



SO THIS IS
CHRISTMAS

TEMPLE BAILEY

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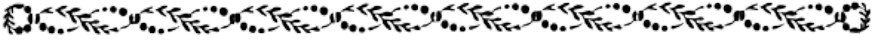
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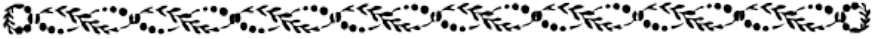


SO THIS IS CHRISTMAS!

and

OTHER CHRISTMAS STORIES





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By Temple Bailey

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SO THIS IS
CHRISTMAS!

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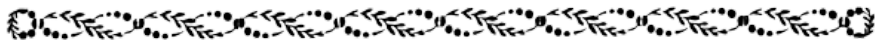
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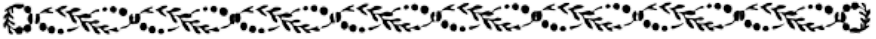
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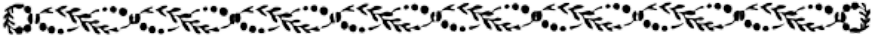
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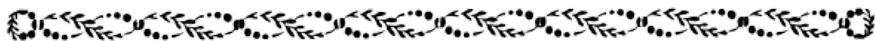
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SO THIS IS
CHRISTMAS!





SO THIS IS CHRISTMAS!



“IF YOU will eat your soup, I will tell you a fairy-story,” said the red-headed nurse.

“What kind of soup?”

“Chicken.”

“Chicken-shadow? Or the real thing?”

“Real. One of the Red Cross women brought it. It has noodles in it.” The red-headed nurse fairly sparkled with her knowledge of its deliciousness.

The man sitting on the edge of the bed could not see the sparkle. He was going blind, and the red-headed nurse was simply a blurred shadow against the shine of the lamp beyond.

“I’m not hungry,” he said.

“Please. I can’t stay if you don’t. And I’ve so much to tell you.”

“Tell it anyhow.”

“If you’ll taste one spoonful.”

“Oh, well. . . .”

“It’s about myself.”

He began to be interested. “What’s happened?”

“I have an invitation, if you please. And a dress with it. An old school friend of mine has hunted me up and has asked me to a Christmas ball at her house. And her mother is my godmother and has given me the things to wear—the loveliest green gown for the party, with silver lace on it. And silver slippers. I am to stay from the evening before Christmas, which is tonight, until the morning after.”

He had been trying to eat the soup, finding his lips carefully with the spoon. Letting the noodles go because one *couldn't*. It was bad enough if one had eyes.

He laid the spoon down. "That means, of course, you'll not be here on Christmas Day."

"I can't be. I'm sorry. But this is such a treat. . . . And you'll hardly know that I'm gone. I am planning everything so that you boys will have your tree and get your presents."

"Presents. . . ." There was weary scorn in his voice. He wanted to say: *What can they give me. . . ? I'm going blind. . . . I'm going blind. . . . I'm going blind. . . !* But of course he couldn't say it. It wouldn't be sporting. None of the boys whined. He wanted the red-headed nurse to go away. He wanted to pull the bed covers over his head. He wanted to cry like a baby.

Yet he wanted her, too, to stay, so that he might be held back for a moment from that awful blackness which engulfed him when he was alone.

She always talked about pleasant commonplaces in such a pretty way. She had told him a lot about herself. That her mother had died, and that her father had married again, and had failed in business, and she had taken nurse's training so that there might be money enough to go round.

She began now to describe the tree which she had helped to trim. "There's to be one in each ward. I think ours is the nicest. It has an angel on top and silver stars and pale blue lights. It gives it a sort of mystical look. Different."

He knew why she was describing it thus minutely. Lending him her eyes. So that he might tomorrow morning see it with an inner vision.

She went on: "I'm dying to tell you about your present."

Some of the blackness fell from him. "What is it?"

"No. . . . I mustn't spoil it. But I'll tell you about some of the others." She whispered, so that the boys in the surrounding beds would be none the wiser. Her voice was like that of an eager child. And while she talked she fed him his soup. Usually he hated that. It seemed to emphasize his helplessness. But she did it so deftly that he was hardly conscious of eating it, noodles and all, to the very bottom of the bowl.

She had to leave him then. "I'm going to say 'Good-night' and 'Good-bye' together. I shan't try to wish you 'A merry Christmas,' Pinkney. It can't be that. But I shall wish you a brave one."

“Wishing won’t make me brave. I’m a coward. I don’t want to have to . . . go on. . . .”

Whining! That was it! But he didn’t care!

Yet her handclasp heartened him, and when she had gone, he got out some pricked cards she had given him and began a game of solitaire.

The red-headed nurse passing down the ward found other men in other beds. A cheerful lot if one looked only on the surface. A sporting lot. Most of them knew there wasn’t much ahead of them. They all liked the nurse. She was a laughter-loving little thing, and spent herself in service for them. She was pretty, too, and young, but with no nonsense about her. They liked her name which was “Patricia Gayworthy.” They felt that it suited her. Some of them called her “Miss Pat” and some of them called her “Miss Gay,” but either way they liked it.

As she went among them tonight, she was aware of a certain lowness of mind in all of them. She tried to think of pleasant things to say, to brighten them up a bit. But it wasn’t easy. She knew that what they wanted on Christmas Eve was not platitudes but hearthstones.

Going out, she met the doctor in charge of the ward. His name was Grant, and he had served overseas. He was young, but not as young as the red-headed nurse. He had seen hard service on the other side and had been a bit fagged by it. He was working too hard, and the only light in his day was the red-headed nurse. He was in love with her. He was not sure that she knew it. He had planned to tell her on Christmas Day.

And now she was saying, “I’m going to be very grand and gorgeous. I’m going away tonight. To a house party. I shan’t be back until day after tomorrow.”

“Oh, but look here, you can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because we can’t spare you.”

“Who is ‘we’?”

“Everybody. What kind of Christmas will the boys have without you?”

“I’m not so important. And anyhow I want some fun myself. I’m not a saint or a Sister of Charity. I’m human. I’ve got to see some happy people. Here there’s just Pinkney’s eyes,” there were tears in her own . . . “and Bruelle . . . dying. . . .”

“I know.” Then after a silence, “When do you leave?”

“I am going over now to the nurses’ quarters to change. My bags are packed. My hostess is sending her chauffeur for me! They dine at eight, and after that there’s the dance and a tree.”

“And you won’t be back tomorrow?”

“Not till the day after.”

“H’m. . . . Well, I call it rather shabby of you.”

“Don’t you want me to be happy?”

“Of course. But I want to be happy, too.”

She had a wisp of a smile for his paraphrase of the popular song. “You’d better run away.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“The other fellows want to eat Christmas dinner with their families. I’m the only bachelor in the bunch.”

They were walking now towards the nurses’ quarters. “You ought to have a house of your own,” she told him with fine unconsciousness.

“I want it,” he said, “with you in it.”

She gasped, “But how could I?”

“I am asking you to marry me. I intended to do it tomorrow. But you are going away.”

Recovering from the first shock, she said: “Of course I couldn’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because I like you a lot. But not that way.”

“What way . . . ?”

The wind blowing a great blast, almost swept her from her feet. He anchored her with a firm grip on her arm. “What way?” he asked again.

She considered it for a moment as he stood with his body shielding her. The lights of the hospital twinkled in rows to the right of them, the lights of the nurses’ quarters twinkled in rows to the left of them. Between was a stretch of snowy ground, overhead was a fleecy sky, with the moon racing.

“Well, I’m not in love with you . . .” was her final explanation.

“How do you know?”

“If I loved you I’d want to marry you. And I don’t.”

His grip on her arm hurt her. “Do you think I am going to let it go at that? Why don’t you want to marry me?”

“Because I am a mercenary little beast. Once upon a time my father had money. And I liked it. And I’d like to have it again. I want a husband who can give me things. I want a husband like my friend has where I am going to the party. I want a town house and a country house, and motor cars and a yacht. And lovely clothes. And fur coats. And I shouldn’t be happy without them.”

She thought she was saying dreadful things. Things that would make him fall out of love with her. But instead, he laughed. “You don’t know your own mind and heart. You were happier tonight feeding Pinkney his soup than you’d be with a thousand motor cars.”

“Oh, did you see us?”

“Yes. They all adore you. They’ll have a rotten Christmas without you.”

“You men are all alike. Trying to make me stay. Pinkney did. But I’m not going to think about you. I’m going to think about myself.”

She began to walk on, outwardly unconcerned, but inwardly acutely aware of his nearness, as he still shielded her from the wind. “You mustn’t think I don’t appreciate you,” she said, after they had gone a little way in silence, “and the wonderfulness of your caring for me. You are fine and good, and a darling with the boys. It’s just that I’m a selfish little beast.”

“You’re not that. And this isn’t the end of things. It’s the beginning.” He caught up her hands and kissed them. They had reached the nurses’ quarters, and he stood, still holding her hands, while she gave him some last instructions about the boys.

“I bought a music box for Pinkney. A fine little Swiss one—and it plays such gay little tunes. I wanted something for his ears—everything else seemed to be for his eyes.”

“The specialist who examined Pinkney is to telephone tonight what he thinks.”

“You mean that there may be—hope?”

“I’m afraid not—”

“Oh—he’s so patient. Poor fellow.”

She tried to withdraw her hands, and he kissed them. Then he let her go. She ran up the steps, and called down from the top, “A merry Christmas!”

He lifted his cap and the light shone on the gray of his hair. She had a little lump in her throat. He was like Pinkney. He needed her. Some of the gray had come from those dreadful days overseas.

But then . . . she couldn’t always be thinking about other people. And she wasn’t going to marry just because a man’s gray hair hurt her to think about. She was going to put on the green dress and the silver slippers and dance until daylight!

It was seven o’clock when Patricia reached her destination. The house was huge, and high iron gates were swung wide for the motor cars to sweep through, and there was a butler at the front door, and a footman on the stairs, and a maid in your room to help you dress.

But before the maid could lift a finger, the red-headed nurse had to be embraced by her friend Barbara, who was called Babs for short, and who had been at school Patricia’s best beloved. And Babs was more beautiful than ever, and had a baby.

“To *think*,” she emphasized, “that you’ve never seen him, and he’s five years old. And you’ve never seen my husband. We were so long abroad. Nick is mad about it.”

“Are you?”

“I’m not sure. Things are different over there. More sophisticated.”

Babs was different. Lighted with a new brilliance. Patricia was not sure she liked it. The old Babs had been so utterly herself. This new Babs seemed to shine with a hardness like diamonds. “She used to be—wax candles,” Patricia remembered.

They went to the nursery, and there was Babs’ baby asleep in a quaint mahogany bed, with carved angels at the four corners. At the foot of the bed hung a stocking, tied up with red ribbon and a bit of holly. A middled-aged woman, spick and span in white linen, was reading a book by a shaded lamp. She rose as they entered.

“I see that you’ve hung up his stocking, Nonny,” Babs said.

“He hung it up himself, dear lamb, like the one in his storybook.”

Patricia wondered why Babs had not been there to help him hang the stocking. She felt that if the child had been her own, she would have begrudged every moment of mirth that she did not share.

“He’s such a handsome laddie,” his mother was saying. “Good-looking like Nick. Only Nick’s hair is dark.”

Patricia said, “How wonderful to have a son.”

“Oh, well, of course. But sometimes it isn’t wonderful. Not when Nick wants me to do things, and there’s Toodles to think of. Nick doesn’t like it to have me tied.”

Patricia reflected that Nick, too, might like to be tied to a son like Toodles. But she didn’t ask questions. And Babs said, “Pat, darling, we must run and dress—people will be coming before we know it.”

Well, the maid to whom Babs entrusted her friend massaged her and curled her and powdered her, and touched up her brows and lashes, and deepened the roses of her cheeks, and when at last the green dress was slipped over her head, and her feet were shod in the silver slippers, Patricia looked in the glass, and knew she was a raving beauty!

When she went downstairs, all the men crowded about her and at last Babs brought her husband, who had missed a train from New York and hardly had time to get into his dinner clothes.

And Babs’ husband said to Babs’ friend: “With that red hair of yours you ought to conquer the world. All the famous beauties had red hair. Think about it, and tell me when I dance with you, if it isn’t true.”

He said it in an exciting way, as if what you would tell him when you danced with him would mean a great deal, and he would be up on his toes to know. He was handsome and distinguished, and it seemed wonderful that Babs should have such a husband—little Babs who had been at school with her—as it had seemed wonderful that she should have a baby.

At dinner, the two young men who sat on each side of Patricia were great fun. They flattered her a lot, and asked for all her dances, and drank quarts of champagne, and tried to get Patricia to drink it, but she told them, “Why should I? And you’d be better off without it.”

They laughed at that, and one of them said: “You mustn’t have such an unholy conscience. And where did you learn to listen with your eyes?”

She had learned it at the hospital, when the boys talked to her, and she had had to seem attentive or hurt their feelings. But she didn’t tell this to the

two young men. She wondered if they knew she was a nurse? And would it make a difference if they did?

After dinner she had a grand and glorious time. She danced and danced and danced. There didn't seem to be any end to it, and she didn't want it to end. The music was marvellous, the floor perfect, the ballroom decorations heavenly. She didn't have adjectives enough to describe it all.

Towards midnight the fun grew wild and wilder, and at last the two young men who sat beside her at dinner, and whom everybody called "Trux" and "Benny," came up and said:

"Let's duck this. . . ."

"And get another girl and look at the stars. . . ."

They said it just that way, together. And Patricia surveyed them with the cool glance she reserved for derelicts at the hospital: "You're drunk," she said, "and what you need is bed and bromo-seltzer."

They roared at that, and said she was "ripping," and that they were going to carry her off. And the one whose name was Trux said: "You've never seen as many stars as I shall show you."

And the other, whose name was Benny, said: "Don't you believe him. He knows only one star, and that is Venus!"

Well, Babs' husband rescued her, and sent the roaring young men away. He had a dance with Patricia, he told them; which wasn't true, because she really had it with Trux. But Trux couldn't think of anything but the stars. "If you've never seen them from a Rolls-Royce," he said, "you've missed something."

"I've seen them from a Ford," was Patricia's parting shot, "and taking it all in all, perhaps it's safer."

Babs' husband danced delightfully. It was the third dance Patricia had had with him, and each time he had talked about red hair, and the wonderful women in history: "Helen and Cleopatra and the rest."

And Pat had asked him: "Were they all red-headed?"

And he had answered: "Well, at least they all had red-headed temperaments."

And now with the third dance, he was again at it. "You have temperament," he said. "Babs hasn't. Queer thing. How different you are."

Somehow the way he put it made it seem uncomplimentary to Babs. To Babs who had been the queen bee of the hive at school! To Babs who had out-distanced all of the others in her list of lovely perfections!

Patricia tried to tell him something of this: “Babs was our fairy princess in the old days.”

“Fairy princesses are not always—human.”

Again that subtle note of disparagement. Patricia ignored it. “It seems wonderful to think that Babs is really married.”

“Wonderful? Don’t all pretty women marry?”

“Perhaps. But still—it’s wonderful.”

He looked down at her, laughing. “Why aren’t you married if you think that way about it.”

“I’ve got to wait.”

“For what?”

“Love.”

“You won’t have to wait long if men have their way.”

“It must not be their way. But mine.”

“I see. But why be so serious about it?”

“Because it’s a life matter.”

“Not at all. You’ve got the wrong slant on it. Babs and I look at it more sensibly. Neither of us thinks of marriage as a sacrament. If we should be lucky enough to go on loving each other, we’ll stick it. If not, we’ll be off with it. We both believe that if a man or a woman feels tied by matrimony, then it should end automatically.”

Patricia flamed: “That’s a horrid philosophy, I think.”

“Why?”

“Oh, what would love be worth if it were so—unstable?”

He laughed again. “You are like Babs when I first met her. Old-fashioned.”

Old-fashioned! Her beautiful dreaming Babs!

“I could teach you,” he went on, his laughing eyes noting the flames in her own, “a glorious freedom—”

Babs came up at that moment, providentially, to ask her husband about the tree. Would he see that everything was ready? The clocks were striking twelve. While she talked she hung on his arm. It was easy to see that she adored him. And he didn't believe in constancy! He didn't believe in dreams of youth, or in aspirations, or hopes! He didn't believe in anything!

It was a most amazing tree. It hadn't anything to do with Christ and the Star. It hadn't even anything to do with Santa Claus and little children. It was strange and fantastic like something out of the Arabian Nights. It was a great round ball of clipped yew, and hung on it were dozens and dozens of golden oranges, and each orange was a box, and in each box was a tiny gift. Coming from the top of the tree, which was crowned by a golden cupid, were floating streamers of silk, and at the end of the streamers were gold and silver balloons which floated like bubbles in the air, and the guests were given golden bows and arrows, and shot at the balloons, and for every balloon that was shot, one got a golden orange.

Patricia shot three balloons and got three oranges, and in one of them was a wee vanity box, and in another a wee gold pencil, and in the third, a wee vial of rose perfume.

The perfume made her think of Pinkney. She had often brought him a rose, because of the fragrance. And he had said to her, "You should have seen the roses in my mother's garden. . . ."

With thoughts of Pinkney came a vision of the long room at the hospital as it would be tonight—the cold moonlight in pools on the polished floor, some of the boys asleep, others awake in their narrow beds. There would be pain there, and heartache, and fear of what was ahead. Yet there would be, too, fortitude.

And in the morning, waking to dreariness and a yearning for home, they would try to carry on. . . .

And she would not be there to help!

With that vision upon her, she was blind at the moment to everything about her. Gone was the great ballroom crowded with dancers—the gowns of the women lighting it with superb color, rose and jade and sapphire; the tree flaunting golden streamers, the music booming, whining, moaning—drums, saxophones, syncopation. For Patricia there was only that long room with its cold moonlight, and the need it had of her.

She tried to tell herself that it was silly to let her mind dwell on it. That to Pinkney and Bruelle and all the rest of them her coming and going was

not important. That she might as well stay and have her good time, and return home refreshed and rested. Then suddenly she knew she wasn't having a good time. She was missing something that should have been there. All about her people were shouting: "A merry Christmas." But it didn't seem to her that any of them was merry. Their voices grew louder, the fun grew fast and furious; but of real mirth, of simple satisfying happiness, she could see no sign.

The climax came when, the guests having tired of the bows and arrows, the beat of a tom-tom was heard above the clamor of voices, and through the great archway which spanned the entrance to the ballroom streamed a wild procession. Jesters were there, and black slaves bearing gifts, and pages holding steaming bowls aloft, and houris dancing: and, mounted on a barrel, the Spirit of Christmas, as fat as Falstaff, and carrying a ladle.

Well, there is this to be said for Patricia, she was neither a prig nor a prude. She knew there was no harm in having fun on Christmas Eve if one wanted it. But as for herself, she didn't want it if she had to have it with those two young men who had had more than enough champagne, or with Babs' husband who wanted to teach her a glorious freedom, or with all those flushed women who seemed to have forgotten that because of a great Mother, this night of all others should have been spent in their homes.

She fled to the top of the stairs and stood looking down. The black men who had brought the gifts had laid them before the Falstaffian saint, who, still mounted on his barrel, beat time with his ladle to the tom-toms. And the black men began to weave back and forth in a fantastic dance, and the houris waved their veils and jingled their bracelets, and coiled themselves like glittering snakes.

As the beat of the tom-toms grew faster, they began to sound an accompaniment to the words that echoed in Patricia's brain: "So this is Christmas . . . *so this is Christmas* . . . SO THIS IS CHRISTMAS!" said the tom-toms. But nobody heard but the girl on the stairs!

The young man called Trux looked up and saw her. He waved to her, made his way through the crowd, and began climbing the stairs. When he stumbled on the first landing, Patricia took to her heels, rushed up the remaining steps, ran down the dim hall, found her door, slammed it behind her, locked it, and leaned against it breathless.

She told herself afterwards, scornfully, that her nerves were on edge. She had never been afraid at the hospital. Not even when the big blond Swede in the nervous ward had tried to brain her with a chair. She had quieted him

without help, and had only been a little shaky afterwards. But tonight there was something—she couldn't quite define it—something sinister in the air. Something malevolent. Something corrupting. She had expected it would be different—fine and exquisite, a part of the old Babs, and of the dreams they had shared together. There had been nothing fine about it. She wondered if it was because against Babs' sincerity had been set the sophistication of her husband. He was, perhaps, the stronger, and Babs, loving him, had been submerged.

How dreadful to be submerged like that in another's personality! Yet if Babs' husband had been like—oh, why not say it?—like Doctor Jimmie Grant, she would not have been submerged, she would not have been carried along by a strength which would fail her, she would have been borne up by a faith which would never falter, she would have had dreams to match her own.

Patricia had never called the doctor-in-charge by his first name, but now in her thoughts she spoke of him as "Jimmie." She was glad that it wasn't any more pretentious than that, just simple and boyish, belonging to him. His whole name, James Jasper Grant, had a steady ring to it, like his steady voice when he spoke to Pinkney or to poor Bruelle. She wondered what he was doing. Asleep, perhaps. Or perhaps called out of bed by poor Bruelle. She knew the comfort he would be to that passing soul. He was more than a doctor. He was a priest.

