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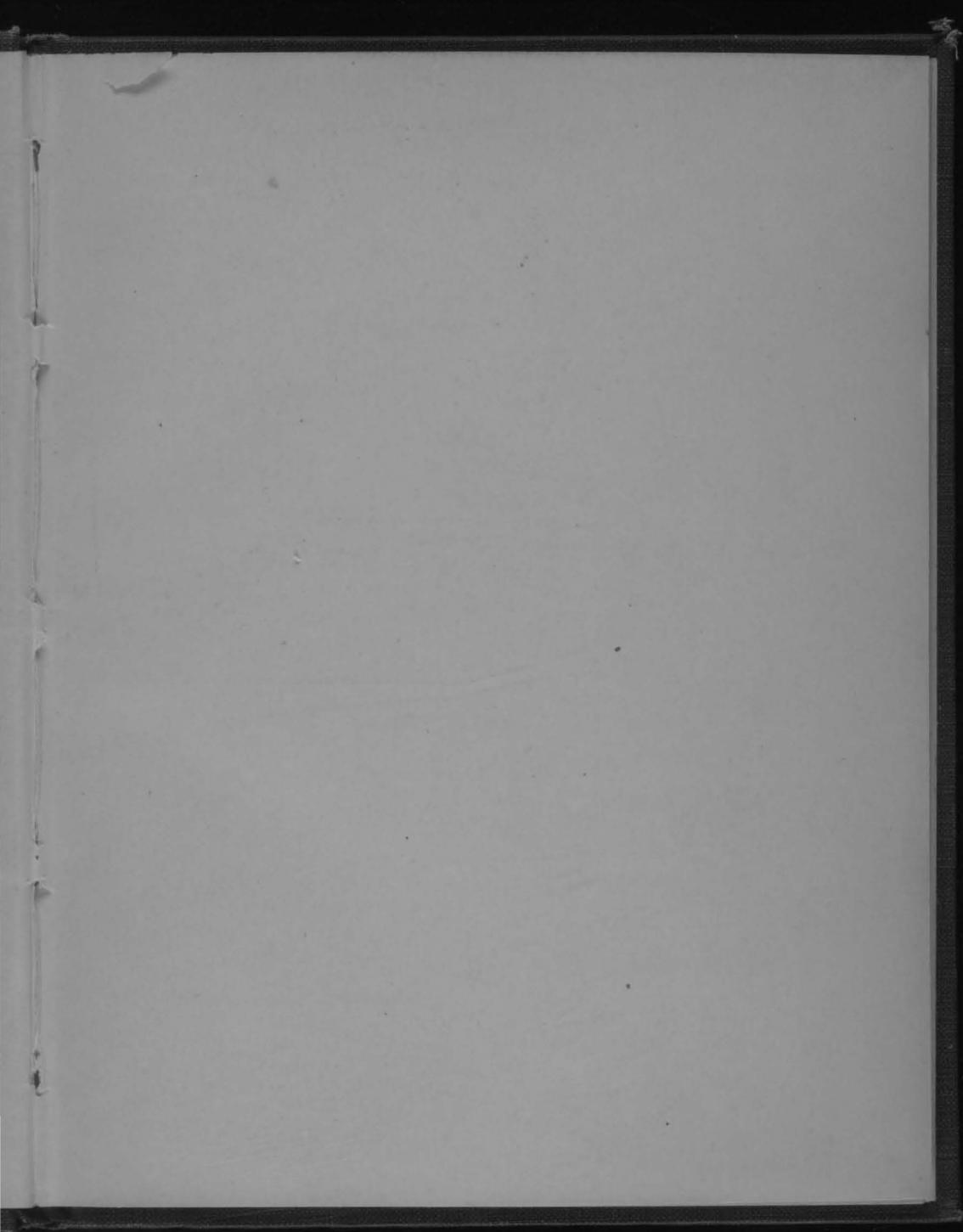


