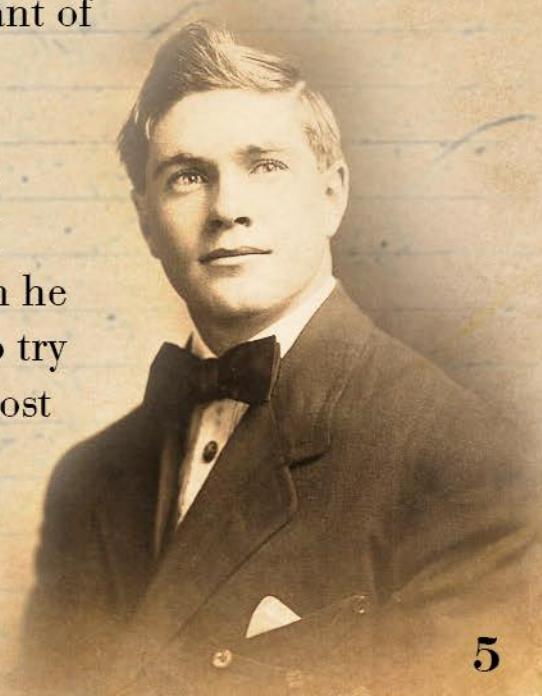


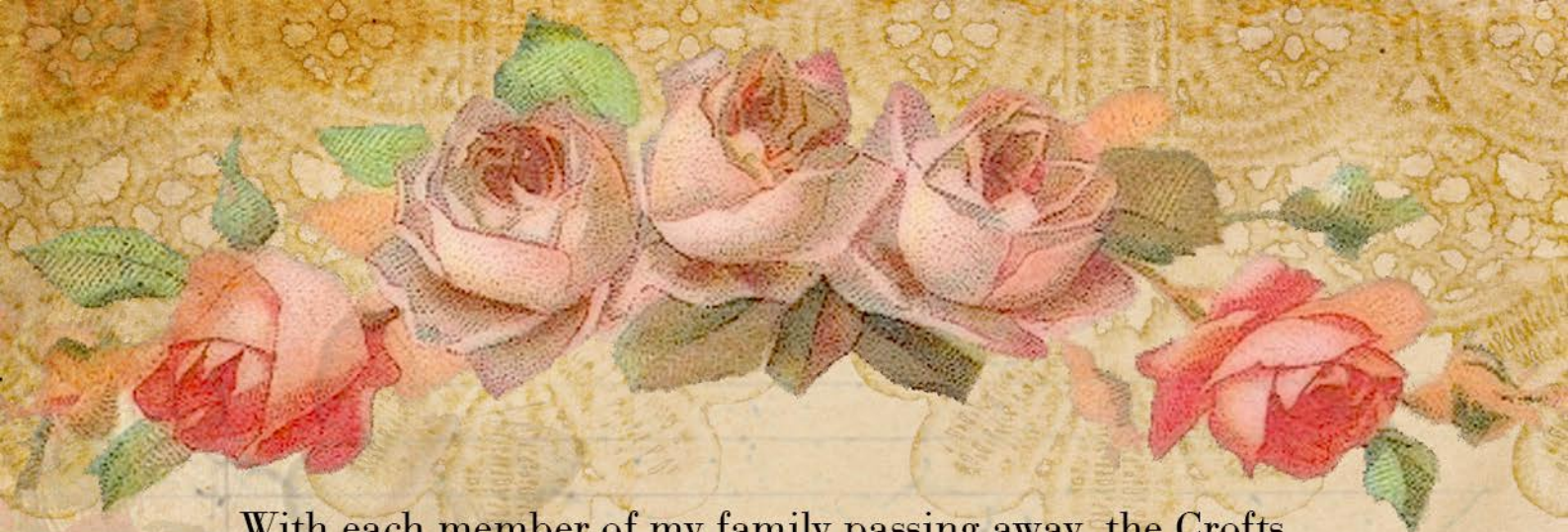
At the table, everything was so lushly decorated and the food looked and smelled spectacular. You would never expect how poor we were by looking at that radiant dinner! And thus I had a revelation. I was so determined to learn how to cook excellent dishes. I wanted to make people taste the best banquets ever and I think I learnt from the very best: both my mother and my grandmother.

Hugo was chairing the table and we started to tell anecdotes and jokes and stories from old times. It was so fun! We toasted with our finest wine and we cheered for that wondrous night. One to remember.

And now, I have to stop. I wrote a lot. What my heart was pleading. And it is the time to see what we all have been through and where we are now from another perspective... I do not have my parents with me any longer, they went to heaven long ago. Nor my uncles, nor my aunts... I never had a wife... Only Hugo remains alive as the last remnant of what my dynasty used to be.

When I became part of the Crofts, as their loyal butler, Hugo never understood why I had to leave. I know he suffered a lot when he was a child, but he also refused the idea to try to understand my position in one of the most famous and influential families in the entire country.





With each member of my family passing away, the Crofts were always at my side in those mourning times and they made sure the funerals were pure excellence. I never saw Hugo there a single time though.

No one was ever born being a perfect being and I have made lots of mistakes during my long-lasting life. But we deserve redemption and absolution, don't we?

I met Richard Croft in peculiar circumstances and I have never regretted my decision to join his wonderful legacy since then. But that is left for another chapter of this humble manuscript. I would have never forgiven myself if I had never had the chance to meet my dear Lara.

All I want for Christmas this year is some news from Hugo, as I do not know where he is nor his telephone number. I am sure Zip would get it fast, he is just a big brainiac. But I prefer to let things roll freely. I hope he is well and has not forgotten all the good times we shared together.

I can hear Lara calling me at present. She is playing Scrabble with Zip, I am totally convinced she has won once again. But Zip will take revenge, hehehe! They're like kids sometimes and since we lost Alister, their bond is tighter. And I am proud of them both. My children. My family. And Merry Christmas Hugo wherever you are!