Since she was no longer frightened, she opened her door and went into the hall. At one end of it was a great window which looked over the hills, and reached from the ceiling to the floor. Patricia walked towards it, and stood gazing out at the stars. The night was still, and the snow lay white over the garden. Patricia thought of the hospital and the lights shining. She thought of Jimmie Grant shielding her from the wind.

She was startled by hearing a little voice at her side: "I want my Nonny."

It was Babs' baby. Adorable in pink pajamas, with sleep still in his eyes, his mop of curls standing up like a crown.

She bent down to him, "Nonny will be here presently. Will I do, until she comes? I'm a Nonny, too, you know."

"Do you take care of little boys?"

"I take care of big men. Sick ones."

He cocked his head, "Would you rather take care of little boys?"

“I would tonight. Shall we run back to bed? And I’ll sit with you till your Nonny comes.”

His hand was tucked in hers confidently. “Will you tell me a story?”

“Yes. If you’ll shut your eyes?”

When they reached his room, the stocking still hung limp from its red ribbon.

“Santa Claus didn’t come yet,” Toodles confided as he climbed into bed.

“He’ll come after you go to sleep.”

When his head was on the pillow, and the covers up to his chin, he said, “Tell me a story.”

“What about?”

“Oh—Donner and Blitzen. . . .”

“I know a better one.”

“What about?”

“Jesus in the manger.”

“Who was Jesus-in-the-manger?”

Was this Babs’ child? It seemed to Patricia incredible! Babs who had always said her prayers at school. Whose faith had seemed so steadfast.

With Toodles’ hand in hers, she told him the lovely story. He listened entranced. “If Mary came here,” he said, all shining with the thought of it, “and there wasn’t any room, I’d sleep on the floor and give the little baby my bed. I’d let the darling little baby sleep in my bed.” Babs’ child? Or his father’s?

When Toodles slept finally, Patricia still sat beside him. The nurse coming in, asked, “Oh, did he wake?”

“Yes. And he was sweet. Nurse, he said if Mary had come here, and there had been no place to lay the Baby, he would have given up his bed.”

“Oh, if they knew you had talked such things to him they wouldn’t like it. They won’t let me. His father doesn’t want him to be narrow-minded. It almost breaks my heart.”

“I didn’t know. I’m glad I didn’t. His mother wasn’t like that . . .!”

The red-headed nurse went back to her room, and to bed. It was a beautiful bed and it had four pillows. She curled up and fell fast asleep. And the droning of the saxophone intruded on her dreams.

She was waked by some one coming into her room and speaking her name, "Pats, darling."

Patricia sat up. "I've been asleep," she said superfluously.

"What on earth made you come up to bed?" Babs demanded. "I thought you'd gone out to look at the stars with Benny and Trux. But when they romped in they had two other girls with them. Nick said he saw you running upstairs, and sent me to find you." She sat down. "What on earth made you go to bed?"

Patricia, with her red hair in a sunrise effect about her face said, "I was sleepy."

"Weren't you having a good time?"

"Too swift for me, dearest. I haven't travelled as fast as you in the years since we saw each other."

Babs had a quick little sigh for that, then said, "But you ought to come down. We are having breakfast."

"Breakfast? What time is it?"

"Almost five."

"A.M.?"

"Yes."

"What time do you expect to get up tomorrow—or is it today?"

"In the afternoon. Trux and Benny are coming then to take us to a tea dance. They want you to go."

"But what about Toodles?"

"Toodles?"

"Yes. Won't he have any Christmas day with you? Or Christmas dinner?"

"He will show me his stocking, and spend the day with Nonny. He'll be perfectly happy."

"Babs, don't you ever think how we loved Christmas morning, and our fathers and mothers being with us, and going to church, and all the children

at dinner?”

“Nick says family gatherings are bromidic. He doesn’t believe in such things.”

“Don’t you?”

“I’m not sure. And it’s frightfully old-fashioned.” Her voice took on a hard edge. “I’m not going to worry myself about it. I adore Nick.” Trouble ahead for Babs! Patricia could hear Nick’s voice saying, “If we love each other enough we’ll stick it.” If he did not love Babs enough, would he break her heart?

She reached out and caught Babs’ hand in hers, “My dear, my dear,” she said, “it isn’t old-fashioned to have—faith!”

A voice in the hall. Nick’s. “Babs, where are you?” Babs stood up. “Be a good sport, Patsy. You never used to be—stuffy. Come on down and be one of us.”

The red-headed nurse, getting into her clothes, asked herself if being stuffy meant to want the best for Babs and her baby? Wishing happiness for them? Content?

She did not put on her party gown. She put on the dress she had worn when she came from the hospital. She looked up Nonny, and left a note with her. The note said: “*Babs, darling, I’ve got to go back. There’s a blind boy at the hospital, and one who can’t get well. And I think I ought to look after them. And you mustn’t think I am stuffy, dearest. I am just the same Patsy who shared your room with you. . . . And darling, if you ever need me, I’ll come to the end of the earth.*”

Doctor Jimmie Grant simply could not believe it. To have her in his arms. To hear her saying: “It was like waddling around with a lot of geese, after having flown with an eagle.”

“Didn’t you like it?”

“Like it? I loathed it. And I felt that I couldn’t stay another minute. I went out to the garage and found a chauffeur who was glad enough to drive me over. And I couldn’t get here quick enough. I kept thinking of what I wanted to tell you. I thought I might have to save it until later in the day—so we could be alone. And then the luck of it . . . to find you up and here.”

“Here” was on the way to the hospital from the nurses’ quarters. Patricia had gotten into white linen gown and cap and blue cape, and had started across the snowy way, and suddenly, there he was coming towards her, his head down and not seeing her! And she had come up to him in the Christmas dawn, and had clutched at his coat, and had said, continuing the conversation where it had ended the night before; “Jimmie, I don’t want a rich husband. I want you.”

He hadn’t asked any questions, he had simply lifted her in his arms and said, “Thank God!” Time enough for questions when this supreme moment had passed. Time enough for everything . . . she was his forever . . .

It was bitterly cold, but they did not know it. Yet when they came into the hospital, he made her sit in his office, while she thawed out and he gave her an account of things that had happened.

“There’s Pinkney’s eyes,” he said at last, “I saved that for you to tell him.”

“He’s going to get better?” But she knew from his voice.

“He’s going to see.”

She had risen in her chair and was looking at him, wide-eyed, vivid, wonderful, “Oh, Jimmie, Jimmie,” she said, “to think that I thought I’d be happier eating scrambled eggs with all those idiots, than to be telling Pinkney . . .” Her voice failed her. “I’m going to cry,” she said, “do you think it would be against discipline, if you would shut the door, and let me do it on your shoulder?”

The men in the ward felt there wasn’t much to wake up for. Bruelle, restless with pain, had seen an hour ago the bright lights of a motor. He spoke now in a hushed voice to Pinkney: “Some one came in early.”

“How do you know?”

“A car passed. A big one.”

“What time is it?”

“Seven.”

The night was over. But to Pinkney it would always be night. He sighed and covered up his head. Christmas morning? What did he care for Christmas!

Then suddenly there came to his ears a gay little tune! The tinkling one from the Magic Flute! A music box!

He sat up, his ears strained to listen.

A murmur ran around the room, growing louder: "It's Miss Pat. She's back."

Pinkney simply couldn't believe it. Not even when she called out: "A merry Christmas, everybody," and shook hands all around, holding Pinkney's a little longer while she said: "I've got a present for you. Can you find your way to the sun-room in fifteen minutes?"

It was easy enough to find his way, and at this time the room would be empty. He wondered what Miss Pat would give him for a present.

There was no sun at this hour, but he found the room warm. He sat in the big chair, listening for her step.

Patricia, coming in, said with seeming tactlessness: "Pinkney, I wish you could see the lovely sky."

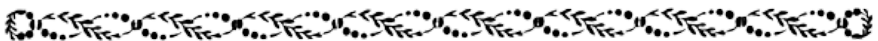
His tone was dull. "I shall never see it."

"Pinkney, let me tell you about it." He knew from her voice that she was standing now by the wide window which faced the east, "Around the horizon is a strip of silver, and above that a strip of rose, and above that . . . above that . . . deep purple, with a star . . . ! Pinkney, it's Christmas morning!"

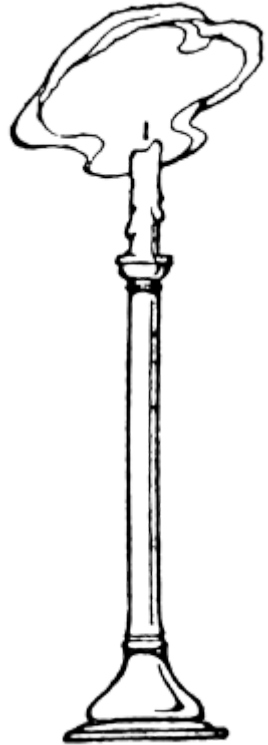
Something moving now in her voice, something breathless . . . "*Pinkney* . . ."

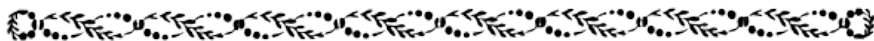
She couldn't go on, and suddenly she began to sob. "Pinkney, you're going to *see*. The doctor says so. Next Christmas you are going to see the morning sky!"

His hand groped for her shoulder. Gripped it. He did not speak, but it was worth everything to catch his radiant, lifted look; worth all the glitter and gleam of golden oranges and bows and arrows, and green gowns and silver slippers. It was worth all the hard work she had ever done, and all the hard work that was yet to come—to see the radiance of his countenance as he turned his eyes up towards the coming Light.



THE LIGHTED PATH





THE LIGHTED PATH



“Take a lantern,” the Mother said.

“We need no light. There is a moon.”

But the Mother insisted—“The moon is not enough.”

So the children went away, swinging the lantern.

The path they followed led through a wood. It was a pine wood; and the trees were close together, their branches making a roof which shut out the moonlight. But the moon was not shut out on the path, which was a silver thread in the tapestry of the night.

The children were not afraid of the dark wood, for they had often gone that way. They sang as they went and the Girl’s voice was a treble chime, and the Boy’s like a deep-toned bell. It was very cold and their voices carried far. There was not a cloud in the sky, nor a sign of snow on the pine needles. And it was Christmas Eve.

At the edge of the wood they met their Father. “Mother made us bring a lantern.”

And their Father said, “She would, of course.” He lifted the lantern and blew out the light. “The moon is enough,” he said.

Then the Boy said, “Which shall we believe? Our Mother says the moon is not enough. You say that it is. Shall we believe you or our Mother?”

The Father stood for a moment looking up at the bright moon. “You must think that out for yourselves,” he replied. “Perhaps I see more light than there is; perhaps your Mother sees less. I look up at the sky. She looks down at the path. She may be right. I may be right. Who knows?”

And the Girl said, “I like looking up at the sky.”

But the Boy considered it, "When the path is rough, we need a lantern."

And the Father laughed and said: "We'll have light enough in the town. And we are going to buy a Christmas present for your Mother."

They were on the road now, which was broad and smooth; and stretching up on each side of it were great farms, with their barns and houses making sharp shadows on the hills; and after a while the farms gave way to rows of cottages; and at last the Father and the children came to the village street, with shops on each side and with crowds surging back and forth and up and down.

And the windows of the shops were gay with their multi-colored wares; and in the market shops were turkeys ready for roasting, and plumes of celery, and cranberries red as rubies, and oranges and a few choice strawberries in a green basket. And in the crockery shop were dinner-sets and painted vases and pots and pans; and on the top shelf a bowl of amber glass which seemed to melt into sunshine as the light shone upon it. And in the dress shop were gowns and hats and coats and furs, and a white scarf woven with a golden thread. And at the florist's were holly and mistletoe and evergreen wreaths; and set somewhat back in a corner a tight little bunch of saffron roses.

And the children, walking slowly with their Father in front of the shops, asked, "What will you get for Mother?"

And the Father said, "What do you think?"

And the Boy said, "She needs a new coat."

And the Girl said, "She needs pots and pans."

And the Father said, "Do you know what I would buy if I had my way? I would buy the amber bowl and the saffron roses and the white scarf with the gold thread and the strawberries in the green basket."

And the children looked at him with startled eyes; and the Boy said, "What would she do with roses and a golden scarf?"

"She would wear the roses at her breast and the scarf about her white neck as she once wore them."

And the Girl said, "Why doesn't she wear them now?"

"She has forgotten romance," the Father said; and there was a touch of bitterness in his voice. "And romance to me is food and drink."

He turned away quickly from the florist's window, and went with the children down the street and bought a warm coat and an iron pot and four pans.

And when they came again to the edge of the wood, the Girl asked, "Shall we light the lantern?"

And the Father said, "No, we have the moon."

So the children went on in the moonlight, singing, and the Father sang with them; and when he had sung for a time he stopped and said, "I used to sing to your Mother."

"Why don't you sing to her now?"

"She cares no more for—singing."

They walked in silence after that; and all at once the Girl stumbled.

"I could not see the path," she sobbed. And the Boy said, "We'd better light the lantern."

So they came to the house with the lantern lighted; and the Mother met them at the door. "You're late," she said, "and the supper's spoiling."

So the four of them sat down at the table. It was a square table with a white cloth and a dish of red apples set in the center. And the food was wonderful—crusty bread and sweet, fresh butter, and eggs like daffodils on a blue platter, and squares of honey in small glass saucers, and a great pitcher of milk with the cream on it.

And the Mother sat at one end of the table and poured coffee for the Father and milk for the children.

And the Girl, eating her egg and drinking her milk, wondered how her Mother would look with a golden scarf about her neck and a rose at her breast.

But her Mother was saying, "We must all help with the dishes, and then the children must go to bed."

And the Boy and Girl knew why they must go to bed. It was because it was Christmas Eve; and there was a tree to be trimmed by their Father and Mother.

So the Mother scraped the plates and carried them to the kitchen, and had hot suds in one shining pan and hot clear water in another, and the

children wiped the china on clean checked towels; and while they wiped they told the Mother of the things they had seen in town.

“We saw strawberries,” said the Boy, “in a green basket.”

“And a golden scarf.”

“And an amber bowl.”

“And little yellow roses.”

“And Father said you used to wear them.”

And as they said these things, the Mother’s hands were still—and at last the Boy said, “Are you thinking of the roses, Mother?”

And the Mother said, “Why should I think of roses?”

And she went to work with a will; and presently she dried her hands and said, “I’ll stir up the buckwheat cakes for tomorrow’s breakfast and then everything will be finished.”

But the Boy and Girl knew that everything would not be finished, for there was yet—the Tree.

When they went upstairs, the moon was still shining, and as the children stood looking out the hall window toward the East, the Girl said, “At midnight the angels will be singing.”

And the Boy said, “The animals will be kneeling.”

The Girl said, “Do you believe it?”

And the Boy said, “Mother believes it.”

And the Girl said, “If Mother believes it, it is true.”

Then the Boy went to his room and to sleep; but the Girl lay long awake, thinking of the things that had happened. And most of all she thought of how her Mother had told her to take the lantern, and how her Father had blown it out. Yet without the lantern, she had stumbled.

And downstairs the Father went into the wood and brought in a tree he had cut, and the Mother brought a box of glittering balls and tinsel chains, and a great pan of corn that she popped; and the Father flung the tinsel over the branches of the tree, and tied on the golden balls, and as he worked he whistled a rollicking tune. And his wife said as she strung the popcorn, “You are always like a boy at Christmas.”

And the Father laughed, and said in his eager voice, “I love it all, the holly and the mistletoe, and the color and the carols. I love the poetry of it, and the old traditions.”

The Mother’s voice had a touch of wistfulness. “I love that, too; but best of all I love the thought of the—angels singing—”

And the Father said, “That’s part of the poetry.”

And the Mother shook her head. “It’s more than that.”

But she did not pursue the thought, for the popcorn chains were ready. And as they hung the chains over the branches, the Father and Mother came closer and closer until at last they met. And the Father, bending down to the Mother’s flushed cheek, kissed it.

And she flushed more than ever and said, “Love me?”

And he said, “Yes.”

And after that they hung the children’s presents on the tree; and the things the Mother had bought were warm and practical, like stockings and gloves and handkerchiefs; and the things the Father had bought were silly things that wound up with a key, so that the donkeys kicked and the clowns danced and the mice ran under your feet. And there was a blue fan for the Girl; and for the Boy a book of verses.

When she saw the fan, the Mother said, with a note of sharpness, “Weren’t you being a bit extravagant?”

And the Father said, with coldness, “If you choose to call it that.”

The Mother said, “I’m sorry. But the children need so many things.”

And the Father said, “Beauty is food for the soul.”

And after that he did not whistle; and presently they went to bed.

And in the morning the Mother got up early to bake the buckwheat cakes. When the children came in, she kissed them and said: “A merry Christmas, darlings.”

And they kissed her and said: “A merry Christmas.”

And the Mother took from a shelf a worn, black book, and said: “While we wait for Father shall we read a chapter?”

So they read of the Wise Men and the Babe in the Manger, and the Mother said: “He was a wonderful Child. I want you to be like Him.”

And the children said, “You are like Mary, Mother.”

And suddenly they saw her face grow stern, “No,” she said, “I am not like Mary. I am like that other woman in the Bible—Martha.”

And then she got up and began to bake the buckwheat cakes.

And when the Father came down there was a smell of sausage frying; and on the table was a jug of translucent syrup, and when the buckwheat cakes came on they were brown as berries and as light as feathers.

And the Father said to the children, “Do you know you have a marvellous Mother?”

And they said: “She says she’s not like Mary—she’s like Martha.”

And the Father looked up at his wife and asked, “What made you say that?”

And she said, “Because it is true.”

And after breakfast they had their presents; and the children looked at the stockings and gloves and the nice handkerchiefs that their Mother had bought, and they thanked their Mother and kissed her, and then they laid aside the things she had given them, and played with their toys and shouted with laughter, and their Father played with them.

Then they brought out the presents for their Mother and she untied the strings and undid the papers, and found the warm coat and the pot and the four tin pans. And the Girl watching her face, asked anxiously, “Don’t you like them?” And she smiled and said, “Indeed I do, my darling.” And she rolled up the string carefully and folded the rest of the wrappings and carried them all out to the kitchen.

And after that she was very busy getting ready for the Christmas dinner. There were to be guests—two uncles and two aunts and a lot of cousins, and there was the turkey to be roasted and the giblets to be chopped and the turnips to be peeled and the potatoes, and the pudding to be watched.

And when the guests arrived and sat down there were seven of them; and one was a young cousin who had just been married. And her hair was waved and her eyes shining, and she showed them a little golden heart that her young husband had given her.

“He really couldn’t afford it,” she said, with a sort of splendid rapture; “but I love him for it.”

And there flashed between her and her young husband a look that drove the blood from the cheeks of the Mother of the children. For there had been a time when her own young husband had looked at her like that.

But she set her mind resolutely not to think of it; and presently she and the children cleared the table, and the pudding was brought in and the tree was lighted, and the popcorn looked like snow.

And the youngest of the uncles said, "We should have had a snowy Christmas. Nothing is as it used to be."

Suddenly the Mother of the children spoke, "Does anyone think in these days of the Babe in the Manger?"

And the oldest uncle who had white hair and a wise heart, said, "There is more kindness and peace in the world than ever before. And if that is so, the Babe is among us."

And silence fell upon them at the thought that the Babe was there.

And after dinner the Father of the children took them for a walk, and when the children came back they were alone. And their Mother asked, "Where is your Father?"

They said, "He went into town."

And the Mother of the children moved about the room putting everything in order; and when she had finished, she opened the door and looked out. Night had come on and the moon was shining, so that the whole world was white with radiance. And the Mother of the children walked down the silver path to meet her husband. She had wrapped herself in the warm coat and the strong wind which blew from the north buffeted her. At last she came to the edge of the wood, and looked down the broad road and saw no sign of her husband. For a moment she was afraid; but as she turned her face up to the shining sky, her heart was stilled. For it seemed to her that in a world of such beauty there could be no place for doubt or despair.

Presently she turned back; and now the north wind blew with increasing violence, and the sky was clouded, so when she came to the house she got the lantern and set it on the steps to light the way for her husband.

And the Mother went to the foot of the stairs and called up to the children, "It is time for bed," and they asked, "Has Father come?" She said, "No, but I shall wait for him."

So she sat by the fire and waited. And the flames of the fire shone on her and she was transfigured. But she was afraid to look at the clock it was so

late; and it was not until she counted eleven strokes that her husband came. He crossed the room and knelt beside her and his cheek was cold against her cheek. And he said, "My dear and my darling."

And she looked into his eyes and said, "Do you think of me like that?"

And he said, "You know I do."

And she said, "I have not always known it," and her voice faltered.

He drew her close. "Listen," he said, "and I will tell you: Last night I went into town with the children. And my heart was bitter because I was tired of a world that was all work and weariness. And I wanted to be gay and young and I wanted you to be young, with your hair loose and flowers at your breast. And because I was bitter, I blamed you for what life had brought us, and I made the children blow out the lantern and said that the moon was enough. And we came to the town and I wanted roses for you and a golden scarf—but I bought you a coat and a pot and pans, because I thought you had forgotten."

Against his heart, she murmured, "I had not forgotten."