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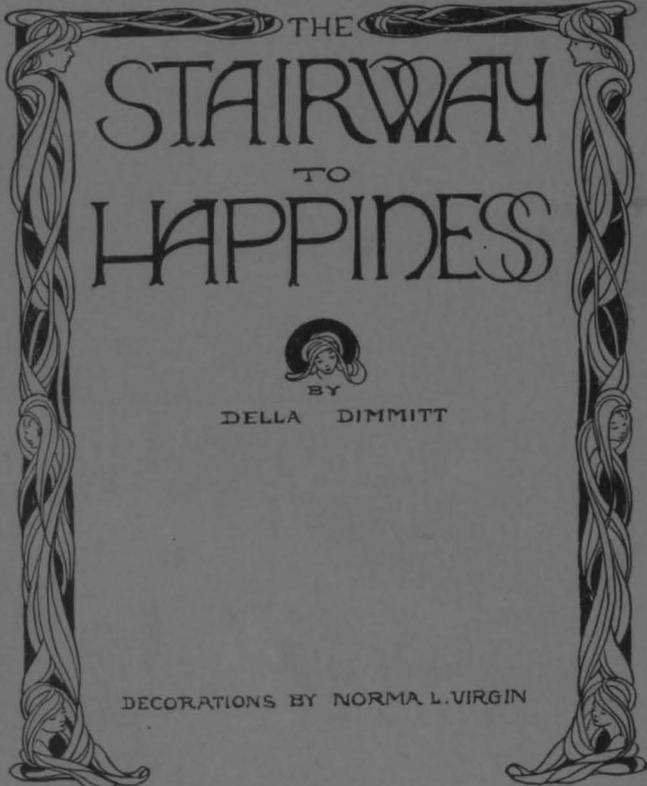
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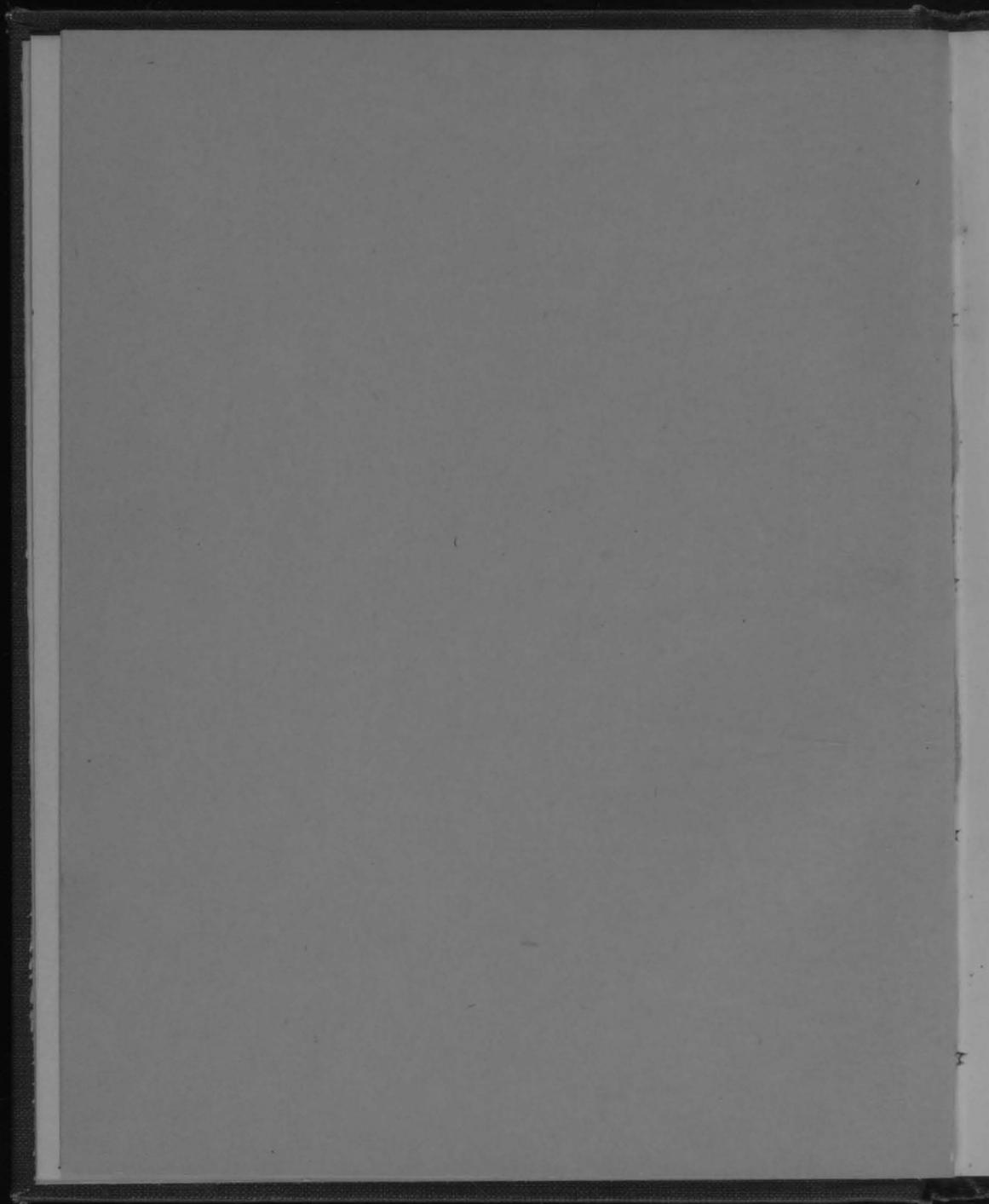


THE
STAIRWAY
TO
HAPPINESS



BY
DELLA DIMMITT

DECORATIONS BY NORMA L. VIRGIN







She took the baby and sat down with him in her arms.

THE
STAIRWAY TO HAPPINESS

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The Story of a Christmas Eve

BY
DELLA DIMMITT

Decorations by
NORMA L. VIRGIN

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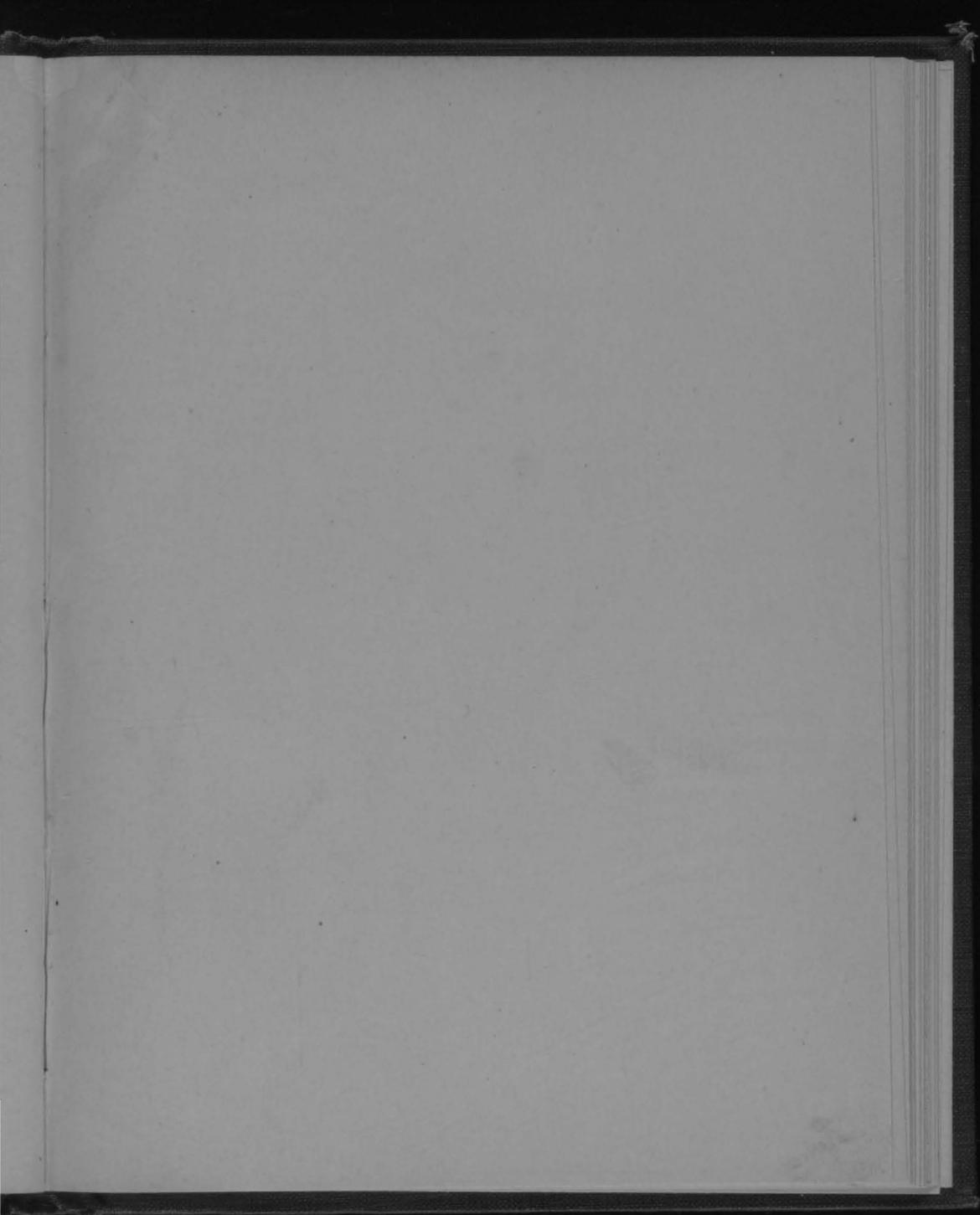
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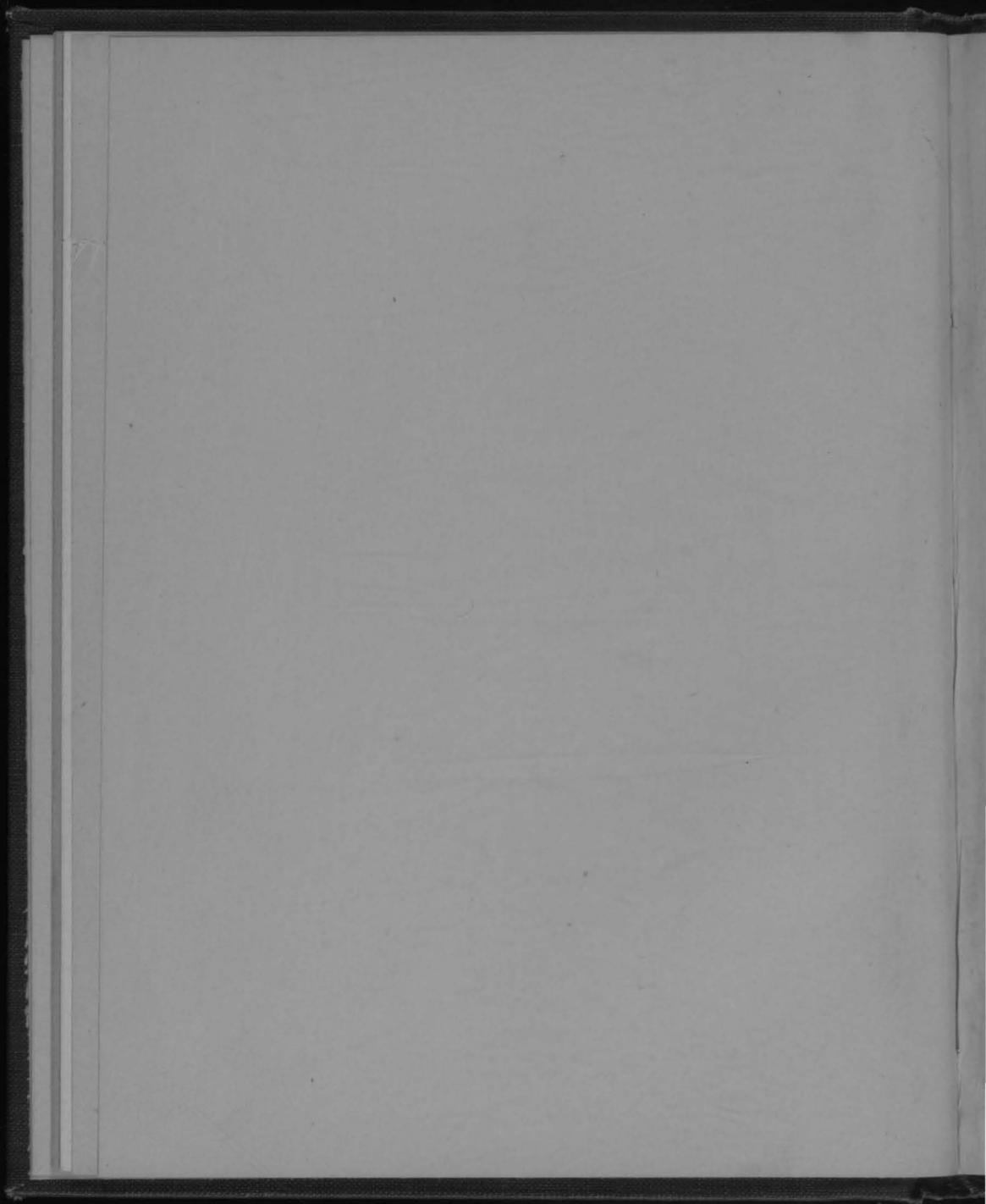


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OW, MAMSIE, I just will pull those wet rubbers off your poor, tired feet. Here! stick them out. Why, there's a hole in the heel of this one, and you've tried to stop it with a wad of paper. O, you naughty Mamsie! not to have bought yourself new rubbers instead of the muffler you got me. Me wearing a muffler and you with a hole in your rubbers. O—oh, Mamsie!"