He went on. "Then we came home through the dark wood, and we walked again without the lantern, and one of the children stumbled and was hurt, and all at once I knew you were right when you said they needed more light on the path than the moon gave them. And last night I lay awake and thought of it all—of how you had flushed when I kissed you on the cheek, and of how you had sacrificed youth and girlish vanity for the sake of the children. And of how you had kept our little house clean and shining. And when I saw you today sitting at our table, serene and smiling, and thinking not of yourself but of the happiness of others, I knew that even the young bride was not more beautiful. For there is a loveliness in women which men go mad about; but there is also a loveliness which they worship—the Mother of the home is a—Goddess."

She stirred in his arms. "Am I just—the Mother of a home?"

He smiled at her. "You are my dear and my darling. When I came tonight to the edge of the dark wood, there, constant as a star, was the light you had set for me. You are that to me—my star—"

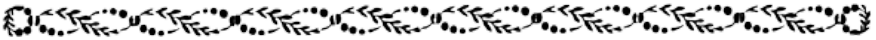
Her cheek was wet as he laid his own against it. And presently he said, "Do you know why I stayed so late?"

And she said, "No."

And he said, “I wanted you to have your roses. And there were none left in the shop where I had seen them, so I went on to the next town; and by luck I found them.”

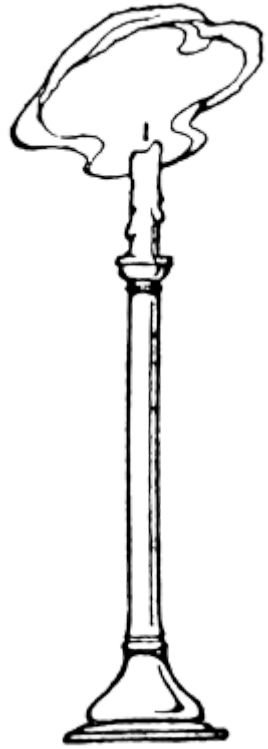
He left her for a moment and came back with the roses in his hand. And the Mother put one of them against her lips and against his lips; and when she laughed, her laugh was like a song.

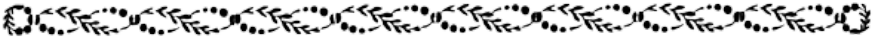
“I love my pots and pans,” she said, “because you have made them beautiful; and I love my warm coat, because when I wear it your arms are about me; and I love the lantern and the moon, because the moon gives a light which is like the love of God, and the lantern is the love we have for each other—and we shall need them both as we walk the path together . . .”



THE STAR IN THE WELL

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THE STAR IN THE WELL



Mary-Alice, eating her very soft-boiled egg and her square of buttered toast, was serenely unaware of the stormy forces gathering about the breakfast table until she heard her mother say, with a sob in her voice, “But I hate to think, Michael, that she won’t have what we had.”

“What did we have?”

“Oh, all the beautiful beliefs about Christmas Day. And now, we’ve lost them, you and I—we’ve lost the shepherds and the angels singing, and the Babe in the Manger, and we’ve lost the Star.”

Mary-Alice reached for another square of toast, but was stopped by her mother’s question, “How many have you had, Mary-Alice?”

“Two.”

“Drink your milk before you have another.”

Mary-Alice having drained her glass, demanded: “How did the Star get losted?”

“There, you see?” said her mother tensely.

“See what?” Michael had risen, and stood looking down at his wife. He was really not thinking of what she was saying; he was admiring the shape of her shining head.

“What can we tell her? Am I to repeat to her what you have just said to me—that Christmas Day is a pagan hold-over, that the Wise Men and all the rest are just—poetic fantasies?”

“We must face the truth.”

“But what is the truth, Michael?”

And there they were at it again, and Mary-Alice having finished her milk slid down from her chair: “ ’Scuse,” she murmured, and flitted away, leaving them to their arguments.

She went into the kitchen where Nora Kelly was cleaning out the refrigerator. Nora was on her knees and had set on the floor around her the various dishes which were to be put back on the shelves. There was a part of a cold chicken from the night-before dinner, and a knuckle of ham with plenty of meat on it, and some purple grapes and some pale green ones so icy cold that they had a frosty bloom; and there was a mold of rice for Mary-Alice’s lunch, and there was the butter and the bottles of milk and a jar of French dressing, and lettuce and tomatoes and a square of cream cheese in silver foil, and a mold of Mary-Alice’s favorite lemon jelly.

Mary-Alice liked to look at the food on the strong, clean plates. “We’ve got to give away a lot of it,” she told Nora.

Nora turned and stared at her. “Give away what?”

“Things to eat.”

“Who’ll we give them to?”

“To all the little children who won’t have any Christmas.”

“Who told you that?” asked Nora Kelly.

“My grandmother.”

Nora Kelly waited a moment before she remarked: “I didn’t know you had a grandmother.”

“Well, I have. Two of them. One of them lives in the country and the other lives with God.”

Nora gasped, then went on with her work. After a while she inquired: “Who told you your grandmother lived with God?”

“My other grandmother.”

“I’ll bet she did,” said Nora Kelly, “I’ll bet it wasn’t your mother or your daddy.”

Mary-Alice, being absorbed in watching Nora Kelly fit all the things back into the refrigerator, had felt no further interest in the conversation. She left the kitchen presently to hunt for her doll, and finding her, began to put her to bed, although it was only eight o’clock in the morning. Time had little meaning for Mary-Alice. She sang lullabies at any hour of the day, and her

lullabies were usually improvised. “The losted Star, the losted Star,” she crooned now, monotonously, above the head of the doll.

Her mother passing through the room and catching the phrase was troubled. “We shouldn’t have talked about it at the breakfast table,” she told her husband, later. “It is still on Mary-Alice’s mind.”

“What is on her mind?”

His wife told him, “The things we talked about. We think she isn’t listening. But she hears everything. And if she once gets an idea in her head she sticks to it—forever.”

It was six weeks before Christmas. Mary-Alice was to have her usual presents. That, her professor-father had decided, was perfectly logical. Gift-giving belonged to the holiday, though one needn’t link it up in the least with—superstition.

Mary-Alice wanted another doll, and wrote it on her list. She wanted also a blue doll’s crib, a doll’s carriage, and a set of dishes.

“But you have so many now,” her mother protested.

“Well, we’ll have to give all these to the little poor children.”

Mary-Alice’s father had been pleased when her mother told him. “That’s the right spirit,” he said, “let us think more of humanity and less of our own souls.”

“What about humanity’s soul?” Mary-Alice’s mother had asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I’d rather give an ideal to a boy or girl than a baby carriage.”

Michael laughed and kissed her. “You’ll get away some day from all that.”

But Mary wouldn’t laugh. “I’d rather come back,” she said, wistfully, “than get away.”

But it wasn’t easy for Mary to come back. It was as if everybody in the world agreed with Michael—all the people who wrote books and the people who wrote for the magazines, and the people who talked at dinner-parties, and the women in the women’s clubs. Mary would put on her trig little suit and the fox fur that Michael had given her, and her close and becoming little hat and go and listen to the women while they talked and it seemed to her that they talked about children’s ears and children’s eyes, and about having

their little minds “psyched” and having their little brains stuffed, and having their little manners mended, and having their tonsils taken out, and having their teeth straightened, but nobody seemed to talk about the children’s souls. “Is it because they think they haven’t any?” Mary-Alice’s mother asked herself. “Yet what would my Mary-Alice be if she were just mind and body?”

She had that, too, to think of when she read the books and the magazines. All the heroines of the stories were like leaves blown by the wind, and things happened to them which made Mary-Alice’s mother shudder. “I don’t want Mary-Alice to be a leaf blown by the wind . . .” and she would shut the books and wonder if there was anyone left in the world who believed in righteousness and faith and the strength of a resolute will.

She talked of these things to Michael. “I can’t think of it in the abstract. Mary-Alice is a concrete proposition. We’ve got to give her a vision. Oh, Michael, don’t we know that without vision the people perish?”

But Michael wouldn’t listen. “It’s all by way of being, progress, my darling,” he would say, “you must think of that.”

“I have thought of it. And I don’t get anywhere.”

And he would flash a smile at her and refuse to be serious: “I wouldn’t bother my brains about it,” and after that he would tell her to put on her amber chiffon, or her periwinkle blue, and if she wore the amber he would cry when she came in, “You’re all honey-colored, dearest—it is like being with the bees in a field of white clover,” and if it was the periwinkle, he would catch her up in his arms and chant, “You are like bluebells . . . blowing in the breeze.” And then they would go on to a dance or a faculty dinner. And if it was a dance, Michael would foot it as deftly as a shepherd with his pipe and the world would seem gay and young, or if it were a dinner, Michael would bring all his brilliant brains to bear on the conversation, and would try to prove that we are all puppets pulled by the strings of Fate, and that our efforts to change our lives must end in futility. And Mary would feel that the world was a horrible place and she wished she didn’t have to live in it.

And going home she would wail: “What makes you say such things?”

“Because I believe them.”

“You don’t really believe them, Michael. It’s just that you’re puffed up with pride of intellect.”

And Michael would laugh triumphantly. “I argued it rather well, didn’t I?”

“Too well.”

For that was the trouble with Michael. He adored blazing trails and breaking down old beliefs, and being called brilliant and broad-minded. So he had thrown overboard everything he had been taught as a child, and he had presented his theories to Mary with such stupendous eloquence that in spite of herself she had been swayed, and now here she was high and dry, and facing what she had to teach Mary-Alice.

And Michael said, “Don’t teach her anything. I refuse to let my child be bounded on the right and left by prohibitions. Let her arrive at her beliefs by her own route.”

Then Mary challenged him. “She is bounded now by prohibitions. We want her to be strong and well, so we make her eat spinach and drink milk, though we know she hates them. Educationally, she follows our program. We don’t let her arrive at learning French without teaching it to her. We don’t expect her to be an expert musician without practising. We tend to her physical needs and her mental needs. We force our theories on her as to diet and to dancing lessons, yet when it comes to matters of the spirit we leave her without guidance.”

But Michael wouldn’t listen. He lifted her up in his arms. “Go and put on your periwinkle blue,” he said, and there it was all over again, with a dinner and a dance, and Michael as gay as a grig and as splendid as—Lucifer.

It was just a month before Christmas that Michael came home with a cold in his head. He was very hot and feverish and had to be put to bed. After a while the cold went down to his throat and then to his lungs. And he had pneumonia.

And they sent Mary-Alice to the country to be with her grandmother.

Mary-Alice’s grandmother was Michael’s mother, and she lived in the South where it wasn’t very cold, and she had a great old house with portraits going up and down the stairs, and high beds with carved posts, and high old clocks that ticked and tocked and chimed and struck all at once and everywhere, and a fat silver service was always set before Mary-Alice’s grandmother when she poured coffee. In the kitchen there was an old black cook with her head wrapped in a white handkerchief, and her name was Mammy Sue and she made waffles and corn cakes and fed them to Mary-

Alice surreptitiously, and she stirred up puddings and stuffed chickens, and while she worked she sang strange old tunes in a wailing voice that made little shivers go up and down Mary-Alice's spine. And there were two old hunting dogs who slept on the hall hearth and who thumped their tails when they heard your step, and rose to greet you like gentlemen. And out-of-doors were tall oaks with bare branches and straight still pines with their rich dark green, and there were borders of box about the old-fashioned garden, and a sundial with ivy leaves twined about it, and in the woods were holly and mistletoe and crow's-foot.

There was a fireplace in Mary-Alice's bedroom.

She asked her grandmother, "Why don't we have radiators?"

"My dear child, what would Santa Claus do if he tried to come down the chimney?"

"There isn't any Santa Claus," said Mary-Alice, serenely.

Her grandmother, somewhat taken aback, said, stoutly, "There's a Christmas spirit."

"There isn't anything," said Mary-Alice, "there isn't any Wise Men or Babe in the Manger, and the Star is losted."

"Who told you that?" her grandmother demanded.

"Daddy."

That night Mary-Alice's grandmother wrote a long letter. In it she told her son Michael what she thought of him. "You are no more learned than your father, Michael, and not half as brilliant. But he used his brains to make men better."

But when she had finished the letter, Mary-Alice's grandmother read it over, and read it again, and then she tore it up, and dropped on her knees. "Lord," she said, with her hands folded, "Oh, Lord, he's sick unto death, and I mustn't send it. And show me what to say to Mary-Alice."

But she didn't say anything. She just mothered her in her old arms, and at night before the child went to bed she read to her from a Book, and sometimes Mary-Alice would fall asleep before her grandmother finished, and through the fabric of her dreams the words she had heard would run like a shining thread . . . of still waters and green pastures, and tall white lilies that neither toiled nor spun.

And there came a night when there was a story which was not out of the Book. "It's a legend," Mary-Alice's grandmother told her. "I heard it when I was in the Holy Land. They showed me the Well of the Magi. And they said when the Wise Men were traveling towards Bethlehem with the Star guiding them that the morning came and the stars were blotted out by the dawning light, even the great Star which they had followed. And the Wise Men wandered on their way, weary and wondering what they should do. And at last they came to a well and stopped to drink. The waters of the well were deep and dark, and as the first Wise Man bent above them he saw mirrored in the deep, dark waters the Star they had lost. And he called to the others and they bent and looked, and behold, there was the Star!"

Mary-Alice, who had been listening sleepily, sat up, wide awake: "But they couldn't see a star in the *daytime*, Grandmother."

"Yes, they could. I've seen stars in our well. Some day I'll show you."

"Tomorrow?"

"Yes. Tomorrow morning."

So the very next day, Mary-Alice went with her grandmother to look into the old well that stood at the edge of the garden. There was a stone wall about it, and a wooden bucket with a chain. The water was sweet and pure, and Mary-Alice reached for the dipper to have a drink.

But her grandmother said: "Before you trouble the waters, look down and you will see the star."

So Mary-Alice looked, and there it was, shining.

And Mary-Alice said, "Then it isn't lost any more?"

"No," said her grandmother, "and it will never be while the world stands."

Now, back in the city at Mary-Alice's home, Michael was fighting for his life. He had two nurses to take care of him, and his wife, Mary, was always in and out. He wanted her all the time, but now and then for her own sake he would send her away. "I mustn't keep you shut up with me, my darling. Go and take a walk and come back with your cheeks rosy."

But with her nights of vigil the roses had gone from Mary's cheeks, and the best she could do when she came in to see Michael was to touch them with color which came out of a little box, so that he might think her gay while it seemed that her heart was broken.

And when she took her walks, she saw everywhere people buying and buying for Christmas. The windows were full of gifts of all kinds, gifts for Father and gifts for Mother, and gifts for Junior and gifts for Daughter, and toys for the children. People went in a mad rush from counter to counter buying brocade smoking jackets, and diamond brooches, and radios and polo things and skating things.

“They remind me of ants, running about,” Mary-Alice’s mother said to herself. “What a wonderful thing it would be for the world if all the shops should vanish from our sight, and we should find ourselves crossing a wide plain and kneeling at the threshold of a stable.”

And then, in her worry about Michael she would feel that she couldn’t be away from him a moment longer, and she would fly back home, and beg the nurses to let her sit by her husband’s bed.

And sometimes they would let her do it, but at other times they would only let her peep in, and because they had said to Mary over and over again that she must have a bright face and not act as if anything was the matter, Mary would have her hair waved and put on the amber chiffon and the topazes which went so well with it, and Michael looking at her through fever-burnt eyes would say hoarsely, “You’re all honey-colored, dearest . . . it’s like flying with the bees in a field of white clover.”

The nurses thought Michael was delirious. But of course he wasn’t. He was just a poet. And the next day when she put on the periwinkle blue she knew he would say what he had always said: “You’re like bluebells . . . blowing in the breeze.”

But when she came in and showed herself, Michael didn’t say anything. He was too ill, and the nurses waved Mary away. But she wouldn’t go very far. She just stood on the threshold and prayed: “Lord, don’t let him leave me . . . don’t!”

She didn’t know that she was praying. She didn’t know that all the things of which Michael had tried to rob her had come back. She only knew that she found suddenly strength to face what might be before her.

That was the day Michael had a dream.

It was a bitter day when everything outside was all slick and frozen, so that the motor cars slipped and slid over the streets, and icicles hung in dangerous daggers at the edges of the roofs, and everyone who had furs was wrapped in them, and those who didn’t have them shivered and shook.

But Michael's dream took him away from Winter weather, and from the room where the nurses moved in white, and where Mary, his wife, came and stood waveringly in the door, sometimes in a blur of amber and sometimes in a blur of blue, and where he was stabbed with swords of pain, and burnt with irons of fever, and weighted with the tons of heaviness which lay on his chest.

It was Spring where Michael went, and in the orchard where he stood the trees were pink and white with bloom and he was a little boy blowing bubbles, and even as he blew them he watched the burnished doves fly down from the roof and wondered what they thought of his bubbles.

Then some one came and sat down beside him. And it was his father. A young father with a thatch of thick gold hair and with shoulders broad under his belted coat, and he said: "It's a wonderful world, isn't it, Michael?"

And Michael said, "Do you like it, Father?"

And his father said: "Yes, don't you?"

And Michael said: "I like blowing bubbles."

And his father laughed and laid a hand on Michael's head: "You don't even know it is a May morning, son, but when you grow up you'll know it."

And after that his father went away. And Michael had forgotten all about it, until now in his dream he remembered the touch of his father's hand on his shoulder. It had made him seem so safe in that safe orchard.

The nurses, watching breathlessly, whispered, "He's relaxing a little . . ."

In his dream he found himself now in a great bed. The wind was blowing outside and a storm was coming up . . . the lightning blazed in great sheets across the sky . . . and the thunder boomed. But Michael was not afraid. For his father had come into the room and was speaking. "It's a wonderful storm, Michael . . ."

And Michael climbed down from the bed and stood at the window.

"Do you like it, Father?"

And his father said: "Yes, don't you?"

And Michael said: "If you were not here I should be afraid."

And his father leaned down to him and lifted him in his arms, and they watched the storm until Michael's eyelids had drooped, and he dropped his

head on his father's shoulder.

"Look, look," the nurses said, "he is sleeping naturally."

And now in his dreams, Michael was an older lad, and he sat in his father's study reading a book, and as he read his father came in and stood beside him.

And his father said: "It is a wonderful Book, Michael."

And Michael said: "Do you believe it?"

And his father said: "Yes, don't you?"

And Michael said: "If I could only be sure, Father."

And his father laid his hand on his shoulder and said: "Some day you will be sure. You have pride of intellect, Michael, and you may for a time run with the tide. But my son can never get away from God . . ."

The nurses stared as they looked at Michael in his sleep. "He is smiling."

When Mary wrote to Michael's mother, she said: "We are coming up to you for Christmas. The doctor thinks that Michael will be strong enough to travel. We'll get there on Christmas Eve, and, darling mother-of-ours, it will be such a thankful Christmas."

When Michael came he was so thin and white that Mammy Sue when she saw him threw her apron over her head and ran back to the kitchen, sobbing. But in a minute she was herself again, and began to give orders about the oyster soup and the chicken jelly which were to be sent up that Michael might refresh himself after his journey, and presently Mammy Sue was herself again and was singing the wailing song that had made Mary-Alice shiver.

And Mary-Alice, upstairs on a stool at her father's feet, was telling him about everything.

"An' we found that losted Star, Daddy."

He had to wrench himself back to those ancient days before his illness. "Oh, yes. . . . Where did you find it, Mary-Alice?"

"In the well. In the daytime. I'll show you."

He said that he had seen it long ago. And after Mary-Alice left, he lay on the couch, looking through the window into the stark, gray branches of the big oak. He was all alone in his room, except for the old red setter who

remembered him and had stolen in to lie on the rug and lick his hand. It was very different in this quiet room with its ancestral furnishings from the bright, bare classrooms at Michael's college. Here were no eager minds challenging him. Nobody to tell him how wonderful he was to have stripped himself free from the past. Here was everything that pertained to the past, to the dignified life built up for him by his father, his grandfather, his great-grandfather, and the men before them . . .

The door opened and Mary came in. She brought on a tray the oyster stew and the chicken jelly. "You should have seen Mammy Sue getting it ready. It was a sacred rite."

She set the tray down and drew up a little table. She put a mulberry-patterned bowl on a white cloth and poured the oysters from a hot pitcher. "Everything is as you like it, Michael. And isn't it heaven just to be here?"

He smiled at her and ate his oysters. Not even to Mary could he express what he was feeling. Yet when he had eaten and drunk, she sat beside him and he held tight to her hand as if he could never let it go.

On the day before Christmas he was up and around but still weak. The house was in a riot of holiday preparation. All the relatives were to come to Christmas dinner and to celebrate Michael's recovery. Mary flying about with tissue paper and seals and red ribbons would stop now and then by Michael's couch to drop a kiss on the top of his head. She came into the living room in the late afternoon to find him in front of the fire, one hand pulling the ears of the red setter thoughtfully, his eyes staring into the coals.

She stood beside him with her hand on his shoulder. "Thinking, Michael?"

He reached up and drew her down to him, crushing her in his arms. "Do you know how wonderful you are?"

"I'm not wonderful, Michael."

"Yes. You are. Mary, at first I loved you for your beauty. But now—if you were gray and toothless—I'd adore you. . . ."

She lay very still in his arms for a little while.

"This old house speaks to me, Mary. Of things I had—forgotten.

"I have thought," he went on, haltingly, "as I have sat among his books in his great chair, that I should like to mean to Mary-Alice what my father meant to me. There are things I remember . . . that came to me when I was

ill. . . . All through my illness, it was as if my father held my hand . . . and I was not afraid. . . .”