"Judith, you ridiculous child!" The offending rubber was whisked instantly out of sight. Divested of her moist outer garments by three pairs of willing, girlish hands, the indomitable figure of "Mamsie" straightened, showing in the lamplight's glow not a trace of the weariness with which she had plodded home through the dark, slushy, illy lighted streets, not daring to use even the small price of a carfare.

"Come, children,"—the voice was that of a girl, herself—"let us see what Ellen has for our tea tonight."

"Same as last night and the night afore, Mamsie, dear," the voice of Ellen, familiarly known as the "market-woman," came blithely floating back from the dining room, where she had retired to light up, "tea and toast, the butter spread a little thinner just for the sake of variety. Would we dare buy a chicken—a very small one—Mamsie, for our Christmas dinner tomorrow?"

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"No, dear," the full, round cheerfulness of Mamsie's tone never wavered, "you know we all agreed that this was to be a 'penny Christmas,' and we must abide by the articles."

"That's all right, Mamsie," as cheerfully responded the market-woman. "I just asked for information, that was all. There's enough of the cold heart left over from Sunday's dinner to serve another meal, and with some fresh dressing it will be delicious."

"Want to hear what's on the boards for tonight, Mamsie, dear? Well, we're going to turn ourselves into real Christmas Waits first thing after supper and stroll through town singing carols on people's doorsteps. That was Judith's idea. Isn't it clever? And we're going to leave you to do the dishes all by your lone self, Mamsie. You haven't had all the exercise that's rightly coming to you down at that employment bureau wrestling with other folks's servant girl problems for the munificent sum of a dollar a day, so we're just going to let you wash all these dishes. After that, you may cuddle up by the fireplace in here and warm your toes and do exactly as you please all the rest of the time we're gone; only do not go into the east room, where we've fixed the tree, and snip off all your presents to give to somebody else."

"We, for our part, have sure lived up to the articles, for there isn't a blessed thing on that tree or among any of the packages that Rastus carried round for us this

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afternoon that cost more than a penny, and that's a certified fact, Mother Wait, that Judith Dabney, Ellen Maria and Eileen Mayo Wait can each affix her hand and seal thereto. But, Mamsie. I'm desperately afraid some of the dear people exchanging with us have not lived up to the agreement as they said they would.

"Aunt Lucy Landis, for one, has sent a 'little remembrance' in a great big handbox affair, and some of the other packages are sizable and hefty, too."

"In that case," and Mamsie's face was gravity itself, "I would advise the calling in of a committee to appraise the gifts all round, and if by any chance some one's offering exceeds your own in value, why, carry it back without delay and demand your own on the spot. Let us preserve our independence, though the heavens fall."

"But Mother"—a bright red spot burned in either of Judith's smooth olive cheeks—"we girls don't mind being poor the least little bit in the world—it's only being paupers that hurts."

"I understand, dear," returned Mamsie, who, knowing a better way, never argued with her daughters. "Now, wrap up warmly," she admonished as the girls rose from the table, leaving her to finish her tea alone. "Put on your muffler, Judith, and don't expose that precious throat, dear, more than you can help."

"My charming Waits!" she exclaimed, as presently the gay group came flitting down the stairway,

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cloaked for the street, their dainty heads all bound in bright scarfs. "What a sweet way you have chosen to usher in the Christmas joys. Now, give all our dear, dear friends your mother's kindest greeting and thank each one who has in any way contributed to our own Christmas. We can still, in spite of our changed circumstances, afford to be gracious. Tell Miss Liza Elkins that I am promising myself the pleasure of a little visit with her tomorrow directly after dinner. She will understand why we cannot this year invite our friends to us. And say to Dr. Glidden that I wish him to accept with my dearest love this gift in remembrance of your father. You are all willing, are you not, that I should part with it?"

She had risen, as she spoke, from the meagrely furnished tea-table and drawn from a secret drawer in a man's much worn desk, still filled with his unused possessions, a packet wrapped in fine tissue paper, a watch it proved to be, a watch of magnificent workmanship and priceless, for it had been presented to the dead father of the girls by the medical association of his state, as the lines engraved on the inner lid of the watch read—"in token of appreciation for his distinguished service in behalf of suffering humanity."

"How sweet of you, mother—how sweet." Judith's voice was pointed with little, tender thrills. "May I carry it over?"

With the departure of the girls the old house grew

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strangely, oppressively quiet; but to the mother it was an intense relief to sink into the shabby, sheltering arms of the chair that had been her husband's, and there alone, among the wavering shadows of the firelit room, with no solicitous young eyes on her, just be without dissimulation what in sad reality she was, only a tired, utterly dispirited woman with the battle of life going against her. Brooding was a costly luxury, but she gave herself up to it, and as the images of the old, bright days when a strong arm had shielded her and her little brood from the rigors of a hard world without rose before her, tears forced themselves between the tightly closed eyelids. In the secrecy of her heart she was compelled to admit the sheer blank wall confronting her whichever way she turned. There was the matter of the twins being kept in the Academy the remainder of the year. The tuition she might, by dint of closer management yet, possibly provide for, but their graduation gowns and other incidentals were beyond her power of obtaining. Then, there were Judith's music lessons, so few remaining until the child could complete the course and measurably fit herself for teaching the art she so passionately loved; but that, too, was not to be thought of. Already they were restricting themselves in the matter of living expenses to the barest necessities. It had gone to her heart to deny Ellen's unspoken wish in the matter of the Christmas dinner, but it had to be done. Silently, she lifted up her heart in a prayer

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for sustaining grace and a yet larger human wisdom in meeting these and all emergencies.

At the first sound of tripping feet she drew herself up, and as though by some magic seemed to become young and eager-eyed again.

"Oh, Mamsie," the gay Waits, their cheeks flushed, their eyes sparkling and all speaking at once, burst in upon her, "such a time as we've had—such a wonderful—wonderful time! Why, you haven't washed the dishes! Girls! she hasn't washed the dishes, nor cleared the table!" And above the din rose Mamsie's own blithe voice denying the charge of "mooning" and engaging to "do" the forgotten dishes twice next day by way of penance if only they might be allowed to stand tonight, since this was Christmas Eve.

"Now, tell me all that happened." Mamsie's expressive face shone with the light of anticipation; Mamsie's voice quivered under the enchantment of the hour. Still as pretty as any of her girls, what a picture Mamsie made and what a Christmas Eve they were all having!

"Now, don't leave out a bit. I'm wild to know what everybody did and said. I know they must all have thought it bright and clever—a really beautiful thing—in you to turn yourselves into real Christmas Waits and come singing their festivities in. Where did you go first?"

"Why, Mamsie, what a question! To Dr. Glidden's,

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of course, and when the dear, blessed old man came and softly opened his door and we could see him sitting there inside with his grand white head bowed, listening, with his hand up to his good ear, we just stole inside and made a little circle round him and sang him every one of our carols. Then, we presented him the watch, and he arose and made us a little speech. I don't believe any of us ever quite realized before—I am afraid we did not—what a perfectly splendid man our father was. But Dr. Glidden told us some things about him tonight, Mother, some things which he had done for folks—O, poor, suffering folks who could never pay him anything, you know—that made us feel very exalted and very humble, too. And then, Dr. Glidden just slipped father's watch inside his pocket and said he would carry it, thinking ever of his great and good friend, Windom Wait, and hope that he, himself, might one day pass it back into our family again untarnished and with its usefulness unimpaired. Why, it was just as though, Mother, he were giving us some great and unspeakable gift instead of us giving him one."

"Any man can give, dear, but it takes a gentleman to receive"—Mamsie's voice thrilled—"so when the watch finally comes back into your hands its value will be enhanced by all the sacred and beautiful memories of the Christly minister who received both your father and mother into the church, married them, christened their three children and read the commitment service

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over your father's grave. The dear doctor! Well, where next?"

"To Miss Liza's, and we found her crying over Eileen's letter calendar. She had just opened it because she couldn't wait any longer, and the poor old soul kept saying, 'Three hundred and sixty-five letters! three hundred and sixty-five letters, all for me. I can't die this year. I've simply got to keep alive until the last one of those letters is read.' So then, we told her that the very last of all was the autograph letter from General Lee to great-aunt Sallie Withcutt on the eve of her marriage, and Miss Liza said, 'Children, has Sallie Wait committed that treasure to my hands?' And, mother, you'd have thought she held an empire's crown jewels in her hands."

"O, I can well believe it," tremulously responded Mrs. Wait, "for Miss Liza, then in her beautiful girlhood, was bridesmaid to Aunt Sallie, and her own sweetheart was one of the General's aides, and after his early, tragic death the General wrote Miss Liza a letter; but her letter was lost in the family's flight that next year out of Petersburg. Yes, yes,—dear Miss Liza! I knew she would prize that letter above all earthly possessions. And Mrs. French, poor lady, did you sing under her window?"

"O, yes, Mamsie, and when we told them we wanted to come once a week throughout the year and sing as our Christmas present to them, the Major followed us

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outside to thank us and to whisper that this would be the most acceptable gift we could possibly have brought, that Mrs. French was always better for days after one of our little sings.

“And O. Mamsie, old bed-ridden Mrs. Maynard was so happy over her portable window garden, gay in all those blossoms we had coaxed out under the window glass. And Aunt Lucy exclaimed and kept on exclaiming over Ellen’s sewing basket made out of the cheese box lacquered and lined with the flounce off my old pink dimity. Really, it did look handsome with those bands of brass beading tacked around it, and it just fitted into the jut in her bay window. And, O, everybody else was charmed, and it was such fun. Why, mother, it just seemed like we actually had more to give this year, when we thought the locusts had just about eaten us out of everything we possessed, than we ever had to give before. They all seemed to think that even if we hadn’t put money, we had put time and ingenuity and heaps of love, or, as Aunt Lucy Landis expressed it, we had put ourselves—the whole of ourselves—into our home-made presents. Why, it was beautiful—just beautiful, Mother, and we were so carried away by the spirit of it and feeling so sort of ‘Christmasy’ ourselves that we forgot everything about the bank breaking and us losing all the money we had in the world, and do you know what we’ve gone and done, Mother? Why, we told Miss Liza and Dr. Glidden and Major and Mrs.

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French that we were expecting them all quite as usual for Christmas dinner tomorrow. We never meant to, Mother, truly we didn't; but what else were we to say when every one of them said to us that they supposed they were to come as usual to us tomorrow. Whatever are we going to do about it, Mamsie?"

"Do!"—Mamsie's heart, it is true, gave one dismayed bound, but not for worlds and more worlds would she have let her girls know it. "Do! why, we will make them all welcome, of course. We will set out our best china and my finest damask and the silver service that was your great-great grandmother's, which has graced every like occasion all these years, and with Dr. Glidden's dear voice invoking God's blessing upon us all, even warmed over heart will furnish a feast. Besides, I think there is a little of the quince marmalade left, and with some of Ellen's milk biscuit I have no doubt but that we shall fare famously.

"Now, let us have our tree, but first, if you are not too hoarse, sing just for me, "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear."

Mamsie, seated at the old piano, touching the time-stained keys with light fingers, listened with straining heart for the lines:

"And ye beneath life's crushing load
Whose forms are bending low,
Who toil along the climbing way
With painful steps and slow;

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Look now, for glad and golden hours
Come swiftly on the wing,
Oh, rest beside the weary road,
And hear the angels sing!"