When Mary-Alice waked on Christmas morning, it was very dark. She did not dare get up, for her mother had told her she must wait until old George came in and lighted the fire.

Old George did not come for a long time. So Mary-Alice lay in bed and was glad it was a feather-bed because she sank down into the soft warmth like a nest, and she was aware of her head as very small and round on the big white pillow, and of the wide spaces on each side of her, and of the expanse of counterpane which was really a sun-rising quilt with the sun in yellow calico, only you couldn't see it at this moment because old George hadn't come to make the fire, and you didn't dare get up until he did.

Old George arrived finally, pushing the door open with such caution that Mary-Alice hardly knew he was there until he struck a match and the flames shot up, and she could see her long thin stocking all filled out and fat with things that had been stuffed in it, and Mary-Alice gave a crow of delight at the sight of the stocking, and old George who was kneeling on the hearth turned and said in a cautious whisper. “Christmas gif”, Miss Ma'y-Alice.”

“Merry Christmas, George.”

She sat up and talked to him in eager whispers, while the fire burned high and higher, and at last he tore himself away to build the fires in the rooms beyond, and then Mary-Alice crept out of bed. She then found that the old red setter had sneaked in and was sitting by the fire thumping his tail. And Mary-Alice whispered to him, “A Merry Christmas, Rufus,” and Rufus thumped his tail harder than ever.

And then all at once Rufus stood up, and Mary-Alice knew that someone was in the room. And she looked around; there was her father. He had on the new dressing-gown which Mother had given him. It was blue brocade and his hair was a thatch of gold above it, and there was something in his eyes that Mary-Alice had never seen before. A sort of shining beauty that made them as blue as his gown.

And he sat down in the big chair in front of the fire and took Mary-Alice on his knee and she showed him her presents and they talked about them, and after a while Michael said:

“Christmas is a wonderful day, isn't it?”

And Mary-Alice said, “Do you like it, Daddy?”

And her father said, “Yes, don’t you?”

And Mary-Alice said, “Yes. But I thought you didn’t.”

And before there was time for them to say anything else, Mary-Alice’s mother came in, and she said with a catch of her breath, “Michael, you here?”

“Yes, you were sound asleep and I wouldn’t wake you.”

And Mary-Alice’s mother knelt beside the chair and said: “It’s almost too beautiful to be true, Michael.”

Mary-Alice wasn’t sure just what her mother meant by that, but she was sure it must be something which had to do with her Daddy’s new blue coat and his new blue eyes and that new look in his face which made her love him.

And after breakfast when they had had the tree and all the presents, and Mary-Alice was rocking the new doll to sleep in the new crib, her father came in and he had on a thick coat and carried a cap in his hand, and he said to Mary-Alice, “Will you show me the Star?”

And Mary-Alice sat back on her heels and said: “The one in the well?”

“Yes.”

So after Mary-Alice had been buttoned up in her red coat and had pulled her red hat down over her bright curls, they went out together, and walked under the bare oak trees and the rich tall pines, and along the box hedges and past the sundial and came at last to the old well; and they leaned over and looked down into the deep dark water.

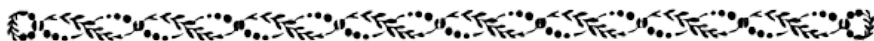
And there was the Star!

And Mary-Alice’s father put his hand on her shoulder and said: “It’s a wonderful Star, Mary-Alice. It has shone through all the ages.”

And Mary-Alice said: “Mother said it was lost.”

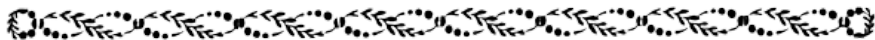
“We have found it—together.”

And Mary-Alice tucked her hand in her father’s hand, and her fingers clung. She had a feeling of great content. She would, she thought, like to hold on tight to her father’s hand forever. It was such a strong hand, and she felt—so safe.



THE WISE SHEPHERDESS





THE WISE SHEPHERDESS



Christmas came on Monday, so there was all of Sunday between old Mary's Saturday marketing and the twenty-fifth. Old Mary's marketing was small, but important. She liked her comfort. She liked to be warm and well-fed and sure of work ahead. Being old, she put every penny she could spare into her savings account. Even now, at Christmas time, there must be no reckless expenditure.

The thought of economy was not, however, unpleasant. She was used to it now, and always created a mild excitement to get the full worth of her money.

Standing before the butcher's stall, with its red and white of lean and fat, she would make her small demands.

"A soup-bone."

The twinkling butcher would let her have her choice. "Twenty-five cents."

"Not enough meat on any of them."

Then from somewhere he would produce a perfect symphony of a bone, prodigal as to marrow and lavish as to flesh; but old Mary, thrilling in anticipation of a bargain, would seem indifferent. "Same price?"

"For a regular customer like you—yes."

And he would wrap it for her, and she would go on, high-hearted, to glean here and there a feather of parsley tied up with a sprig of thyme and summer savory, a carrot or two, and a curl of celery; a small measure of onions, potatoes, and such small groceries as would last her through the week.

But tonight she had more on her mind, so she lingered by the butcher's stall. "I had thought of a chicken."

The twinkling butcher stared down into Mary's young blue eyes. "A little hen?"

"Too tough."

"I have a tender one."

He held it up, and as she surveyed it, she felt again that sense of inner excitement. "I am to eat it all myself," she told him, "it will make more than my Christmas dinner."

"No one to eat with you?"

"Not a chick nor a child." She broke off to test a chicken wing. "You told the truth. It's tender."

"I always tell the truth." He had a big laugh, and he liked old Mary. But he haggled a bit over the price of the chicken, that she might taste to the full her triumph.

There were other people at the butcher's stall—a girl buying a turkey. Mary recognized the girl at once. "We live in the same house, dearie," she said sociably.

"Do we?" The girl was looking at old Mary with unseeing eyes. She had more to think of than an old woman with apple-red cheeks and an awful hat. Of her own young husband, for example, who had asked her to cook a Christmas turkey—and she hated it.

They had quarreled over it. "A woman should know how," he had said. "It's her job."

And she had flung back at him, "I never roasted a turkey in my life."

"Then it's time you learned."

He had, she felt, been brutal. It would be so much simpler for them to have their Christmas dinner out—there were good tables d'hôte in a dozen places.

"You're spoiling all the romance—" she had told him.

"How—?"

"Oh, acting as if things to eat were everything." And she had wept.

“There’s something of romance in order and comfort,” he had said, “and a man can’t live on—hyacinths—”

She hadn’t, of course, known what he was talking about, and after that she had sulked and sobbed, and he had pretended to read the evening paper. But at last he had come over and had knelt down beside her and had laid his rough curly head beside her sleek blonde one.

“We are missing something, honey,” he had said. “What I am talking about has to do with more than food or drink. When I come back to you at night, I want to come back to a—home—”

“Well, what do you call this?” Her eyes had swept the big living room that they had furnished when they were married. They had chosen this old and unfashionable house on a side street downtown, because Terry had said that the spick and span little apartment that she had picked out was like a prison cell, and she had given in, because she was so glad to marry him. But she had had her own way about the furnishing, and everything was bright and beautiful, except his old books, which she loathed. And there was a long mirror in which she could see herself at full length, and she had felt that nothing could be more effective than her pomegranate pajamas and her little black satin coat, with its splash of Chinese embroidery.

“What do you call this?” she had repeated.

His voice had been wistful. “It’s pretty enough, and you’re pretty in it. But my kick is that you don’t really care for it. It’s just a place to show you off—a frame for a picture—but it doesn’t really mean anything.” Then, aware of the blankness of her gaze, he had broken off. “I’m afraid I can’t make it clear to you. . . .” He had risen and was looking down at her.

She hadn’t wanted him so far away. She wanted to be petted—kissed—adored. “Don’t you think it’s dreadful to care so much about *things*?” she had demanded. “You love me and I love you. . . .” She had reached out her hand to him.

He had taken it, but there had been no warmth in his grasp. “How long would you love me, if I didn’t pay the rent and buy clothes on Fifth Avenue? Suppose I gave up my job and just sat at your feet. . . .”

She had flushed. “That’s different.”

“Not so different. . . .”

She had flared. “You ask a lot, when you ask me to stand over a hot stove—and there are plenty of places—”

And he had said, wearily, “I hate to think that on Christmas Day we must go out to one of those awful rubber-stamp restaurants. I want a fire on my hearth, and our own little table, and your dear face on the other side of it, and I want you to love all the things that the women of my family have loved.”

“The women of your house were—slaves.”

And he had flared back, “They were—queens.”

“Oh, why did you marry me?”

“Because I loved you,” he had said, simply. “Because I couldn’t bear to think of you drudging away in that old office—tapping, tapping, tapping on your typewriter. I felt like a bit of a fairy godfather to give you—this—” His hand had swept out to include the room.

She had flushed at that. He could not know what a release it all had been. She remembered how she had washed and ironed her bits of underthings in her small hall room after a grilling day in the office. That was why this home had seemed so much like Heaven. And there had been no serpent in their Paradise until Terry had begun to talk of married life in this ridiculous way. She had thought of it as a fairy tale with a Prince and a Princess.

And Terry had a good salary, not enough, to be sure, to compass the wages of a maid, and Mazie didn’t mind getting the breakfast, but this thing he was talking about—that she should love her job . . . ! She couldn’t see it. She would never see it. And everybody said it was the way you began with a man that kept him loving you—and no man could love a woman whose nails were dull with dish-washing. Yet Terry *was* a Prince—one had to concede that, and suddenly she had surrendered. “I’ll cook your old Christmas dinner,” she had said, and had been rewarded by his kisses.

But now that she was really in the thick of it, she regretted that she had been so easy. She hated the butcher’s stall, and the fat white bird that the butcher was handing out to her. She was aware of her inexperience when he spoke of giblets. She had planned to order the mince pie from a near-by tea room and cranberry sauce could be bought nicely put up in glass. But the giblets and the gravy! Her soul shrank from them! Oh, she had been a fool! She would go back and tell Terry—that she hated the whole thing. She didn’t know how to cook. No one had ever taught her. And if he loved turkey better than he loved her, he could roast it himself!

She countermanded her order, hurriedly. “I think after all, I won’t take it,” she told the butcher.

He stared after her. “Pity she didn’t know her own mind. But she’s pretty enough to change it, if she wants to.”

“She’s married,” said old Mary succinctly, “and she’s got a husband that’s one of God’s own.”

Old Mary really knew very little about the young couple. Her own poor room was at the top of the house, but now and then she met Terry on the stairs. He always had a smile for her. Sometimes he carried her parcels up and stood hat in hand, at her door and talked. But of late his smile had been less radiant, and old Mary had wondered whether his depression had to do with the small butterfly person who danced out to meet him in strange, unmaidenly garments.

A girl like that had no business to meddle with a man’s happiness, old Mary thought as she went on her way. Then as she came to the flower market, she forgot everything in the rapture of bloom and fragrance.

She bought herself a pine wreath and a branch of holly. Then laden and happy, she hurried home.

As she climbed the stairs, she told herself that she should have bought a Christmas log for her fireplace. Old Mary rarely used the fireplace, for her oil-burner was cheaper. But she meant to have a Christmas fire.

On the stairs she met Terry. “Merry Christmas,” he said, and took her bundles from her.

“You’re early,” she said, “with your wishes.”

“I’m happy.” And he went whistling up the stairs.

When he had put old Mary’s parcels on the table, he stopped to explain. “My wife is going to cook our Christmas dinner,” he said. “Perhaps you think that’s a simple thing. But it isn’t. It’s more than a dinner—it’s a symbol.”

Then, as he saw her daze, he touched her lightly on the shoulder. “‘Home-keeping hearts,’” he said, “‘are happiest.’ Years ago I learned that out of Longfellow.” And still laughing, he ran down the stairs.

The next morning when old Mary went to church, the snow was spitting hard round flakes on the sidewalk. But old Mary liked the snow. It belonged to Christmas Day, and her shabby coat was snug, so she trudged on, her

cheeks redder than ever. And coming into church it was wonderful to meet the golden light of it, and the warmth and fragrance, and there was a great star overhead, and presently the choir was singing, “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” and then the sermon began.

Old Mary followed the sermon intently. The minister was young and eager. And he told them the story of the wise shepherdess who had the flock in her care, when her husband went out one Christmas night to search for a lost sheep. And because it was Christmas night, as the shepherdess sat alone, she heard in the distance the sound of music, and knew that in the town there was dancing and merrymaking and a great feast. She was young and she wanted to go, so she went to the door and looked out into the shining night. The music was loud as she listened, and presently she saw dancing figures come over the hill, and voices called, “Come and dance,” and she called back, “I must watch my sheep.” Then they went away, and the music grew faint and fainter, but the heart of the shepherdess was torn with desire—“If I only dared,” she said, and looked out over the sleeping flock. “They will be safe,” she said, “alone.”

So she braided her hair and wrapped herself in a soft blue cloak, and stepped out under the stars. When she had walked a little way, she looked back, and there was no sound from the flock—and she lifted her face to the stars and said, “Keep them safe.” Faint and far off, as if wafted from ineffable heights, a Voice came down to her, “You must keep them. . . .” So she turned and went back to the cottage. As the night wore on, she heard the howl of a wolf, and then of other wolves, and she rose and lifted out of the fire a flaming brand, and went to where the sheep were plunging and bleating in deadly fear. She set the flaming brand before the fold, and the wolves dared not pass it. All night she watched, and brought other flaming brands, and when the morning came and the shepherd returned, the shepherdess showed him what she had done, and he said, “You saved the flock.” But she did not tell him of the dancing and the music, for she was wise in more ways than one.

Old Mary thought about the story on her way home—of the sheep in the fold and of the young shepherdess holding the flaming brand high.

And as she passed a door on the second floor, voices rang out in the clamor of quarreling, and to old Mary, fresh from the peace of the golden-lighted sanctuary, and from the music of the great organ, it seemed dreadful to hear the anger and hate in those voices.

“It’s as if they didn’t love each other,” she said, and she went upstairs, and stood looking out at the falling snow. Suddenly she found herself saying as the young shepherdess had said, “Keep them safe,” and again from ineffable heights a Voice came down, “You must keep them. . . .”

And all at once, old Mary found herself going down the stairs, and when she came to the door, she listened, but all was still, and at last she turned and went away.

Yet if she had looked on the other side of that door, she would not have gone away. For Terry was packing his bag in an awful silence, and Mazie, in a negligée of jade green, was watching him with hard eyes.

When Terry had finished his packing, he threw a little box into Mazie’s lap. “It’s your Christmas present,” he said. “You’d probably rather have it than have me, and I’ll see that you get a check every month. . . .” In spite of himself, his voice shook, and he turned away quickly, that Mazie might not see the tears in his eyes.

And Mazie said, “To think you should make such a fuss about a Christmas dinner. To think that you’d leave me because I wouldn’t roast a turkey—!”

And Terry, turning to face her, said, “It isn’t that. You know it isn’t that. It’s the things you said—about hating it all—after you came home from market—”

Mazie knew that she had said sharp things. They had talked for half the night and had waked to say everything all over again in the morning, and at last Terry had said, “I thought I had married a wife, not a parasite.” And Mazie had flung out, “I wish I had never seen you.” It was then that Terry had begun to pack his bag.

Mazie, watching him in startled silence, felt that if Terry left her, she should die. But she felt that if she gave in now, she would always be doing it.

So when Terry left, she still stood there in her green and gold and watched him, and he went away without a wave of the hand.

When he had gone, Mazie opened the little box, and there, on a bed of white satin, lay a bracelet—jade and gold—and much more expensive than Terry should have afforded. And Mazie remembered that when she told him she wanted it, he had said, “When I’m rich enough, darling. . . .” She remembered that of late Terry had been doing without things he needed, and now she knew the reason why. Suddenly she flung the bracelet from her, and

all that afternoon and all that night, she lay in her green and gold, prone upon the bed, while the Christmas bells rang out.

Upstairs, the next morning, old Mary put the soup on to boil, and stuffed her chicken, and made a mince pie, and then she went out to order wood for her fire.

As she passed the door on the second floor, she heard the sound of sobbing. She knocked and waited, and at last the door opened, and in the door stood Mazie in her pomegranate pajamas and Chinese coat.

“What do you want?” she demanded, and old Mary said, “I heard you crying, dearie.”

“If I want to cry it is my own affair.”

Old Mary would have gone on, but a Voice spoke to her heart, “You must keep her safe from the wolves.”

So old Mary said, “No, it isn’t your own affair, dearie—not on Christmas Day, with all the bells ringing. . . .”

“I hate the bells,” said Mazie, and with that, she slammed the door.

When old Mary went downstairs, all the happiness she had felt in her simple feast had fled. For there had been a look of tragedy in the disordered room that she had glimpsed, and her intuition told her that young Terry had been driven forth, and that the joy which should have been his on Christmas morning had been stolen from him by this sleek-haired child in the pomegranate pajamas. Old Mary hadn’t much patience with the sobbing Mazie. She believed that a wife should buckle on her husband’s armor. Her own life had been one of giving. To her parents, to her husband, to the son who had died in the war. Yet she had always given whole-heartedly, never in servile self-sacrifice, but with a sturdy sense of the rights of others.

And here was this child wringing the heart of the best young husband in the world. Old Mary was sure of it, and so preoccupied was she with the thought that when she reached the corner shop and the man who sold wood said to her “Merry Christmas,” she answered him abstractedly, “The same to you.” She made her purchase and said, “You are to leave it at the door of the room on the second floor. And I wish you’d take it now.”

The man walked on ahead of her, and when he had placed the sack against the wall, and had gone, old Mary knocked again at Mazie’s door, but there was no answer.

She knocked again and again, and at last the door was opened a crack, and Mazie peeped out. "Go away," she said, and, of course, old Mary should have gone, but she didn't. For Mazie's eyes were frightened and her chin quivered. So old Mary said, "It's none of my business, but I'm coming in." She said it with such firmness that Mazie gave way before her, and when the door was shut, the young wife clutched the old woman's hand.

"Terry's left me," she said, "he told me he wouldn't come back, and I didn't believe him, but now. . . ." She broke into helpless weeping.

And old Mary said: "You ought to be glad he didn't come."

And Mazie stared and said, "Why?"

"Because this is no room for a man to see on Christmas morning."

It really was a dreadful room. It was as disordered as Terry had left it, and the shades were down, so that the light of the somber day was deadened to a dull murkiness like the dreariest depths of the sea. The room was cold with a cold that struck at one's bones. Mazie was wrapped in an old bathrobe of Terry's which obscured the gorgeousness of the pomegranate pajamas and the Chinese coat.

Looking about her, Mazie saw that what old Mary had said was true, but she was still sorry for herself, so she said, "He left me because I wouldn't cook his Christmas dinner."

And old Mary said, "He left you for more than that."

And Mazie whispered, "What do you mean?"

"He left you because you let the fire go out on your heartstone," old Mary explained.

"But we've never had a fire."

"It's the fire in your heart I'm talking about."

Mazie stood there, Terry's old bathrobe slipping back from her shoulders and showing the satin sheen beneath, so that the bathrobe seemed like the sheath of a cocoon from which her slim pomegranate-clad figure emerged shining. It was as if, at the same moment, her soul emerged and met the soul of the red-cheeked old woman in the awful hat. Her breath came quickly as she said, "I love him."

"If you love him, make a home for him."

"How can I make a home, when he isn't coming back?"

“If he comes, he must have a fire to welcome him,” said old Mary. She went to the door, and brought in the wood and built a fire on the empty hearth. When the flames were leaping, she and Mazie worked together until the room was in order. They pulled up the shades, and the white light of the snowy day came in through the windows, and was warmed by the golden light of the fire.

Then Mazie said, “Everything is ready. . . .”

But old Mary said, “Everything is not ready. You must cook his Christmas dinner. I will bring down my little chicken and the other things and help you. But when he comes, you must not ask me to eat with you. This will be your first Christmas with your husband, and you must be alone, as I was on that first Christmas day, with the man I loved.”

Mazie knelt beside her and said, “Tell me about it. . . .”

So old Mary told her. “We were very poor, but we worked together. And we always played fair.”

“What do you mean by playing fair?”

“We each gave as much as we asked.”

“I’ve always asked, and never—given. . . .”

“You’ve got to play fair with men like Terry. The other kind don’t count. A man’s like a little boy in many things. He wants just a fire and food and a woman’s love. And I don’t care how far he goes away, he’ll come back if you are square with him.”

After a little silence, old Mary said. “The next year our little son came to us . . . and I felt like Mary—the Mother of God. . . .”

Mazie spoke in a breathless whisper. “I should like to be—like Mary. . . .”

After that there were no words between them, but their hearts spoke.

The morning passed, and Mazie said, “I told you he would never come.”

“If he won’t come, we must find him.”

“I don’t know where to look. I’ve called his club and called his office.”

“Call them again.”

So Mazie called the club, but he was not there. Then she called the office, and when Terry’s own voice answered her, she said, “Oh, Terry,

Terry, come home. . . .”

As Terry replied, old Mary saw Mazie’s face turn white. Suddenly the girl hung up the receiver. “He says this isn’t home, and he isn’t coming.”

Old Mary stood up and said, “I’ll go and bring him.”

But first she went upstairs and brought down her Christmas dinner, and told Mazie how to cook it. Then she put on her hat, and her warm coat, and went out into the whirling storm.