The little, glimmering southern pine, soon relieved of its light burden of home gifts, stood in uncompromising stiffness above the packages from outside acquaintances.

Judith picked up the bandbox affair and handed it to her mother, saying with a little catch in her voice, "I don't care if there's a town lot inside of this, Mother. If Dr. Glidden could receive father's watch and Miss Liza Aunt Sallie's letter in the spirit in which they were both given, we are mighty poor in soul if we haven't caught a little bit of their nobleness. Take off the lid, Mamsie."

But the bandbox, unwrapped, yielded nothing but a round footrest that stood apologetically on four wobbly screw legs, and some other articles crying loudly their home manufacture. Poor Aunt Lucy Landis had done her conscientious best, but even the girls could see that it had been the most dismal kind of failure. They stood in a little, hushed group, thinking remorsefully of what it must have cost this most generous of friends to have dispatched these poor contrivances.

"Oh, Mamsie," exclaimed Judith contritely, "weren't we vulgar—weren't we vulgar, though, to go around

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telling folks that because we were poor they couldn't pay anything for the presents they gave us?"

"Not vulgar, dear," amended Mamsie, "only thoughtless and a little unmindful of the rights of others who like to give as well as to receive."

They would not perhaps have admitted it, but there was a sense of disappointment, of something lacking, which even the cards and notes freighted with love and tender wishes could not altogether cover. Deeper than the dearth of gifts or the meagreness of such as were sent was the consciousness of pain inflicted on some whose friendship had made much of the sweetness of life to them all.

But they were not left long to such reveries, for presently there broke a sound as of shuffling feet on the back gallery. Some colored person, doubtless, come to ask a donation for a Christmas festivity. Mamsie's first regretful thought was that for the first and only time in her life she would be compelled to deny any such demand on her slender resources.

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WHEN it was that Judith upon opening the door, received the warm, soft little bundle being thrust unceremoniously upon her. Instinctively her arms closed round it.

Those of her family within the inner room caught the drawling, honeyed voice, such as the southern negress alone of all the world possesses, saying, "Tell Miss Sallie I done waited a mighty long time on them no 'count white folks whut neveh come back after this huh baby an' I jes' 'bleeged to git back home an' change this ol' dress an' git on my good shoes. An' say to Miss Sallie, chile, ef she'd be pleased to look after it till we all's chu'ch Chris'mus suppah's oveh, I'll shore come back an' rid huh of it.

"'Pears like to me," the same rich, warm voice went on, complainingly, "thet some folks is mighty keerness o' their chillen drappin' 'em round fur we all to tend whut ain't no kin to 'em a -tall."

Mrs. Wait came hastening to the door.

"O, Sukey," she broke in at once, "has no one from the Foundlings' Home been over yet after that poor little mite?"

"Why, of course I will keep the baby. You did perfectly right to bring it over to me, only do not come back for it—not tonight, Sukey. I, myself, will see that it is cared for, this one night, at least."

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She closed the door on the already rapidly retreating Sukey, whose thoughts were all centered on the church supper and her own proper adorning for that all-important function.

Meanwhile, Judith had carried her unsought burden into the warmth and light of the living room, and was engaged in unswathing the coarse, soiled wrappings from about a plump and fuzzy-headed baby who fixed a pair of unwinking and very blue eyes upon her and continued steadily to regard her.

"Howdy do?" inquired the object of this concentrated scrutiny affably, while the other girls gathered round in laughing wonderment, all questioning at once, "Where did he come from, Mamsie?" "Is it a him or is he a her?" "O, isn't he the darlinest thing ever?" "He's ours to keep, isn't he Mamsie?"

In the midst of such rapid cross-fire of inquiries, piecemeal, such slight details as were known concerning the baby came out. He had been found; indeed, Mamsie, herself, had picked him up that morning, having almost stepped upon the odd looking bundle wrapped about with a soiled gray blanket and thrust a short way within a dark alley through which she was hastening to reach the office on time. It appeared to be a simple case of child abandonment, although no trace of any person or persons leaving a child had as yet been found other than that a mover's wagon, with tightly drawn cover, had been seen very early that morning in the

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neighborhood of the alley into which the baby had been placed.

The supposition was that these were the people who had cast off the child. There had been some talk of pursuing the wagon; but, or so Mamsie argued, the persons in the wagon had shown their unfitness for any responsibility on its behalf, parental or otherwise, by their heartless act of abandonment, and so she was inclined to believe that no move had been made in the matter. At least, she hoped that none had been made. She said this with her eyes resting on the baby, thinking how soft and tender a blue his eyes were, and thinking, too, of the hardness of heart of any who could cast adrift, on a cold December morning, so small and helpless a creature.

"What do you s'pose his name is, Mamsie? Could you make a guess just by looking at him?" suddenly asked Judith, transferring her interest from the uninteresting matter of the baby's guardians to the baby, itself, who still maintained a fixity of gaze as though he would determine what sort of strange creature this was with the vivid red cheeks and the very dark eyes who seemed to have appropriated him all to herself."

"I'll tell you what he looks like," said Ellen, her head turned critically to one side—"he looks—why, he looks for all the world like a chicken that's just pipped the shell."

"I say, let's call him Pip.

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"Pip, Pip! O, you dear, fuzzy-headed Pip!

"Mamsie,—I say,—Mamsie, can't we keep Pip for our very own?"

"Yes, yes, Mamsie," they one and all now chimed in, "do let us keep him.

"It won't take any more to feed Pip than it does to feed one of the kittens"—this from Ellen.

"And I'll make all his clothes—I'll wash and iron for him, too"—this from Judith.

"Yes, do let us keep him—do—do"—now they were all three talking clamorously at once—"please do, Mamsie. We won't let him be one speck of trouble to you—we'll give the white kitten and the gray kitten and—yes, the Maltese kitten, all away—indeed we will, Mamsie, just as soon as ever we can find good Christmas homes for them. Please say that we may keep Pip."

Mamsie said nothing at all. She only looked at little Pip. They couldn't keep him, of course they couldn't. It was not to be considered for one moment—but what a dear, downy yellow head Pip had.

It cost far more to keep a baby than it did to keep a kitten, or two kittens, or three kittens, or any number of kittens. Mamsie knew that, if the girls didn't. No, she could not, she positively could not allow herself to think of it—but what round, wondering eyes Pip had—and so blue. No, she must not, she positively must not.

So, steeling her heart as she invariably tried to steel it whenever a new waif of a kitten appeared, to have

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its fate decided, she began quite firmly, "I am sure you wouldn't have me"—when all at once it flashed upon her that it was on just such a night as this the inn had been too full to receive another such little child—"no, I am sure you wouldn't have me," she recommenced in a strangely altered voice—"turn a helpless baby out into the wet and storm of—of a Christmas Eve."

"O, Pip, you're going to be my baby—no, mine—*mine*, I say;" again all three voices were raised at one and the same time, each striving to outbid the others. "O, Pip, we'll have to divide you—yes, snip you into two—no, into three parts with the scissors. How will you like that, Pip?"

Apparently, Pip looked with no favor on this just division of him into three several parts; for suddenly and without warning he lifted up his voice in an anguished and prolonged wail

"He's scared to death!" exclaimed Judith, hugging Pip in his entirety jealously to her breast.

"It's more likely that he's hungry," said the more experienced Mamsie. "Have we any milk, dear?" she asked of Ellen.

"Only what we got for our breakfast, Mamsie."

"Bring that, then. We surely can go without our breakfast—on a Christmas morning—that a little hungry child may be fed."

She took the baby and sat down with him in her arms, hardly daring to think of the grave uncertainties

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to which she had just committed herself. She only knew that one of those swift and searching tests that reach to the very root and groundwork of character had come to her and she had met it in the only way she could. It was as though she had been obliged to step off onto a frail raft, and without oar or any means of determining her course, trust herself to the open sea. And for the moment she was uplifted above fear. Even the fear of the uncertainties of the future touching herself and her helpless family which had been for weeks gnawing at her heart—that, too, had somehow, for the moment, vanished. A lightness of spirit, it might be from the very desperation of her case, had taken free and full possession of her.

Pip had been very hungry. At each spoonful of sustenance offered, he stretched his mouth widely in the manner of a young fledgling impatient for a worm, till at length a gasping hiccough proclaimed him full to the point of spilling over.

Then, leaving Pip to the girls' care and bearing a candle, Mamsie went up stairs to bring from the laven-dered hiding place in an upper chamber the cherished things which had clothed her own baby daughters and that were now to become the possession of the waif so strangely drifted into her care. Only once did Mamsie falter in her task, and that was when, with full arms, she began to descend the stairway. On another Christmas Eve, just twenty-two years ago that very night and

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at the self-same hour, she was placing a white-slipped foot on this same old stairway. A broad and beautiful thing of grace, its slender carved hand rail, rich with the mellow tones of age, rounding out into the full and gracious curve of the final downward step, it had been fitly called the "Stairway to Happiness" because of so many brides—two generations of them before Mamsie's time—having come down its shining length.

On this night of all nights, memories crowded thick and fast upon her, and for a moment it seemed as though she would sink upon the steps.

Then it came to her that this was not, after all, the way by which any had crossed the mystic border line into life's happiness.

This stairway, shining and beautiful though it was, was but the outward and visible symbol of the real stairway by which she, following after those long-vanished brides, and young Windom Wait, who had become her husband on that long ago night, had passed over into happiness. That stairway—the real stairway—they had together builded for themselves. Its base lay deep in self-surrender—in kindly thought—in tender deed—each for the other and for so much of the wide world as lay within their reach. Why, all the span of her husband's short professional life had been one continuous mission of mercy, his very death from yellow fever caught while going freely about among its suffering victims, an act of devotion.

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No, no, no, this was not that over which they had entered into happiness. That—the real stairway—was a thing of the spirit, mystic, imperishable, as are the things that belong to God.

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HE baby had scarcely been put into its white slip of a night-gown when in walked Dr. Glidden, having come in person as had been his habit through all the happy, changeful years to bring the season's greetings.

It was a pretty sight to see the girls instantly cluster about the benign figure of this most revered of friends, one taking his cane, another his hat, and still another helping him out of his greatcoat.

He listened in silence to the commonplace story of the baby. Such things were of daily occurrence. Babies were everywhere thrust upon the cold mercies of the world with as little care for what might befall them. Perhaps it was the night, perhaps it was the smallness and helplessness of little Pip; but, at any rate, something seemed to have filled all their hearts with an inexplicable and overflowing tenderness.

Saying no word, Dr. Glidden took the little one and placed it on his knee, then very gently he laid his hand upon its small, downy head. He, too, had quite forgotten that this was a foundling. It might have been the Christ, himself, for the welcome one and all had given him.

They were still sitting there, a moved and silent group, when all at once a strange and thunderous knocking began that shook the old house to its oaken beams.

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Mamsie again took up the lighted candle and went hurriedly through the wide, front hall out of which the stairway wound. Mamsie was unacquainted with fear, and yet she acknowledged to herself a sense of safety in the presence of Dr. Glidden within. Reaching the door, she flung it widely open.

It may have been that the group outside were not entirely prepared for the appearance of a slender woman with softly shining, unafraid eyes holding a candle aloft as she peered into the night. At any rate, there was a something hostile—a something suggestive of a challenge—a threat, even, in the voice demanding to know if a certain Mrs. Wait lived in that house.

"I am Mrs. Wait,"—there was not a tremor in Mamsie's voice—"will you walk in, gentlemen?"

One lone man—and not the one who had spoken—stepped swiftly forward into the solitary ray of light made by the candle's wind-blown flame. Beyond him Mamsie could not, at the moment, see. The darkness, however, seemed palpitant with other living, breathing persons, how many she could not sense.