It was the worst blizzard in years. Traffic was practically at a standstill. Old Mary was strong, but the struggle tired her. She hated the howling wind. “It’s like the wolves,” she told herself, and thought of the shepherdess with her burning brand.

She came at last to a tall building, and on entering was greeted by a heavenly stillness. The elevator boy helped her shake off the snow. “You’re a brave soul, Mother,” he said, and old Mary said, “I’ve weathered worse storms than this.” Then she went upstairs and found Terry.

She did not knock at his door. She walked straight in, and there was Terry at the window, looking out. . . . He whirled about when he heard her step, and said, “For Pete’s sake, it’s old Mary. How did you get here?”

“I walked through the snow.”

He stared at her. “Great guns. . . .” Then, “What can I do for you?”

“You can go home, to your wife.”

Terry froze at that. “Did Mazie send you?”

“Nobody sent me,” said old Mary. “But I have talked with Mazie, and she is sorry.”

“Words are cheap,” said Terry.

Then old Mary told Terry about the wise shepherdess. “She was young, and I am old, but she guarded her sheep. And this morning I prayed for you and your wife. I said, ‘Keep them safe,’ and a Voice said, ‘You must keep them.’”

When she had finished, Terry lifted her hand and kissed it. Then there was a long silence.

And out of that silence, Terry said, “I dreamed a dream, and it was shattered. How can I put it together?”

“Life isn’t a matter of making our own dreams come true,” said old Mary. “It’s making others dream with us.”

And Terry said, “Can I ever make Mazie dream?”

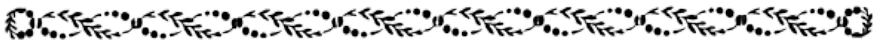
And old Mary said, “Yes. She loves you.” Then she told him what Mazie had said on her knees beside her.

At that Terry put on his coat and picked up his hat, and said, “I’ll find a taxi or break a blood-vessel.”

He went out and came back with a taxi, and put old Mary into it, and they puffed and snorted through the drifts until they reached home. While Terry paid the man, old Mary went upstairs, and presently young Terry followed her. The door opened and there was the golden-lighted room with the leaping flames, and with the little feast set forth, and there was Mazie, her face lighted by a look that clutched at Terry’s heart and he took her in his arms and said, “Forgive me.”

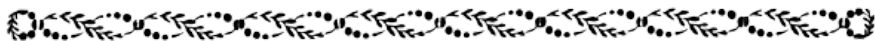
They went in together, and old Mary closed the door after them. She climbed the stairs to her own cold room, and took off her wet hat and her wet coat, and set her pot of soup on the stove, and wrapped herself in a blanket and sat looking out at the whirling snow.

Presently she would have her simple dinner, and she would envy no man anything. For life is not all food and drink. And Old Mary had kept the wolf from the door of happiness. Sitting there wrapped in her blanket, she saw herself no longer old and wrinkled, but young and straight, with her hair streaming and her soft blue cloak about her, holding high her flaming brand against the darkness of the night.



THE BURNING BUSH





THE BURNING BUSH



“If you were a puppy or a kitten I might leave you on the doorstep,” said Thisbe as she ran along.

The wind boomed and beat upon her. She was shivering and shaking. She had on a sable coat but it didn’t keep her warm. Nothing, she felt, would ever keep her warm until her heart stopped being frozen.

“If you were a *puppy*,” she gasped with the wind in her throat, “or a *kitten*.”

But the thing which was warm in her arms in spite of her frozen heart was a baby. She couldn’t leave it on a doorstep. She couldn’t leave it anywhere. She had to go on with it.

She had gone on with it for three whole weeks. It hadn’t all been like this—running along a dark road with the wind booming and beating. At first it had been in a hospital with everything white and shining and then it had been in a high-ceiled room with everything warm and rosy.

But that was before her heart was frozen.

She ran on, stumbling, gasping, beaten by the wind.

There were no houses on either side of the road, no lights gleaming in the windows. No welcomes. Just stark frozen fields and beyond them on the horizon a hard strip of yellow where the sun had gone down. The brightness of the yellow strip seemed to intensify the blackness above it.

“If you were a *puppy*,” Thisbe began again, and stopped. There weren’t any doorsteps so why go on saying such silly things? If the baby had been a puppy or a kitten there wouldn’t have been any place to leave him.

And anyhow, why should she leave him? He was hers. He was swathed in a pink blanket so that not an inch of him showed, but she knew what he

was like—curled up asleep, white as milkweed in a pod, and fragrant with rose powder. His little head was bald and his fingers crumpled up and he had a dimple in his chin.

Her knees began to feel stiff, her legs petrified. If this kept up she might have to walk like the wooden soldiers in the *Chauve Souris*. It had been a million years since she and Pyramus had seen the wooden soldiers. And they had laughed a lot.

If only someone would come along and ask her to ride. But not a car had passed. Her own fault of course. She had chosen a lonely road lest someone should try to follow.

Yet why should they follow? Nobody wanted the baby. They had said so, Pyramus and Pyramus' mother.

They had not known she had heard. They had thought she was in bed in her high-ceiled room. But she had dressed for dinner to surprise them, and had sped down the stairs and had seen them by the fire in the drawing-room, Pyramus standing up and looking down at his mother with his thin face somber and a cigarette in his long thin hand.

It was that adorable thinness of his which had captivated Thisbe. She felt that if he had been fat she would never have looked at him. At first. Of course now it didn't matter. If he grew fat and bald and had wrinkles she would still adore him. There was more to Pyramus than physical charm—there was the wonderfulness of his mind, the quick light play of his wit, his moods of tenderness.

There had been no tenderness in his voice when Thisbe heard him say, "I'm sorry too, Mother."

"You and your wife might have stayed on here with me . . . but the house is too crowded for babies."

"There is only one baby."

"One is too many."

He stood staring into the fire while his mother went on talking. She told him she would rent an apartment for him and pay all the bills; but she wouldn't have a baby in the house. There would have to be nurses and it would upset the servants, or if there weren't nurses the servants would be upset by having more work than they wanted. And anyhow, leaving out the servants, one's guests must be considered . . . and a baby could be most

disturbing . . . that she hoped Pyramus would come and stay as often as he could . . . but Thisbe and the baby might stay away forever for all she cared.

Of course she didn't say it like that. Pyramus' mother had a tactful tongue. But Thisbe hanging over the stair-rail knew what she meant. And she felt that Pyramus must know. And if he knew, why didn't he shake his fist and shout: "*Do you think I'll take a penny? Do you think there's anything in the whole wide world as wonderful as being the father of Thisbe's baby?*"

But neither of these things did Pyramus say. And so Thisbe, flaming, had fled up the stairs and had sent the nurse down to dinner, and had written a note to Pyramus and had thrown on her sable coat and had stuffed some money in her purse, and had snatched up the baby and a pink blanket to wrap him in, and now . . . here they were on the road . . . and she had been running and running!

By this time back in the big house Pyramus would have found her gone. Perhaps at this very moment he was going through the rooms crying, "Thisbe, Thisbe."

No one else called her "Thisbe." Her real name was Anne Elizabeth but in the first rapturous days of their lovemaking Pyramus had whispered:

*"The moon shines bright: in such a night as this . . .
Did Thisbe fearfully o'ertrip the dew."*

They had been then to each other not commonplace people but beatified beings who belonged to romance.

But now she and Pyramus were no longer young lovers under the moon. They were father and mother. Always after this, wherever they went, there would be the baby. Whether they wanted him or not.

Well, of course she would always want the baby even if Pyramus didn't. . . .

He would be frantic, of course, when he couldn't find her. He would run upstairs and down, calling, "Darling, darling." That was the trouble with Pyramus. He was always hanging over her and saying "darling" while his mother paid the bills. Thisbe had felt that he ought to work for a living. It had shocked her dreadfully when after her marriage she had found that he did not think it necessary to support his wife. He painted pictures but they didn't sell. He really painted them very well, but as long as his mother took care of him he didn't need the money and he hated to push his wares. Thisbe

worshiped every mark of his brush. She felt that if he had lived in a garret he might have been great. But his mother had always disagreed with Thisbe. They had even come to words about it.

“A man should be the head of the house,” Thisbe had said, with scarlet in her cheeks.

“I have plenty of money. Why should his talent be commercialized! You can stay with me as long as you like. There’s room enough and to spare.”

But now there was no room for the baby! Thisbe, running along, found strange words beating in her ears. “And she . . . ‘laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.’ ”

Well . . . of course . . . Mary found a place to lay the Child. But there weren’t any mangers in these days. People just had places to keep their cars, with oil cans and vacuums and concrete floors, and there wouldn’t be any hay to make a baby’s bed nor any soft-eyed cows to fall on their knees nor any little gray donkey nor any bird on the sill. . . .

After a while she stopped running. Her legs were giving out. The hard low light in the west was gone. The wind sweeping up against the sky had brushed it clear. The stars burned in a blackness that was like a sable canopy.

The tears were freezing on her cheeks. She tried to get at her handkerchief. She held the baby on her left arm while she fumbled with her right hand in the pocket of her coat. The handkerchief came out at last and brought with it her best pink powder puff. The powder puff fell to the ground. She couldn’t stoop to pick it up. If she did it might wake the baby. So she let it lie where it had fallen, like the petal of an enormous rose.

It had begun to snow. Oh, there must be a house somewhere! As she turned this way and that, seeking a sign of habitation, a light suddenly jumped out at her. Up the hill it winked at her like a jovial eye inviting her to adventure.

She climbed the hill by means of rough stone steps which led to a flagged walk. It was so dark she could not see the house, but she was guided by that winking light to the front door where she sank on the steps, out of breath, pierced by the bitter cold.

It would be warm in the house. She felt for the bell, pushed it and the sound of its whirring came faintly to her ears. The moments passed but no one opened the door. At last she knocked, knocked again, beating hard and harder. Perhaps they were deaf . . . perhaps they were asleep . . . perhaps *they were out!*

Well, if they were out and the door was locked Pyramus would find her on the doorstep, dead! There came again an intriguing vision of herself and the baby blanketed with snow, like the Babes in the Wood—and Pyramus bending down to them. . . .

She shuddered away from that. The baby mustn't die. Once more she beat with bruised hand on the unyielding boards. Then she reached for the knob, turned it. The door swung back. It had been left unlocked; the warmth rushed out at her!

She said, going in, "I'm sorry . . . but you didn't hear the bell. . . ."

She found there was no one to listen but a fat black cat that was sitting by a fat black stove. There was, indeed, nothing alive in the house but the black cat and a canary in a cage. The canary was round as an orange, with his head under his wing. He did not wake when Thisbe entered, but the cat got up and stretched and yawned and sat down again.

The room seemed to be a sitting-room although there was a bed in it. Besides the bed there were some cushiony chairs and a small table with a leaf up and set for one with blue china. The bed was back in a corner. It was a pineapple four-poster and it was covered with a quilt that had pink rising suns on it, the kind that our great-grandmothers made with infinitesimal stitches.

Thisbe, approaching the bed in its shadowy corner, was sure that the mattress was made of feathers. If she could lie down on it she would hug the baby close to her heart and sleep for a thousand years!

The bed was so high she had to stand on a stool to get into it. She didn't undress. She simply dropped her fur coat on a chair, pulled off her galoshes, kicked her slippers under the bed, released the baby from the folds of the pink blanket and crawled in beside him under the sun-rising quilt.

The warmth was heavenly. She and the baby sank down among the feathers until there was just the hint of a hump. Sleepiness swept over her in waves. It was like taking ether at the hospital.

She was aware that the black cat had jumped on the bed and was curled up at her feet. She was aware too of the cat's song. . . .

It was like coming out of ether to hear the bell whirring through the house and not care who answered, to hear a knock at the door and not be curious as to who was knocking.

Then someone tried the knob and a voice said, “I am sorry to disturb you. But I am looking for my wife. . . .”

Thisbe had drawn the pink sun-rising quilt up over her face so that there was just a peephole for one eye.

The black cat moved. Thisbe held herself very still. If Pyramus should see the little hump in the bed. . . .

The cat saved the situation by jumping down and brushing against Pyramus’ legs. He picked it up and smoothed its head; “Isn’t anyone at home, puss-cat?”

At the sound of his voice the bird in the cage waked. It began a sharp chirping. Thisbe’s heart stopped beating. . . . *What if the baby waked and cried?*

But the baby did not wake, though Pyramus tarried and took off his fur gloves and held his hands to the fire and lighted a cigarette and held it in his long thin fingers—those adorable fingers. Thisbe remembered the first touch of them against her cheek.

She wondered what the owners of the house would think if they should come in and find him smoking. They might take him for a thief, and . . . *what if the man of the house had a gun!*

She wanted to shriek, “Go away, go away; nobody must find you!”

She did not stop to think what would happen if she was found in somebody else’s bed, like Goldilocks with the three bears!

Well, he went before anything happened, but not before he had opened the door and called into the night, “Thisbe, Thisbe . . . !”

Her heart cried out to him but her lips made no sound. If she answered Pyramus she would have to go back with him. And she couldn’t go back. There was no room for her and for the baby in his mother’s great house.

So she let him go. And after he had gone the snow fluttered against the windowpanes soft as the wings of butterflies. The cat came again to the foot of the bed and sang himself to sleep. The bird tucked his head under his wing; the baby slumbered on. The blood which had pounded in Thisbe’s veins when she had heard her lover’s voice flowed less tumultuously. Once more waves of warmth engulfed her and she sank into unconsciousness.

It seemed hours after that she was once more aware of someone in the room. This time a woman. She was tall, but not tall and thin like Pyramus.

She was tall and fat. When she had taken off her coat and hat she showed herself a rather fine figure in a gray skirt and a pepper-and-salt sweater, and with gray hair.

With the entrance of the woman everything in the room seemed to come to life. The cat jumped down, the bird began to sing and the fire to crackle; even the wind blowing outside had a sociable sound as if it wanted to come in and be cozy and comfortable with the rest of them.

The woman talked to the bird and talked to the cat. "Did you think I would never get here? Well, my car broke down. I had to fix it. My hands are half frozen."

She held out her hands to the fire. "I've brought you a Christmas present, Tommy," she said to the cat. "I'm going to hang it on the tree."

Christmas!

The word seemed to shout itself in Thisbe's ear. She had forgotten that it was Christmas Eve. It seemed uncounted centuries since Pyramus had stood by her bed and had told her of the great tree below in the ballroom and of how he hoped she might come down, and of the guests who would dine with them, and of the presents there would be for everybody.

Perhaps even now they were dining and nobody had been told that Anne Elizabeth had run away. Or if they had been told, the whole thing would be blamed on Anne Elizabeth.

The gray woman opened the front door and brought in a snow-powdered balsam bush. Its foot was set in a wooden standard so that it stood steady when she set it on the broad sill of the window. It was not very tall but it was peaked at the top, with spreading branches, and presently in the warmth it began to give out aromatic odors.

The woman asked her cat, "Are you hungry? Well, so am I. We'll have supper in a second."

With that Tommy the cat and his mistress ramped out to the kitchen. At least Tommy ramped, with his tail like an interrogation point. Thisbe could hear him beyond the door, mewing inquiringly, while the voice of the gray woman expostulated, "If you don't get from under my feet I'll never have things ready."

Thisbe could hear too the rattling of paper as the bundles were opened. There was the clatter of iron skilletts and in due time the air was filled with

the delectable fragrances of broiling chops, of toasting bread and of boiling chocolate.

Thisbe sat up. She had a reckless feeling that she didn't care if she was discovered. She was as hungry as the cat. She had had no dinner and her lunch had been light. The thing she wanted more than anything else in the whole wide world was food.

Yet to reveal herself and ask for her supper? The gray woman might turn her out. Runaway women with babies in their arms were not always welcome.

Yet the thing was excruciating! To whiff the fragrances which were not for her. Thisbe adored chocolate. She had always adored it, and Pyramus had loved to see her drinking it and wearing the lace cap with the blue rosettes, and the blue silk bed jacket which was the first thing he had bought her.

They had stayed at a marvelous place in Paris and she had had delicate little pastries with her chocolate, and Pyramus had hung over her as if she were something too precious to be real . . . and now she was homeless . . . hungry . . . wondering if she dared ask for her supper.

Well, why not? A woman who was kind to a cat wouldn't turn a baby out in the cold. For the first time since she had overheard Pyramus' conversation with his mother, the baby appeared to Thisbe as an asset. In this moment of need he might prove an advocate.

Yet to meet the amazed eyes of the gray woman! To say in effect, "My child is cold and starving!" It savored too much of the old melodramas.

As a matter of fact the baby wasn't starving. It was exceedingly well-fed, and as for herself she had worn under the sable coat a velvet frock with silver ribbons. It was the warmest thing she had and the slippers which she had kicked under the bed had silver buckles. And the resulting effect was that she looked like a million dollars and not in the least like a soul in distress.

Thisbe decided that the baby must speak for her. She threw back the sun-rising quilt, climbed down from the bed, picked up her child, and with an eye on the half-shut door of the kitchen behind which the gray woman was busy with her culinary preparations, darted toward the stove and laid the baby down in a nest of pink blanket. Then drawing back among the shadows she watched, as once upon a time his mother had watched the infant Moses. The words of the old song jiggled in her mind, "Pharaoh's daughter on the

bank. . . . Moses in the pool.” How she had loved to sing it years ago with Pyramus and his college mates before she was married.

Oh, why were her thoughts so shallow? This was a serious moment. What would happen if the gray woman was not so kind to babies as she was to cats? Would she turn them out from her snug little house, to go on and on in the bitter night?

The gray woman came presently, carrying a blue chocolate pot. The cat followed her and they approached the stove.

And there on the hearthstone Pharaoh’s daughter stopped still and stood staring down at the baby.

He was awake. His watching mother could see his small fists waving above his blanket. They were such tiny fists. . . .

The gray woman set the blue pot carefully on the stove and bent down to the child. “Who brought you?” she demanded.

Thisbe dared not answer. Her throat was dry. The gray woman straightened up and flung her voice toward the shadows about the bed. “Is anyone here? Is anyone hiding?”

Out of the shadows came Thisbe, her silver buckles twinkling, her blonde head shining, her velvet frock showing a childish length of gray silk stocking.

“That’s my baby,” she said. “I thought if you saw him first you might not turn us out.”

The gray woman gazed upon her with an air of astonishment. “You look like a baby yourself.”

“It’s my short hair and skirts,” said Thisbe succinctly. “I am really quite old—twenty-three.”

“What happened?” the gray woman interrogated. “Did your car break down? And where were you when I came in?”

“We were in bed. I was dead for sleep. I didn’t stop to take off my clothes.” She paused a moment to increase the dramatic effect. “I didn’t come in a car. I brought the baby in my arms. I am . . . running away!”

“Running away?”

Thisbe nodded. “From my husband.”

The gray woman opened her lips and shut them. But her eyes asked questions.

Thisbe answered them. “I . . . was on my way to the railroad station. I . . . I didn’t think when I started how far it was. And it was so . . . cold . . . and I couldn’t walk any more . . . and then I saw the light in your window and I opened the door . . . and there was the bed . . . and I was so tired! I didn’t think until afterward that I was trespassing. . . .”

“You are not trespassing,” the gray woman told her; “I am glad to have company, and to help you if I can.”

Thisbe went on explaining: “I have an aunt in the city. If I could stay here for the night I could go to her the first thing in the morning.”

“Of course you’ll stay. I wouldn’t turn out a cat in this storm. And now you’d better sit down and have supper with me. There’s plenty for both. I’ll get another cup and plate.”

She went into the kitchen and returned with the extra china, the chops and toast and a dish of baked potatoes. “I put the potatoes in the oven before I went out,” she told Thisbe, “they’re done just to a turn. They are such big ones they didn’t spoil in spite of the long wait.”

Thisbe was possessed by a feeling that the whole thing was fantastic—like a play she and Pyramus had seen years ago—“Six Who Pass While the Lentils Boil.” So much had happened While the Potatoes Baked. How amusing it would be to tell Pyramus . . . but then, she was never again going to tell Pyramus *anything*!

The chops! The toast! The chocolate!

“I am ashamed of my appetite,” said Thisbe when it was all over.

“I wouldn’t have believed,” the gray woman told her, “from the looks of you that you lived on anything more than the wing of a chicken.”

“Well, of course,” Thisbe had an air of apology, “in these days there’s the baby.”

“You don’t mean,” said the gray woman, “that you are *not* bringing it up on a bottle?”

“Of course not.”

“Thank God,” said the gray woman, “you have some sense if you are pretty.”

“I am not half as pretty as I was when Pyramus fell in love with me.”

“Pyramus?”

“My husband. That’s not his real name. It’s a romance-name.”

The gray woman nodded. “I know. And he calls you ‘Thisbe.’ Once upon a time I played that game with my husband.”

It seemed to Thisbe incredible that the gray woman should ever have spoken the language of lovers. But of course, years ago, when she wasn’t stout . . . and her knuckles weren’t knobby. . . .

Thisbe had the baby now in her arms. She had given him his supper and he was sound asleep. She said, “I suppose I ought to tell you why I ran away.”

She told, and the gray woman said, “My dear, that’s no reason to leave a man.”

“Why not?”

“You can’t run away from life.”

“I couldn’t stay where I wasn’t wanted. It was like Mary. . . . ‘When she came to the inn it was crowded, and there was no room for the Child.’ ”

The gray woman’s voice was sharp, “Stop being sorry for yourself.”

Thisbe sobbed on.

“You haven’t suffered enough,” the gray woman said, “to be sorry for yourself. Do you think that when Mary held her little son in her arms she cared if the inn was crowded? It was only when she lost him that her heart—broke. . . .”

The last words came in an agony of tears and Thisbe whispered, “Have you . . . lost a son?”

“He died—in the war.”

They talked for a long time after that. The gray woman felt that Thisbe should go back to her husband. “You can’t have ’em perfect. It’s best to push ’em and prod ’em.”

“I don’t want to push him and prod him.” Thisbe’s voice was on the ragged edge. “I don’t want anything except to go to bed.”

The gray woman reached out a kind hand. “You mustn’t think I don’t sympathize. Only life has such hard things for us women that it’s well to

know we're not having the worst. You sleep on it, my dear." She rose: "I'll put you in the big bed, and the baby in a basket by the fire. I'll take the bed in the room beyond. I'll give you some night things and a warm dressing gown. It grows cold when the fire dies, and I'll have a hot-water bag for the baby."

Thisbe, lying snug under the pink sun-rising quilt, watched the gray woman cover the bird and carry the black cat to his basket in the kitchen and bend down for a last look at the baby, and it was not until she had said, "Good night" that Thisbe remembered one thing had been left undone. The Christmas bush in the window had not been trimmed.

In spite of her weariness she lay awake for a long time, and when the clock struck twelve she was still awake, but she was never quite sure of the hour or the moment when the three men entered and she saw their shadows on the ceiling.

They were tall shadows, like Pyramus' shadow, and they crossed and recrossed as Thisbe stared up at them startled. And at last, with her heart beating madly, she raised herself on her elbow and looked.

Her fear fled as she saw that the three men were kneeling about the sleeping baby. They had gifts in their hands . . . jewels that glittered . . . and gold that glimmered . . . and jars that gave out fragrances. She knew at once who the men were. She had seen them a thousand times on the paintings by the old masters when she and Pyramus had made the rounds of the great galleries in France and Spain and Italy.

One of the men was old and white, and one of them was young and dark, and the third was neither young nor old, but at the time of a vigorous maturity, with his hair like copper and his skin like bronze. They all wore splendid robes, richly colored, and when they spoke their voices seemed to come from far away, with a deep sound like the beat of bells.

And the young man was saying: "The tree is not trimmed."

And the old man said: "Of what avail are gifts, when his mother has robbed him of that which is more precious than myrrh or frankincense or gold?"

And the man who was neither young nor old said: "*Yea, she has robbed him of a father!*"

They rose then to their feet and again their shadows wavered and crossed on the ceiling as they busied themselves about the Christmas bush. And

suddenly the tree began to burn with a sacred fire, and every branch was tipped with a star, and at the very top was a small and shining cross.

And one of the voices which was like the beat of bells said: "The cross is for the mother. When she wears it, she will know what she has to do."

After that the bush seemed to grow bright and brighter, and the rest of the room grew darker and darker, and in that darkness the figures of the three men were swallowed up and after a while, though she heard no sound of their passing, Thisbe knew that they were gone.

She waited for a long time before she crept out of bed and approached the burning bush. She felt no heat from it. There was only an incandescent glow that almost blinded her eyes. She reached for the cross and hung it about her neck, and for the first time since she had run away from Pyramus her heart was warm.

She found herself after that out in the wild night with the baby in her arms. She had left behind her all the things that gleamed and the things that glittered. She had left behind the safety and shelter of the snug house. She knew what she had to do. She was not a thief. She had to take the baby back!

The wind buffeted and beat her. But she did not feel the cold. The cross above her heart still gave out that strange warmth which wrapped her about like a blanket.

She came at last to the great house where she had lived with Pyramus. It was lighted up, all of its windows gleaming, and between the parted curtains she could see crowds of people passing back and forth through the big rooms.

She ascended the steps to the front door and rang the bell. No one came. She beat the knocker and there was no answer. She went at last to one of the windows and tapped. The people inside looked toward her but did not seem to see her.

Again she returned to the great door and rang the bell and beat upon the panel. At last it gave way, but when she tried to enter the crowd within pressed forward and cried: "There's no room. There's no room for you and the baby."

"I want Pyramus," she told them. "You needn't let me in, only let me see my husband."

But Pyramus was not there. Although there was Pyramus' mother with her pearls and her pompadour and her pointed nose, and she was saying, "You can't come in. The place is crowded."

Once more the door was shut and Thisbe fell back crying, "I want Pyramus. I want my husband . . ." but no one answered, and at last she was alone with the baby in the wild night, calling, "Pyramus . . . Pyramus . . . !"

And then she heard him saying, "My darling, I am here."

His arms were about her. She was aware of the softness of his fur coat, the fresh coldness of his cheek against hers.

She clung to him. "They wouldn't let me in."

"Who wouldn't?"

"The people in the house."

A moment's silence, then, "My darling . . . you aren't awake! Thisbe . . . *Thisbe!*"

Opening wide her eyes, she found that he was sitting on the edge of the pineapple bed, and that he had picked her up and wrapped her in the pink sun-rising quilt. And there was the smell of coffee boiling, the trill of the song of a bird. . . .

She whispered, "How did you know I was here?"

"I found your powder puff in the road, last night, and I came in and called; but no one answered. So I went away and wandered until morning. And then I came back, because I knew you must have passed, and I knocked, and a woman opened the door . . . and let me in."

"I heard you call last night."

"And you didn't answer? How you must hate me."

And Thisbe whispered, "I don't hate you. I love you. And I had no right to rob you of the baby."

Pyramus' eyes as he looked down at her had an awakened look in them.

"You had a right to rob me," he said. "You had a right to run away. When I read your note I knew that I had been a cad and a coward. I had tried to please you and I had tried to please my mother. And all the time I should have been honest with myself. I should have known that a man who dares to have a child must work for it. I thought romance could be enough for you

and me, but it isn't enough without a roof to cover our heads, and the roof must be of my own building.

“Last night I told my mother that I would never take another penny. I told her that if I could not paint I would plow. She laughed and kissed me and said I would come back. But I shall not go back.”

He laid Thisbe again among her pillows and began to walk the floor, speaking in the impassioned poetic way of his that won her heart.

“Dearest, I am going to paint a great picture. I shall paint the things I saw last night when I opened the door of this little house. There will be this wide bed and the quilt with the pink suns, and a black cat curled up and the glow from the black stove. And I shall paint it so that all the people in the world will want peace and purring cats and little houses. I shall paint with all the talent that was born in me when my mother bore me, and by all the strength that was born in me last night when I thought I had lost you.”

Pyramus, the poet, striking a new note on his lyre! Perhaps these things might come to pass. Perhaps not. But whatever happened, Thisbe would always know his wistful dream for her.

“And when I sell the picture,” he bent his tall figure to sweep her into his arms, “when I sell the picture I shall buy a house like this . . . and we'll live happy ever after!”

The gray woman coming in said, “A Merry Christmas.”

Pyramus put his hands on her shoulders. “May we stay with you until I make a home for her?”

And the gray woman looking up at him asked, “You fought in the war?”

“Yes.”

“My own son never brought a wife to me. My Christmas will be less lonely because of you and the child.”

She took him off after that with her to the kitchen, where the baby in his basket was watched over by the black cat. And Thisbe, left alone, dressed herself in the velvet frock and the silver slippers, and tied on a great white apron, so that she might begin at once to look like the mistress of a little house.

But before she went to join the others, she stood for a moment beside the Christmas bush which had burned in the night with a sacred fire. And she put her hand to her neck where she had hung the cross. It was no longer

there, but she found that her heart was still warm. It was so warm indeed that no coldness was left for anybody, not even for Pyramus' mother.

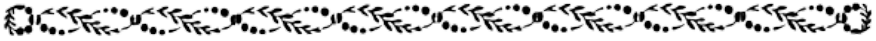
So she said to Pyramus when he came to look for her, "A son must not be separated from his mother. I should die if some day a wife took my son from me."

"Our son."

"I want your mother to come some day to our little house."

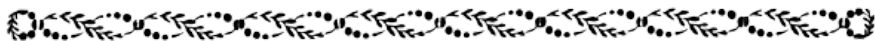
And Pyramus kissed her and said, "You are an angel."

But she knew she was not an angel. She was just a woman. And she knew too that in the night just passed she had learned many things: that one may run far, but one can never run away from life; that one must never rob a child of its father; and that if one wears a cross, one's heart will be warm always toward the world.



THE CRYSTAL BOWL





THE CRYSTAL BOWL



The Grey Little Grandmother stood at the kitchen window and watched the snow come down. “It is very deep,” she said to the Hired Girl, “they’ll have a hard time getting through.”

The Hired Girl, whose name was Helga, lifted the lid of the pot and looked in. “I hope they won’t keep supper waiting.”

The words sounded hard, but they were not hard. Helga always talked like that, but the things she did were beautiful. That very afternoon, she had made tarts so that the children might have them when they came home, and nobody had told her to do it.

The supper waited a long time; then a big man arrived alone. He was as fair as a Norse god, and was the son of the Grey Little Grandmother.

“It’s a dreadful night,” he said, as he stood shining under the lamp, with the snow melting on his leather jacket. “I didn’t dare bring the rest of them. Little Nan has a sore throat. I’m afraid we shall have to spend tomorrow with Emily’s mother.”

“Do you mean that you won’t be home for Christmas dinner?”

“Yes, I’ll stay with you until morning, then drive over and eat with them. If little Nan is better we can come back here in the late afternoon, and have the tree and the presents.”

He took off his leather jacket, and his strong body in its silver-colored sweater made him seem more than ever like a young Norse god. “Will you be lonesome?” he asked. “If you think you will, I won’t go. I don’t quite like the idea of leaving you—and it’s a long ride for you to take in such weather.”

The Grey Little Grandmother gazed up at him. Standing there in the shadowy kitchen he lighted it like a torch. He was her son, and he was

willing to stay. That was heart-warming enough without accepting the sacrifice. So she said: "I shan't mind in the least, and it wouldn't be Christmas for Emily and the children unless you were with them."

"Well, of course you'll have Helga."

Helga, frying eggs in a huge skillet, turned on him a glowering glance, but said nothing. And presently she lifted the eggs, like gold and ivory discs, and laid them around the slices of ham on a big blue platter, and said, tersely, "Supper's ready."

The dining-room was as shadowy as the kitchen, with a great fire on the hearth and a red-shaded lamp and a shimmering, old, hard wood table with a dish of red apples in the center. And in the arch which led to the living-room was the tree, which Jan had set up while the children were away. Its top plumes touched the ceiling, and the sweep of its lower branches was like the spread of a lady's skirt.

After the Norse Giant had said grace, he remarked over his ham and eggs:

"The Black Sheep is back again."

"Edith?"

He nodded.

"How do you know?"

"There was a light in the parlor window of the old house as I drove by, and I looked in and saw her."

"All alone?"

"Yes. She had two candles lighted and was on her knees packing a trunk. Mother, I think she was packing the crystal bowl." His voice was husky.

"Do you mean she is taking it away?"

"That and a lot of other things. They were all on the floor about her. It made me furious to see them. They don't belong to her—simply because her father was the eldest son. The rest of us have a right to some—"

It was an old argument. The Grey Little Grandmother had heard it a thousand times. The Black Sheep had all of the old things—the Dutch candlesticks, and great-grandmother's china, and the Sheffield orange cups, and most of all, the crystal bowl. They were hers because they were in the house which she had inherited. And the rest of the family had raged. They

had no case in law, but they felt they had a case in equity. They had written to Edith, and she had replied crisply on thin foreign notepaper that what she had she would keep. Reading between the lines they had read the truth, that she was glad to withhold that which they wanted. They had cast her off. If they would have none of her, they should have none of her possessions.

And now she was back from those elusive lands to which she had fled, and was packing a trunk . . . the Grey Little Grandmother had a sense of keen distress. "They belong in the old house."

"Do you think she cares for that? She'll probably sell them. Why, the bowl alone is worth a fortune!"

"A fortune—?"

"Yes—a small one. I dropped into a shop on Fifth Avenue last year and asked a dealer. He's written to me several times since. He's crazy to get hold of it."

The price Mark mentioned was astounding. "Of course if it was mine I wouldn't sell it. But Edith—! She'll be glad of the chance!"

"She may need the money."

"I need it. But do you think I'd let a thing like that go out of the family? It belongs to my children—to my grandchildren."

She had nothing to say in answer, but after a little she ventured, "Is she changed?"

"I couldn't see her face."

"Poor Edith."

"Mother!" a sharp note.

"I know you can't forgive her, Mark."

"Disgrace isn't an easy thing to bear."

"She was young and foolish."

"She was young and—wicked."

She sighed, "I know. But I always think of her as a little girl—with her curls, and her hand in mine."

"But she ran away with another woman's husband."

The words seemed to ring clamorously through the serene old room. So, too, had the Black Sheep, long ago, jangled all the bells of family pride

when she broke the rules which had bound them honorably for generations.

But the Grey Little Grandmother, who was old and wise, and whose ear was tuned to finer harmonies than pride, sighed again, and said, "Do you know, I should like to have her here with me for Christmas dinner."

"*Here!*"

"Yes. It couldn't hurt me, could it—? . . . And it might help her. It isn't as if Emily were here and the children."

"Not in this house, *ever*—. I mean that, Mother. She shall never cross my threshold. Never, never again."

It was not his house, but she did not remind him that it was her own. She waited for a moment before she said, "Do you remember, Mark, how she came here one Christmas eve? You had made her a little ship and it was on the tree?"

Never had she seen his face look as it looked now, except on the night when the news had come of Edith's flight. And he was saying, "It is because I remember the boy who worshipped her that I am—hard—"

He rose abruptly from the table and went out to the barn. The Grey Little Grandmother rose, too, and went into the dairy to skim the cream from the round pans. The cream was thick and yellow, and the floor was painted yellow, so that even at night there was the effect of sunshine. And while she skimmed the cream, she thought a great deal about what her son had said. And when Helga came in to get the sour milk to set on the back of the stove for cheese, the Grey Little Grandmother had made up her mind. "You can have the whole day tomorrow, Helga, instead of the afternoon. I shan't need you."

"Do you think I'll leave you alone?" Helga said violently.

"I shan't be alone. I am going out. I am going out for dinner."

It would have been useless to tell Mark what she had planned. He would have opposed it, and that would have spoiled it all. The simplest thing was to do as she pleased, and to decide afterwards whether she would let him know. She did not, of course, know whether Edith would see her. She might, indeed, find the door shut in her face. But she would take the chance. She had, indeed, a secret sense of elation in the thought of her adventure.

Lying awake that night, with the snow sweeping against her windows, she told herself that she would take the dinner with her. Edith, in that lonely house, would probably have a makeshift menu. The child had never had

domestic qualities. Only her beauty, and a soft, affectionate charm of manner. It was hard to think of her alone. The sequel to her mad romance had been tragic. The man had died, a month after his marriage with Edith. His wife had divorced him to make it possible.

Well . . . anyhow she would have Helga roast a chicken—Mark could take the turkey . . . Emily’s mother would not, naturally, be prepared for such a crowd. It would be easy enough to re-heat the chicken and vegetables in the oven at the old house. And to share some of the good things that she and Helga had made for the feast. And the tarts. She remembered the little Edith of long ago had loved tarts!

How the snow fluttered against the window. Like the wings of some soft bird. She loved nights like this. It was in the winter that she had come to this house, a bride. . . .

She was up very early the next morning. Jan killed the chicken, and Helga got it ready. They did these things furtively, although she had not pledged either of them to secrecy. They seemed, intuitively, to understand the situation. They were always, indeed, her allies, in a house of rather dominant personalities. They often helped her to have her way, unobtrusively, but none the less effectively.

It was still snowing when, after breakfast, Mark rode away with two great hampers in the back of his car. He kissed his mother before he went, and said with a touch of compunction, “I hope you don’t think I am selfish—going off like this.”

“I shall be perfectly happy.”

“Take care of her, Helga.”

Helga surveyed him with brooding eyes. “She takes care of herself. I never see such a woman. Always happy.”

He seemed a little startled at that. Asked his mother: “Are you?”

“I think I am. Yes.”

And she was happy. And the reason she was happy was because she was never sorry for herself. She was always sorry for other people and trying to make them comfortable. And just now she was very sorry for Edith.

The snow was deep, but it was not far to the old homestead at the foot of the hill. Jan drove her over. The house, as they approached, loomed dark and still. It was a long rambling edifice, with the kitchen in a wing at right angles to the great parlor where Mark had seen the light.

It was through the kitchen door that the Grey Little Grandmother entered. Quietly. “It’s a surprise, Jan,” she told him. “Coming in this way, she won’t see us.”

The kitchen, with its closed shutters, was still and cold and dead—a perfect corpse of a kitchen, with no fire in the stove. But presently Jan had one blazing. And after a few moments the little grandmother emerged from her fur coat and began to unpack the hamper she had brought, the kettle began to rock on the stove; the coals glowed like hot red eyes through the slits of the dampers, and the dead kitchen was alive again!

When Jan was gone, and she was at last alone, the Grey Little Grandmother opened the kitchen door and looked out into the hall. The hall was as dead as the kitchen had been. Years ago when life had flowed warm through the house, there had always been the sound of heartbeats—*tick-tock, tick-tock*, a steady comfortable sound which kept one company.

The clock was at the other end near the parlor door. The Grey Little Grandmother went swiftly and soundlessly along the strip of faded carpet. She was old, but her straight, small figure was young. She wore a black dress with crisp white bands at her neck and wrists, and she seemed to belong in that wainscoted hall with its old clock, as a bit of old ivory belongs in an inlaid cabinet. She was a part of it—merged into it by a sort of spiritual inheritance.

She stopped in front of the clock and began to wind it, and immediately the slow sound woke the echoes in that still, cold house—*tick-tock—tick-tock*.

Then all at once, the door of the parlor flew open, and a voice said, “WHO IS WINDING THE CLOCK?”

The Grey Little Grandmother turned and faced the slender woman in the straight green gown:

“I am.”

“*Aunt Edith!*”

“Yes.”

“How did you know I was here?”

“Mark told me.”

“Mark?” A white hand caught at the silver beads which set off the green gown.

“Yes. He saw you through the window.”

“When?”

“Last night.”

The woman shivered. “So it was he who was there? I thought I heard footsteps on the porch . . . but when I looked there were only the tracks in the snow.”

“My dear, did he frighten you?”

“No. Nothing frightens me now but—memories.”

She stopped and turned back into the parlor. “It’s warmer in here,” she said. “I haven’t tried to keep the rest of the house comfortable. . . . I am not used to making fires.”

The Grey Little Grandmother had vague ideas of how one kept warm in France. Charcoal, perhaps. And, then, too, there were those Elysian lands where no fires were needed.

The chairs in the parlor were heaped with garments. Young Edith cleared one of them, going on into the adjoining bedroom with her arms loaded. “I’ll be back in a moment,” she said.

The Grey Little Grandmother sat down and looked about her. It had been a long time since she had been in this staid, dark room with its stiff furniture and staring family portraits. But now it was not staid and stiff—it glowed and sparkled, like some somber casket with the lid lifted to show a shining treasure. The great trunk in the center of the room was open and half-packed. Things which might have come out of the trunk were thrown about everywhere—shimmering gowns in flame and silver and orange—a Spanish shawl flaunting its red roses—a scarf heavy with sequins, a fur wrap with turquoise lining dragging its length across the corner of the rosewood piano. The Grey Little Grandmother noted that the things which had once been on the piano were not there—the Dutch candlesticks which had lighted it when years ago young Edith had played.

The older Edith had played that piano, too, in her girlhood. It was inlaid with mother-of-pearl. She had always thought it a lovely thing. And it was lovelier now than ever, with that sumptuous wrap across its corner.

There was something else on the piano—back at the end, so that it caught only now and then a golden flick of the firelight. It was the crystal bowl! Brought from the recesses of the sideboard in the dining-room, it

waited apparently on the piano for the moment when it, too, with the Dutch candlesticks, would find a place in the trunk.

And in the meantime, there it stood, a glimmering, translucent thing among the shadows with the light wavering on it, so that it seemed to flow like water.

Young Edith coming back said: “You’d think I had clothes enough to last me for a lifetime. Perhaps they’ll have to last me. I’ve had nothing new for ages. I made this dress I’m wearing. I make everything I wear. Do you remember I couldn’t sew, Aunt Edith? Or cook? Well, the years have changed that. I learned a lot in France—. I made an omelette this morning and cooked it over this fire. The kitchen was like the Arctic regions—”

“There’s a fire in the kitchen now,” the older woman told her. “I had Jan build it.”

“Jan?”

“One of the men about the place—husband of our Swedish cook. He brought me over.”

Young Edith standing with her back against the piano put the question squarely: “Aunt Edith, why did you come?”

“I brought our Christmas dinner. I thought we’d eat it together.”

Silence. Then, “You needn’t have bothered.”

“It wasn’t a bother. And I wanted company. I was all alone. The storm kept Mark’s wife and the children at her mother’s and I made him go so that they could all be together.”

“Mark’s wife?”

“Emily. He was thirty when he was married.”

“How many—children?”

“Five. When we are all together it makes me think of the old days, Edith.”

A little later young Edith was saying, “I had planned to open a can of baked beans.”

“No Kirkland ever ate canned beans for a Christmas dinner.”

There was a sharp edge to the other’s voice, “I am not a Kirkland. I have been read out of the family.”

They were having their little feast in the warm old kitchen. After the first moments of awkwardness, young Edith had entered into the spirit of the thing. She had, indeed, entered almost too perfectly into the spirit. Nothing had seemed to break the surface of her bright composure. The Grey Little Grandmother had had a feeling of distinct disappointment. She had thought that, putting everything behind them, they might meet on the common ground of old affection. Yet here was young Edith, talking like a lady at a tea-party, lightly, cheerfully, avoiding carefully any topics which might be embarrassing, keeping her aunt at arm's length. This was no return of the prodigal, no brand plucked from burning, no black sheep bleating in the cold! Young Edith was self-possessed, mistress of the situation. She spoke of the Christmas days she had spent in foreign lands. She had travelled, it seemed, everywhere. She was vivid, interesting. She ate with an appetite, and clapped her hands like a child when the tarts came on.

Yet she was not a child. The fifteen years since old Edith had seen her had taken their toll. Slender, still lovely, her eyes showed the tiredness the years had brought. She was thirty-five—forty years younger than the Grey Little Grandmother—yet the eyes of the older woman were not tired—they were serene and bright—as bright and serene as the soul which looked out of them.

And now, at the end of the feast, young Edith was letting the barriers down with her sharp asseveration: "I've been read out of the family."

She caught herself up, "Can't we have our coffee by the fire in the parlor? I'll carry the pot, Aunt Edith, if you'll bring the cups."

Through the cold hall they went, the aroma of coffee trailing after them. The clock ticked a welcome. It was like some old dog, spent with loneliness, wagging an ecstatic tail.

When they reached the parlor, young Edith swept from a pie-crust table a drift of rosy lingerie, set forth the cups and filled them. She put the coffee pot on the hearth, lighted a cigarette and leaned back. "This is comfy, isn't it?"

Old Edith had never seen a woman smoke. Yet, since she had a sense of humor, it was not her own shocked feelings which occupied her, but the thought of what Great-grandmother Kirkland up there on the wall in her Quaker cap would have said to this desecration of her hearthstone.

Young Edith, rather tardily, remarked: "I hope you don't mind, Aunt Edith."

“Your cigarette? I was wondering what she’d say to it,” she indicated the old lady in the Quaker cap.

“Great-grandmother Kirkland? What an old prig she was . . .” She rose and stood in front of the picture, looking up. Then suddenly she wheeled, speaking stormily, “How could women make themselves so hideous . . . that cap. . . .”

“She was really a very handsome woman,” her aunt told her. “I remember her well. And I remember I loved her grey silk dresses and her soft gaiety of manner. Beauty belongs to every age. Fashions never seem to kill it.”

The Black Sheep came back and sat down. The Grey Little Grandmother in the following silence, told herself that, after all, black fleece was beautiful, beautiful in a dark and somber sense, as Great-grandmother Kirkland’s white fleece had been beautiful in a clear and quiet sense.

And now young Edith said, abruptly, “I am going to sell the house.”

The serene eyes opposite her were suddenly shadowed. “It seems a pity.”

“Yes. But I need the money. . . . The house won’t bring much, but what I shall get for it is all that stands between me and poverty.”

“My dear, I didn’t know.”

“No. You’ve thought like all the rest of them that I was flourishing—like a green bay tree. The wicked always do, don’t they? I had a little money after—he died. But it was invested in French securities, and they went absolutely dead when the War came.”

The firelight flicked the crystal bowl with wavering gold. What had Mark said? That it was worth a fortune?

“Are you going to sell the heirlooms, Edith?”

“No . . . I shall keep them. All except the crystal bowl. I want Mark to have that.”

The room seemed to whirl before the older woman’s eyes. “You are going to give it to Mark?” she asked incredulously.

“Yes.”

The fire had died down, and in the half-darkness, leaning a little forward, young Edith seemed a shadow among the shadows. To the older Edith the whole thing had a sense of unreality—that she should be sitting

here listening to the ghostly voice of one who had once filled this room with light and loveliness.

And now the voice was saying, “Aunt Edith—what does Mark think of me?”

Her aunt hesitated, then told the truth. “I am afraid he is—hard. He can’t forgive. When he is my age he’ll see things differently.”

Deeper darkness. Then a sharp, “I don’t want him to see things differently.”

All the barriers were down! And a mantle of darkness enfolded a sobbing figure on the hearthrug!

“Why didn’t somebody save me, Aunt Edith? I was so young . . . I didn’t know life . . . I didn’t know that romance . . . that what I called ‘love’ didn’t count . . . that nothing counted but . . . self-respect.”

The grey little woman bent over the bowed head. “Hush! Hush, my darling.”

“Aunt Edith, nobody has called me that for a million years.”

They clung together, talked in low tones. Outside it grew darker. The wind blew strong from heavy clouds.

Then, suddenly, above the roar of the wind, came the sound of footsteps on the porch. Old Edith lifted her head: “It must be Jan,” she said, “he’s early.”

But it was not Jan. Someone had entered by the kitchen way, and was coming through the hall. A voice called, “Mother!” Mark’s voice!

Young Edith jumped to her feet, tore her hands frantically from the other’s restraining clasp, “I can’t see him,” she said wildly. “Tell him to go away—” She ran into the bedroom, slammed the door, locked it.

Mark came in, filling the room with his towering bulk. His blue eyes were like steel in his stern face. Sweeping the room with his glance—that glowing, untidy room—he demanded, “Where is she?”

“In the bedroom.”

“Well . . .” he let that go, “I’ve come to take you home.”

“How did you know I was here?”

“I telephoned to the house to see if things were going all right. And I couldn’t get an answer from you or Helga or Jan. I thought something might have happened, so I jumped into the car and came. I found one of the men at the barn, and he said Jan had brought you here.”

His eyes accused her. But she had not lived a long life with him to be afraid of him. “I came,” she said, calmly, “to eat Christmas dinner with Edith.”

“After what I said?”

“Well, you didn’t want Mahomet to come to the mountain, so the mountain—”

He interrupted, “I don’t see how you can joke about it, Mother.”

“I am not joking.”

Again he let that go, “Get your things on, and I’ll take you home.”

“I am not going, Mark.”

“Mother!”

“No. Edith needs me. And Jan will call for me when he brings Helga back.”

He began to speak violently. “I can’t understand you. She has made her bed—”

“Mark, *don’t*—” she had a feeling that Edith might be leaning against that closed door—listening—.

He went on. “Why does she need you? She chose to cut herself off from us.”

“She’s unhappy.”

“You’re too soft-hearted, Mother.”

His eyes were taking in the room, going from the shimmering things on the chairs and sofas to the rosy drift that had been swept from the pie-crust table, the Dutch candlesticks in the top of the trunk, the sumptuous wrap across the corner of the piano, the crystal bowl back among the shadows. . . .

Old Edith’s heart leaped suddenly. The crystal bowl! Might it not move him if she told him young Edith was going to give it to him. He had wanted it so much—for himself, and for his children—his children’s children.

Yet even as the thought came, she dismissed it. Graces of mind and spirit must not be bought. Pity must have a more worthy motive. Then, too, there was Edith's poverty. Could they accept such a gift at her hands when she needed the money? She said in a low tone, "Mark, she cried in my arms."

The steely look went out of his eyes. Again his glance swept the room and rested on the piano. She wondered if he was seeing what she saw—a slim girlish figure in a blue-ruffled frock, with brown curls banded with blue, bending over the keys between the twin gold flames of the tall candles in the Dutch holders.

When at last he answered, his voice was subdued. "I am going," he said, "you can come when you get ready. This house is full of ghosts. . . . I hate it."

He shut the door sharply behind him, his footsteps echoed through the hall, another door opened and shut. Then silence.

Young Edith, coming out, spoke tensely, "I heard what he said."

"My dear, I'm sorry."

"No, don't be sorry. He's right."

Her aunt stared at her, "*Right!*"

"Yes." Then passionately, "Oh, do you think it was easy to hear him say things like that? Mark? He was always so kind . . ." she struggled for composure. "But now, he oughtn't to be kind. I wonder if you understand what I mean? All through the years it has steadied me to know that Mark wouldn't forgive what I have done. Don't you see, Aunt Edith, it is the men who forgive things that make it easy for women to do them? I want men like Mark in the world. Somehow he stands for the strength that means—happiness. Aunt Edith, if the man I loved had been strong, he wouldn't have let me—"

"Don't think I am blaming him," she went on, hurriedly, "any more than myself. Only I had to tell you why I am glad that Mark is Mark. Oh, I've been bitter, Aunt Edith. I've said hard things of all of you. I've tried to think of you as a lot of old fogies living up here among the hills with your family pride. But all the time I've known underneath that a pride like that is a fine thing—pride that keeps Mark with his Emily, and both of them with their children—a pride that makes the family a thing of integrity—not at the whim of some sudden passion."

She controlled her voice and went on: “That’s why I want Mark to have the crystal bowl. It belongs in the family just as pride belongs in the family”—she gave a little forlorn laugh—“it sort of links Great-grandmother Kirkland with Mark’s littlest child, doesn’t it?”

She brought the bowl over and set it between the coffee cups on the piecrust table. It was of Venetian glass, clear as ice, thin and fluted like a flower, and it tinkled when you touched it.

How Mark would love it! How they all had loved it! It had never been in common use, but had been reserved for high feasts and holidays. Its history was obscure, some sea-faring ancestor had touched at an Italian port, and there it was—a rare and radiant thing.

“My dear,” the older woman said with decision. “Mark mustn’t have it.”

“Why not?”

“It is worth a fortune.”

“A fortune?”

“A small one—yes. Mark learned that the last time he was in New York.”

“But if he had it he wouldn’t sell it, would he?”

“Of course not.”

“Then, why—?” she was standing by the table, tapping the bowl with her finger tip so that it rang a chime of bells.

The other tried to put it delicately. “My dear—the money would be a great help to you.”

The bells no longer rang, “Oh—”

She came over and stood by the fire.

“It needs more wood, doesn’t it.” She took two sticks from the basket and laid them on the coals. Still kneeling, she spoke, with a certain fierceness, “I hope I’m not such a rotter as that—”

“*Edith.*”

“Aunt Edith, why did you tell me? You are forcing me to make a choice. I don’t want to think about money. Yet I have to think about it. . . .”

The fresh logs flamed. The crystal bowl flamed with them—it seemed made of thin sheets of gold, flaunting its opulence, proclaiming its cost.

It was still snowing when the Grey Little Grandmother drove home with Jan. As they came up to the house, she saw that all the windows were lighted. . . .

Mark, opening the door, helped his mother out of the car and kissed her. “I was a beast,” he at once apologized. “I’ve been talking it over with Emily.”

She returned his kiss but said, “You *were* a beast. And on Christmas Day.”

“I know,” his arm was about her. Then: “We’ve got the tree lighted, the children would have it. But we’ve waited till you came for the presents.”

Going in, the room seemed alive with love and laughter, Emily with the littlest child on her lap; all the other children rushing to meet their grandmother. The little girls had rosy ribbons in their hair to match their rosy cheeks, and the little boys had red ties because it was Christmas Day. They pushed and shoved each other, hugging her and shouting, “A Merry Christmas, Nana.”

It was wonderful to see them, and wonderful to see the great tree blazing behind them. Wonderful to see Mark and Emily smiling. There was something stable and serene about it all. What was it Edith had said of “the integrity of the family”?

“Sing your carols for Nana,” Emily suggested, and the children went at it with a will—standing in a row, pink ribbons and red ties, and all the rest of it. The littlest baby crowed an accompaniment, and Emily sang with them, and Mark in his deep voice. Wonderful!

Not until after supper were they to have their presents. “The children are ravenous,” Emily stated.

“I told Helga they wouldn’t want much—”

“They are never satisfied . . . We’ll give them plenty of bread and milk.”

The Grey Little Grandmother went to the dairy room to get the milk for the children’s supper. As she passed through the hall, the old clock ticked. And in that dead, old house that other clock ticked!

She had made Edith keep the bowl. She wondered what Mark would say? She had deprived the littlest baby of its link with Great-grandmother Kirkland!

And now the second-littlest baby was piping in the hall, “Supper’s ready.”

She went then, and found them all at the table. Mark still on his feet to seat her; Emily at the other end with the littlest baby—all those smiling faces!

They hadn’t even said grace when the door opened. Without a knock, without anything! It might have been, as the children said, “A Christmas fairy.”

But it was not a Christmas fairy, although she looked like one. It was young Edith, and she wore the sumptuous wrap, and a smart close hat with a gold flower, and she seemed very elegant and shining in the simple room.

“May I come in?” she said from the threshold.

Mark got on his feet and went forward, a flame in his cheeks, “Of course.”

She had a huge bundle in her arms. “Take this, please,” she said, and thrust it upon him. “You are not to open it until I am gone.”

She spoke to the children, “He musn’t open it, must he?” and they got down from the table, shouted and made a nosegay of themselves about her—pink ribbons and red ties and bobbing curls.

“You darlings,” young Edith said, and her voice broke on the words.

Then Emily rose and went to her, and the two women stood together. The littlest baby was on Emily’s arm. “Her name is Edith,” she said with lovely quietude. “Would you like to kiss her?”

The littlest baby crowed. Her tiny hand clutched at the gold flower. . . .

Mark, standing now beside his wife said, “Won’t you stay . . . Edith . . . ?”

“No. I’m on my way to my train. I just stopped to leave my gift. I wasn’t going to come in . . . but somehow when I saw the lights on the tree . . .” she reached out her hand to Mark and he took it . . . “I thought I’d like to say—‘A Merry Christmas.’”

Her voice was shaking. But in a moment she had control of it. . . . “Good-bye,” she said. “I shan’t be coming back. . . .”

She turned from them and hid her face against the shoulder of the Grey Little Grandmother, “You darling . . .” she said. Then, with one last look

around her, she opened the door, and was gone!

Mark took a step forward, but his mother said, “No—” And after a moment, “Hadn’t we better finish our supper?”

But the children were shouting, “Open the present.”

Old Edith knew before Mark took off the wrapping what he was to see. The children were disappointed. “It’s just a bowl,” they said, slightly, and went on eating bread and milk.

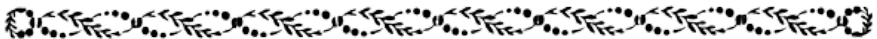
But Mark set the bowl in the center of the table, and as the eyes of the little grandmother rested upon it, it seemed a chalice, lighted by a white flame!

“There’s a note,” Mark said, and glanced over it. “I’ll read it to you and Emily when the children are in bed.”

The three of them sat up late that night. The children had been slow in settling down. Christmas Day was almost over. They spoke again of Edith, and Mark read the note. It was written on thin French paper, and about it was the faint fragrance of roses.

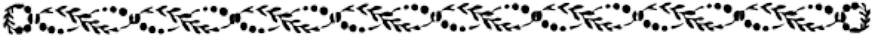
“I want you to have the bowl, Mark. Once upon a time you gave me a little ship. I still treasure it. Perhaps because of it I shall sail some day into safe harbor. And now, God bless you all! Today your mother and I have been talking about God. And the Christ of Bethlehem. Christmas means that, doesn’t it? I had forgotten. But now I want to—remember.”

. . . The day had begun with snow, and ended with it. The Grey Little Grandmother, lying snug in her upper room, heard the sweep of it against her windows. And, the Black Sheep was out in the storm! But the Shepherd watched!



O LITTLE FLOCK!





O LITTLE FLOCK!



I

THE choir was practicing Christmas carols in the church next door. There are some advantages in living next to a church, even if you are in a shabby old apartment house which backs up to the sacred edifice, with a frontage on an unfashionable thoroughfare.

One advantage, Sara had found was on moonlight nights, when you could look out upon the high, delicate spire etched against the golden sky, and be flooded with a sense of the world's beauty. And another was when, in moments of deep depression, the sound of the organ swept over you in waves of celestial harmony.

At times, however, Sara felt there were no advantages. As tonight when the reiteration of the Christmas carols got on her nerves.

"It is all very well," was her mental challenge, "to sing like that. As if Christmas Day made up for everything. But it doesn't. Not when you have four children. Not when every one of them wants something you can't give. Not when you haven't any money. Not when you don't dare face your bills. Not when—"

She stopped there. Why go on, with that crash of exultation weakening her protests?

*"Oh, take the gift,
In joy receive;
All things are his
Who will believe;
O Little Flock,
What words can tell,
The bliss of souls—"*

It was really a beautiful carol, but Sara had no patience with it. "If they knew anything about sheep, they wouldn't talk of flocks."

Sara knew a great deal about sheep. Her girlhood had been spent on her grandfather's old place in Virginia. His sheep had roamed the hills of Albemarle, picturesque at long distance, but not so meek as the poets have

them. Sara had once owned a pet lamb, which had shown revolutionary traits. When she wanted it to follow, it had had a way of kicking up its heels and ramping sideways down the road, leaving her dismayed and disconcerted.

And now her own little flock had kicked up its heels. And she didn't know what to do about it. She didn't know what to do about anything. If only the children knew how helpless she felt without their father.

But of course they couldn't know. They were young, and youth is thoughtless. She must seem to her children quite mature and self-sufficient. They couldn't know the panic in her heart when she thought of the years ahead of her.

She had made her Christmas plans with certainty that they would cooperate. She had felt sure that the older ones, at least, would share her sense of responsibility when the situation was explained to them.

So that very night at dinner she had said, "My darlings, some of daddy's investments have gone wrong. I'm afraid we shall have to have a rather shabby Christmas."

"What do you mean by 'shabby'?" young Randolph in his father's place at the head of the table had flung out.

"Oh, well, I wondered if we couldn't go down to Solomon's Shore for the holidays. We'd be very cozy and happy and—"

They stopped her with a chorus: "Solomon's Shore!"

No mistaking that tone of horrified protest. She tried to ignore it: "We could have the time of our lives, couldn't we?"

"We could *not*," this from Kathleen, seventeen and a beauty, "and anyhow there's my Christmas Eve party."

"My dear, I'm afraid you'll have to give that up."

"Do you mean," there was a sort of breathlessness about Kathleen, "that I am not to entertain my friends, after I've been asked *everywhere*—asked and asked and asked, and *never* paid back?"

Sara, white and troubled, demanded, "What can I do?"

Then young Randolph, cocksurely, "Kits is right, mother. She ought to have her party, even if we have to sell the family jewels."

"But we haven't any jewels, Randy."

“Don’t be so literal-minded, mums. What I mean is, let’s forget dull care at Christmastime and mortgage the house and lot.”

“But we haven’t any house and lot,” she answered patiently.

“There you go again. It’s this way. Cut out economy during the holidays, and give us a whale of a time, and we’ll live on bread and cheese if we have to. Kits and I have social obligations, and they’ve got to be met. We want a party and clothes for it.”

“Randy, I can’t pay my January bills.”

“Pay your February ones, then. Lots of people let them run over, and we’ll take lean pickings for a month or two.”

She tried to tell them it was impossible. But they bore down with their arguments until she had no strength left to combat them. Yet it was not their arguments which finally weakened her, but Kathleen’s lovely face rainwashed by tears. “We’d be *buried* at Solomon’s Shore, mother. What made you think of it?”

“Your daddy and I loved it,” said Sara simply, “and so did you when you were little.”

“Oh, well, of course; but things are different in these days,” said young Randolph toploftically. “We have to keep up with the procession.”

Arguments, arguments, arguments! At last Sara told them desperately, “I’ll see what I can do. I have to think of our future.”

“You think too much,” her son promptly assured her; “just gather your rosebuds, old dear, and forget tomorrow.”

After which helpful remark, he got up from the table, and later went off with Kathleen and some young friends to the movies, leaving Sara high and dry, as it were, on the shores of her dilemma.

After their departure, Mary Virginia, who was eight and had some lessons to do before she went to bed, looked up from her place under the lamp and said, “I think it would be dreadful if Kits couldn’t.”

And Bobs, the baby, being tucked in, added a codicil to his usual prayers, “Please, God, give Kits her Christmas party.”

Was it any wonder that Sara, standing now by the window, listening to that triumphant choir, flung a challenge to their glorious tidings? Christmas was not a time of peace and good will. It was a time of spending more than you could afford. It was a time of trying to keep up with other people. It was

a time not of light-heartedness, but of heaviness. Yet the children were young. And youth had a right to good times and gayety.

II

HAVING a Liberty Bond or two, Sara sold them. She sold them in order that Kits might have her party and Randy his first dress clothes. Kathleen, flaming into more-than-ever loveliness, said, "Oh, mother, you're a darling," and Randy patted her on the back and called her a good sport.

Well, of course it was something to be approved by your children. Sara told herself with a touch of sarcasm that mothers had stolen for less. She was amazed to find herself appreciating the satire of the situation. Having had their own way, Randy and Kathleen proceeded to show their mother they adored her for letting them have it. They led her on into further extravagances. Kits' party, they said, must be the real thing. No homemade sandwiches and salads. Old Martha, their negro cook, might do for every day, but not for this occasion. A caterer must do it all. "We might as well be killed for a sheep as a lamb," Randy proclaimed grandiloquently.

Being again reminded of flocks and fleece, Sara wanted to retort that you couldn't eat your mutton and have it too. But she refrained. She knew the futility of attempting to stem the tide of Randy's disputations.

She was, however, not happy. She was oppressed by a sense of her lack of proper guardianship. What if they were wrecked on the shoals of debt? Who would save them? And wouldn't it be her fault if they went under?

She lay awake nights thinking about it. At last she showed dark circles under eyes, an unwonted paleness.

One morning, coming to the breakfast table with a blinding headache, she seemed so worn and spent that Randy asked solicitously, "Aren't you well?"

"Yes. Why?"

"You don't look it. You'd better see Wade Phillips."

But Sara didn't want to see Wade. She knew he would say at once, "It's those darned children. They are draining the life out of you."

Wade had been a friend and college chum of her husband, and was the family doctor. He was also Sara's adviser and friend. He didn't approve of

Sara's attitude toward her children. "You're too good to them," he told her, "and they take advantage of it. They'd be a lot better off if you'd treat 'em rough."

She flamed, "I want them to love me."

"They'll love you more if you don't let them impose on you. You've got to show them that you're the head of the house."

He embroidered this theme somewhat, one night when he came to look at Mary Virginia's tonsils. "Parents," he remarked with a spoon in Mary Virginia's throat, "ought to be mid-Victorian."

Mary Virginia, regaining presently the use of her tongue, demanded, "What's mid-Victorian?"

"Well, those were the days when little children had to mind their mothers."

"I do mind her."

"You didn't when you wouldn't wear your overshoes, and got your feet wet. And now Mother has to nurse you. If you and Bobby and Kits and Randy were mine I'd shut you up in cages."

Mary Virginia was entranced. "Would you?"

"Yes. And it wouldn't be as nice as you think," he replied, adding, "And if you get your feet wet again I'll cut out your tonsils."

With that he left her and went downstairs with Sara. "What have you been doing to yourself?" he asked, as they stood in front of the fire.

"Why?"

"You look as if a puff of wind would blow you away."

"I'm a little tired, that's all."

"I'll bet those darned offspring of yours are acting up."

"I wish you wouldn't call them names. If they are troublesome it is my fault."

"Nonsense; I'd manage them."

"You do manage them," she said, "and the more you bully them the more they adore you."

He laughed a little, but his eyes had a softened look. "I only bully them," he said, "when I have a just cause. And they know it."

In the moment's silence which followed, the voices of the choir broke in:

*“I saw three ships come sailing by,
Sailing by, sailing by,
I saw three ships come sailing by
On Christmas Day in the morning!”*

“That’s a dandy old carol,” Wade remarked, “about ships and things. Sara, I sometimes feel that I made a mistake when I studied medicine. I’d like to be a pirate and pick you up under my arm and carry you off to unknown seas. It wouldn’t hurt the children to know what it would mean to be without a mother.”

III

WHEN RANDY'S new clothes came home, he tried them on and displayed himself to the assembled family. "Can you beat that?" he inquired modestly. "You've some looker for a son, mumsie."

He was rather splendid, Sara told herself, with his thin grace, the fresh bloom on his cheeks, his crisp blond hair, his air of taking the world as he wanted it.

"Dance with me, Kits," he commanded, and as the two beautiful young creatures stepped in time to the music of the phonograph, Sara's heart leaped high in her breast. They were her own and they loved her.

Yet in the darkness of the night she would sometimes ask herself, "What is love worth if it makes no sacrifices? If I should set myself against them what then?"

Now and then she tried feebly to oppose her will to theirs, as when Kathleen, whose new dress for the party was a clear and lovely red, declared that she must have a fan to match it. "A big one. All the girls are getting them."

"Dearest, I can't afford another thing."

"You might call it my Christmas present."

"The party is my present to you, Kits."

"Mother, Uncle Wade always gives me something. Couldn't you hint to him?"

"Kathleen!"

"I don't see why you take that tone about it. And I might as well have a fan as some of those awful things men always pick out—books or work-baskets."

As it happened, Wade dropped in that very afternoon for a cup of tea. "I've been thinking," he said, over the buttered muffins, "of giving Kathleen a set of books. What would she like? There's a new edition of Stevenson."

Sara poured him a fresh cup of tea before she answered. She put in three lumps of sugar and more cream than was good for him.

Then she said casually, “Do you know—I think she’d rather have something—silly.”

“Silly?”

“Feminine, I mean. Like a—fan.”

“Great guns! How am I going to choose it?”

She passed the plate of buttered muffins. “Would you like me to help you?”

“I would. When? Tomorrow afternoon?”

Well, they bought the fan. A beautiful thing, all waving plumes, flamingo-tinted. It was extravagantly expensive. “Oh, Wade,” Sara protested when she learned the price, “you mustn’t pay so much.”

“Why not? Don’t you like it?”

“It’s lovely, of course.”

“Well, then.”

But Sara felt it was not well, it was ill. The cost of the fan would have fed her and the children for a week. They couldn’t keep this up. Kits *couldn’t* go on having everything she wanted. They would have to stop.

At last arrived a crisis: “Mother, you can’t wear that dress.”

Kathleen had come home one afternoon and found her mother putting some extra touches on an old black lace. “You simply can’t,” she repeated.

“Why not?”

“It’s so utterly out of style. And it makes you look years older.”

“I have spent all the money I can possibly afford, Kathleen.”

“But it will be only fifty dollars more. I saw a dress in the window—blue chiffon with silver. You’d look stunning in it, mother.”

Randy arriving in the midst of the discussion, contributed another of his helpful remarks: “You really ought to have it. Can’t you dig down in the treasure chest and find some pieces of eight?”

She told him firmly that she couldn’t and wouldn’t. She didn’t dare think of her treasure chest, otherwise known as her safe-deposit box. The few

bonds she had kept there as an anchor to windward were gone. All except one for fifty dollars.

It would buy the dress. But it shouldn't. Her mind was made up. She mustn't spend another cent for nonessentials.

But Kathleen didn't look on the new gown as a nonessential. "I should think you'd *want* us to be proud of you. I should think you'd *want* to look your best. I should think you wouldn't *want* us to be—ashamed of you, mother."

Surely the child couldn't know how those words had stabbed.

That night Wade Phillips asked Sara to go to one of the new plays with him.

Sara wore the old black lace.

"You're beautiful tonight," Wade said.

Her hands lay in her lap. They were lovely hands, slender and aristocratic. "You should have had the fan," Wade said, "only it should be blue to match your eyes."

Sara's hurt heart was comforted. At least Wade wasn't ashamed of her.

After the play they had supper at one of the smart hotels. Wade ordered lobster meat under glass with mushrooms and a creamed paprika sauce, a crisp salad and, at the end, little cups of coffee. It was all delicious and Sara enjoyed it, until Wade spoke about the Christmas party. "I'm coming if I can. And I want all of your dances."

"I'm not going to dance."

"Why not?"

"I'm going to keep in the background."

"Why?"

Before she knew it she was telling him. Never before had she complained to him of the children. But now it all came out. That she had fought against having the party. That she had yielded at last against her better judgment, that to pay for it and the attendant expenses she had sold her bonds and mortgaged her income many months ahead. And that now at the very end, when she had refused to go on to other extravagances, they had said dreadful things to her.

All the time she was telling him, in the back of her mind was a sense of utter disloyalty to the family code, which had hitherto sealed her lips to outsiders, yet she wanted sympathy and expected it when she finished her story.

Wade wasted no breath in saying he was sorry for her. “Do you mean,” he demanded, “that you’ve let them spend all that money?”

“What could I do, Wade? I wanted them to be happy.”

“You could have told them to wake up and march shoulder to shoulder with you.”

“I did. I tried to make them see, but they wouldn’t, and now this last thing—”

She had not intended to tell him about the dress, but she did. That they wanted her to buy it with her last fifty dollars.

He gave an attentive ear: “What kind of dress?”

“Blue chiffon.”

He asked a question or two after that. Where had she seen it? And what advantage it would have over the black lace? “You can’t look lovelier than you do tonight, Sara. Where are their eyes?”

Going home he made up for any seeming lack of sympathy. Indeed Sara was a bit alarmed at the trend of the things he said to her. Once he laid his hand over hers, the big kind hand that had helped her over so many rough places. “You need somebody to take care of you.”

IV

IN the morning early, Mary Virginia came and got into Sara's bed. "Mother," she demanded, "aren't we going to have a tree?"

"Darling, we can't. We've spent all of our money for Kit's party."

Mary Virginia's voice had a disconsolate sound: "I didn't think we could have Christmas without a tree."

"Just this once, darling. Next year we'll have our tree at Solomon's Shore the way we had when you were little."

"Tell me about it."

"Me, too," said Bobby, who had arrived on the scene.

The two of them snuggled down beside their mother, rosy and bright-eyed with anticipation. "Tell us."

"Well, then, there is always snow on Solomon's Shore, so that the world is white down to the very edge of the water, and then it is blue where the waves stretch out till they meet the sky."

"And the sky is blue like sapphires," chanted Mary Virginia, who had heard all this before and who loved it.

"Yes. And all along the bluff above the blue sea and the blue sky are the tall spruces—"

"That stand like sentinels."

"Yes. And in between the tall trees are the little ones—"

"Just waiting to be cut for Christmas."

"Yes. And on the day before Christmas we would all go out with daddy, and he would cut down a little tree, and we would drag it through the snow to the house and set it up by the big fireplace, and then when we were all asleep—"

"Santa Claus would come and trim it!"

“And then the very first thing in the morning we would go out and look at the Christmas star.”

“Twistmas ’tar,” chortled Bobby.

Mary Virginia turned on him. “You didn’t see it, Bobby. You weren’t there.”

“Where were I?”

“Up in heaven with the stars,” said the orthodox Mary Virginia.

Sara, ignoring this interlude, went on with her story: “Then we would sing ‘O little town!’ ”

“Let’s sing it now,” said Mary Virginia.

So the three of them sang it; Sara, with her soft brown braids and parted hair making a Madonna of herself; Bobby, gold-crowned like his father; and Mary Virginia, lusty follower of the faith.

And while they sang, Sara’s thoughts went back to the daddy with the gold crown, and to the still white mornings down there by the sea.

“Mother,” said Mary Virginia, stopping in the midst of a verse, “what are you crying about!”

“I was thinking of daddy.”

“Well, I like to think about him. It doesn’t make me cry.”

There was about Mary Virginia a stimulating quality. Sara felt that some day she was going to lean, not on Randy or Kathleen, but on this little daughter who already began to show something of her father’s strength.

Bobby demanded, “Tell some more.”

“Well, we went in and had breakfast and there was the tree with pop corn on it and nuts—”

“And wee red apples and wee wax candles.”

“Yes, And after we had had our presents, old Martha popped the turkey into the oven and we went for a walk, and when we came back—”

“We ate it all up!” They fell on her and hugged her.

Having subsided presently Mary Virginia said: “Oh, mother, can’t we?”

“Can’t you what?”

“Go down this year?”

“My dear, I thought you wanted Kits to have her party.”

Mary Virginia had a just mind. “Well,” she admitted, “I did. But I don’t.”

“Why not?”

“It doesn’t seem like Christmas.”

It didn’t seem like Christmas. And it didn’t seem fair to the younger children.

Sara thought about it all that day. Tomorrow was Christmas Eve, and already the house was in the process of being prepared for the party. Sara and old Martha had more than they could do. Kathleen for once proved equal to the emergency. She dusted and decorated for dear life.

It was when everything was spick and span, and Sara was resting from her labors, that Kathleen brought in a big box.

“Oh, mumsie, you bought it!” she cried ecstatically.

“Bought what?”

“The dress. I opened it downstairs.” She dropped the box to embrace her mother. “You darling sport, to get everything from fan to slippers.”

“Fan to slippers!” Sara repeated mechanically.

Kathleen was flinging tissue paper out of the box. “You’ll be a dream, dearest.” She rushed into the hall and called over the stair rail, “Randy, come up and see mother’s darling dress.”

He came and found his mother staring down at the chiffon gown of heavenly blue, the fan to match, the slippers.

She lifted dazed eyes. “But I didn’t buy it.”

“Then who?”

Sara knew. Wade had done it!

Kathleen was searching through the tissue paper for a clew. Finding none she faced her mother. “Mother, who in the world?”

Sara was white as a sheet. “I am afraid it was—Uncle Wade.”

Kathleen sparkled, “How adorable! But how did he know?”

“I told him—that you didn’t like me in the black lace.”

She expected a thunderbolt. She had broken the family code. She had complained of them to an outsider!

But no thunderbolt came. “Of course we like you in anything!” Kathleen emphasized. “It’s only that we want to be proud of you.” She was radiant with satisfaction.

But Sara was not radiant. “Of course I can’t keep it,” she said.

“Mother!”

“My dear, if Wade sent it, it was a lovely thing for him to do. But I can’t accept it. You must see that. I can’t wear it, and I won’t.”

“Oh, gee,” Randy’s voice was sharp, “I should think you’d want to please us.”

And Kathleen sank down on the floor beside the box and sobbed, “If you don’t wear it, I’ll die.”

V

SARA wore the blue dress to the party. She wore the fan and slippers. She received the guests and was a gracious and charming hostess.

When Wade came she said to him, "You shouldn't have done it. But we'll talk about that later."

She was very busy after that and only danced with him once. "I must be nice to other people," she said, "and I've got to find partners for all the wallflowers."

It was when supper was almost over that she disappeared. Wade, hunting for her, finally asked Kathleen, "Where's your mother?"

Kathleen, having the time of her life, said casually, "Oh, she's around somewhere."

But she was not around somewhere.

He went to look for Martha. But nobody had seen Martha. The caterers were packing preparatory to loading up their truck. Presently the party would be over.

And meanwhile, no Sara. No Martha.

Wade made his way to the room where the younger children slept, at the end of the apartment. They had had their refreshments early, had been tucked into bed.

The door of the children's room was shut. Wade opened it and peered in. By the low light he could see that it was empty!

Back he went through all the rooms. There was no place where the four of them could hide, Sara and black Martha and Bobby and Mary Virginia. Making his worried way back to the living room, Wade found the guests leaving.

One of the caterer's men approaching Wade, handed him a letter. "I was to give it to you, sir," he said, "when the evening was over."

Wade opened it and read it. He waited until the last guest had departed, then he said to Kathleen and Randy, “Your mother has gone. She left a letter.”

They looked at him with startled faces. “Gone?”

“Yes.” He read the letter to them while they sat huddled side by side on the sofa like two frightened children.

And this is what Sara had to say: “I didn’t want to spoil the party, so I wore the dress. But I am enclosing a Liberty Bond for fifty dollars. It won’t cover the entire cost, but I will have more for you later. And you must take it, Wade. I simply can’t let you buy a dress for me, although it was dear of you to want to do it, and to try to help me.

“Tell Kathleen and Randy not to worry. The babies and I have gone to find Christmas and we are taking Martha. Aunt Ruth sent me a check for a present and insisted that I spend it on myself, so I am spending it this way and I’ll be back when I am really rested and when I can work things out a little. I know I should have worked them out long ago, but I haven’t and I make no apologies. I leaned for so many years on daddy, and it hasn’t been easy not to lean. I am afraid I haven’t been a wise mother.

“That’s all, and Kathleen and Randy can eat up the rest of the party, and there’s money enough in my black bag in the top dresser drawer for immediate expenses.”

Wade, looking up with accusing eyes, said, “You see?”

Yet in spite of his sternness he was sorry for the stricken pair. “The trouble was,” he told them, “that you were thinking of your mother as a parent and not as a person. You couldn’t realize that before she was a mother she was a little clinging child. Your father knew it and cherished her, and when he was taken away she had no one to cling to, and her tendrils of affection have been groping about trying to find support.”

In their young eyes was dawning comprehension of a mother who needed to be shielded by their tenderness, upheld by their strength.

“We didn’t know,” they said.

“You might have known if you hadn’t been such a darned pair of egotists,” Wade rapped out, “but I suppose you’ve had to go through with it like measles and whooping cough.”

Kathleen, having no fight left in her, wailed, “We can’t have Christmas without her.”

“No,” Wade agreed, “we can’t.” Then, “Of course, she’s gone to Solomon’s Shore.”

“She wanted us to go,” Randy confessed disconsolately, “but Kits wouldn’t give up her party.”

“Randy,” Kathleen cried, “you wanted it as much as I did.”

“Oh, I know. But I didn’t dream—” His voice trailed off. Then with an effort: “When she comes back we’re going to make it up to her.”

“No,” Wade told him, “you can’t ever make it up to her. Not in the way you think. I’m going to marry her. She doesn’t know it. But I do. I’ve been in love with her for a thousand years. And the pair of you need a father.”

VI

AT SOLOMON'S SHORE, before the dawn on Christmas morning, the stars shone in a sky of misty blue that was merged into a misty sea.

Sara, with Bobby and Mary Virginia, walked under that wide sky and talked in hushed tones.

"Mother, I can hear the world listening," said the imaginative Mary Virginia.

"For what, my darling?"

"For the glad tidings." Mary Virginia was walking, as it were, emotionally on tiptoe.

Sara wondered. Was the world listening? Did it care? Had the Babe of Bethlehem any more than a mystical meaning to the millions who this morning would celebrate His birth?

Bobby was saying, "I want to sing."

As they turned back at last toward home, Bobby trudged along beside his mother, but Mary Virginia ran on ahead, and suddenly she stopped, and piped up alone the song which the choir had sung on the day when Sara had flung at it her bitter challenge.

*"O little flock,
What words can tell,
The bliss of souls,
Christ loves so well."*

When the song was finished, the tears were running down Sara's cheeks. Oh, her little flock! How could she have dreamed of spending Christmas without all of them! Well, she wouldn't! She wouldn't!

There was a telegraph office at the little station at Solomon's Shore. The station was a squat edifice, and as Sara hurried toward it over the dunes, the light in its window shone low like another star.

"Where are we going, mother?" Mary Virginia demanded.

“To send a telegram to Uncle Wade.”

“What are you going to send it for?”

“It’s a secret.”

“Oh, a nice secret?”

“A lovely one.”

They were satisfied with that. Christmas was a time for lovely secrets.

When they reached the house, Sara went into the kitchen, where old Martha was dishing up the children’s cereal. “Martha,” she said, “we’re going to have six for dinner.”

Old Martha asked, “Who-all gwine eat with you?”

Sara flushed. “I telegraphed Wade to bring the children down.”

“Effen they was mine,” said old Martha disapprovingly, “they’d eat lean this day.”

“Martha,” Sara told her, “you know you’re glad they’re coming.”

“I may be glad,” old Martha agreed, “but I knows what’s good for ’em.”

Well, after breakfast Sara went out with the children, and they cut down a very small tree, and brought it in and set it up and popped corn at the fireplace, and strung it in snowy chains and hung some old ornaments on it which they found in the attic, and some wee wax candles salvaged from the same place, and some red apples which old Martha had brought with her.

And it was when the turkey was all brown and beautiful in the pan, and the giblets bubbled in the rich gravy, and the mashed potatoes were in a white fluff, and the scalloped oysters plump and delectable under their buttered crumbs, that Wade Phillips’ motor car drove up to the doorway.

And Randy and Kathleen, rushing in, hugged their mother; and Wade, following them, put his hands on Sara’s shoulders and said, “Did you think we’d let you spend Christmas without us?”

“That’s why I telegraphed?”

They chorused, “Telegraphed?”

“Yes. Didn’t you get it?”

“No. We started early.” Then suddenly Kathleen began to cry, great tearing sobs. “Oh, mumsie,” she said, “then you really wanted us?”

“Wanted you?” said Sara, and they clung together.

At dinner Wade sat at the head of the table and carved the turkey; and Sara sat at the foot, and told them how they had bought everything after midnight at a market shop where the man was just turning out his lights, but turned them on again to find a turkey for them and oysters and all the other things.

And how they had taken a late express train to the junction, and a rackets car from there; and how it was too late for Santa Claus, and they had had to trim their own tree!

And Wade said, “It isn’t too late for Santa Claus. At the very last moment he dropped a lot of boxes in my automobile.”

And after they had had their mince pie he brought them in, big boxes and little boxes, and fat boxes and thin boxes, and long boxes and short boxes, and in the boxes was everything that Bobby and Mary Virginia had ever wished for in their young lives, and a lot of things for Kits and Randy.

But there was only one box for Sara, and that was a lavender one with a bunch of violets in it, and there was a book which wasn’t very new and had a bookmark in it.

And when in the afternoon Randy and Kathleen went for a walk, and the babies were tucked into bed for much-needed naps, Wade and Sara sat by the fire, and outside, over the sea, the sun was going down in a burning glory, and inside there were dimness and the glow of the burning logs.

And Wade said, “Read what I’ve marked in the book.”

And Sara opened it and read with a shake in her voice:

*“And it’s buy a bunch of violets for your lady.
While the sky burns blue above. . . .
On the other side the street you’ll find it shady. . . .
But buy a bunch of violets for your lady. . . .
And tell her she’s your own true love!”*

And when she finished, Wade laid his hand over her little one and said, “I’ve loved you for a thousand years.”

And Sara, curling her fingers up to meet his own, felt her burdens fall from her, for in the grasp of that big hand was a promise of a strength to lean on, of a wisdom to look up to and of a tenderness which would follow her ranging lambs and bring them back again to the safe shelter of the fold.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

[The end of *So This Is Christmas! and Other Christmas Stories* by Temple Bailey]