One sidelong glance was sufficient to assure her that the man closely following her was young. There was about him a certain disorder of appearance as though he might have jumped into his clothes days ago and then forgotten ever to take them off. There was a strained look in his eyes, a haggardness in his face that, taken in connection with the telltale splotches of mud on his





That—the real stairway—was a thing of the spirit.

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furred overcoat, told of fast and furious riding—very possibly in a forward-leaning posture as though he would outride the wind itself.

It would have been a curiously interesting thing to know just which of the many conflicting emotions surging through the man's soul was at the moment uppermost when Mamsie's light touch on the door-knob disclosed the picture within. It was a very simple picture—just a benign and beautiful old man sitting holding a sleeping child in his arms, three young girls hovering over both.

A hoarse and scarcely articulate sound that seemed to have the name of God in it escaped the man's lips. In two swift strides he had crossed the room, and himself stood over the whole group.

"The little chap's all right, eh?" He spoke breathlessly and with a swift, sliding inflection. His voice shook and his face had in it the paleness of death.

"D'you say he's all right, ma'am?"

At the first sound of his voice all three of the girls sprang up and ranged themselves in front of the baby, shutting him clear away from the sight of this brusque interloper, whoever he might be.

"If you've come after our baby," cried Judith vehemently, "you may as well go away. We found him first and we mean to keep him."

"To keep him," they all three exclaimed simultaneously, "for our very own."

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"Hush!" and Mamsie put out her hand for silence. No one heeded her.

"He's ours," chanted the girls together again. They formed a half circle, their short skirts stretched out as a screen, hostility in the eyes of them all. "Pip is ours and we mean to have him christened tomorrow, because he's a Christmas baby."

"Christened?" the ghost of a smile, for just a bare second, wavered on the stranger's lips—"christened—Pip?"

"Why, no, that's what we are going to call him just among ourselves. His real name will be—will be—well, something quite different.

"Is it—is it of any interest to you, sir, what we name our baby, now that we've adopted him?"

"Well, yes—a little." Again that suspicion of a smile just touched the man's lips.

"Are you—are you from the Foundlings' Home!"

"Sorry, but I can't claim the honor."

"Are you any—any—relation of Pip's?"

"Only his father, that's all."

And then a thing happened that only a skilled physician could fully have understood. The stranger, with a backward fling of his head, burst suddenly and crazily into laughter.

It was little wonder that they all stared at him. The revelation and the man's behavior were alike astounding.

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Judith was the first to recover speech.

"Well," she said, witheringly, "it doesn't seem to me that anybody who would leave a dear little baby like this out in the cold and wet to starve and die deserves to be a father."

By way of answer, the stranger suddenly and almost roughly thrust her aside, thrust them all aside. Stooping, he lifted the sleeping baby and strained it to his heart. And as he stood holding it so, they saw that his eyes were wet.

The baby stirred and uttered a faint cry. Gently, the father laid it back in Dr. Gliddon's arms.

"I'll have to ask you to keep him a little longer," he said, and this time his voice sounded controlled. "There's further business to do tonight—some telegraphing, too, that I can entrust to no one but myself.

"You won't mind, madam"—he turned toward Mrs. Wait, who had scarcely yet recovered presence of mind—"you won't mind if I throw a guard about your house, will you?"

"Why, no, if you think it at all necessary, sir, but would it not be a hard-hearted person who would harm a little child?"

"There are such in the world," he made quick answer—"only four nights ago this boy was taken from his crib—stolen away—O, my God—I expected—"

Mamsie's low cry interrupted him.

"Has he a mother?"

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"If she hasn't drowned herself in her tears."

"O, then, sir, don't stop here a minute. Throw twenty guards, if you wish, about my house, only do not keep her in suspense a moment longer. Tell her—O, tell her—for me—that not a hair of his head has been harmed."

"Stooping, she gathered the sleeping baby to her tender breast, and as she rose to face the father her own eyes were as full of tears as his had been.

Dr. Gliddon rose at once.

"I will go with you," he said with grave courtesy; you may require a friend's aid."

And together, they passed out into the night.

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SOON the storm, which had been all day gathering, broke with sullen fury. The wind increased in violence, and the long withheld rain poured in a succession of slanting sheets broadside of the old house stoutly resisting its beating pressure. The stars faintly showing in the uncertain earlier evening had all been blotted out of the sky, and, except for the recurrent flashes of lightning in the riven sky, the outside world seemed but a mass of trembling blackness filled with a multiplied roar as of something alive and moving from far up the valley.

The girls huddled on the floor drew closer about their mother holding the sleeping baby on her lap. They were quite alone, as all knew, but there were strange noises breaking every now and then in the dim and silent chambers of the upper regions of the house as though the dead and vanished life up there were awaking and endeavoring to join in the universal tumult.

Hemmed in, surrounded, all but engulfed, it seemed to Mamsie's aroused consciousness that the rise of another hostile wave would surely sweep her and all belonging to her as driftwood before it, she knew not where.

Of them all, little Pip alone was undisturbed. In the safe shelter of Mamsie's encircling arms he slept peacefully on, his breath now and again coming in little

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swift catches, his warm mouth touched at times by a fleeting smile, as though he had found a sweet security in the port of dreams.

A paleness came into Mamsie's cheek and a tremulousness to her lips. The storm, all at once, had taken on terrifying significance. In its all-encompassing might it was like unto that which was ruthlessly sweeping down upon her. At last, doubt and despair had pounced upon her—she was afraid!

With an inward, anguished cry for help, when no help was at hand, she struggled to her feet, the baby still in her arms.

"O, don't leave us, Mamsie," wailed the girls together, laying restraining hands upon her.

"Just a moment, dears; I—I think I hear some one at the back trying to find the way in, and we must not turn any shelterless away on a night like this."

Thrusting Pip into Judith's embrace, she slipped away from their hold. It was only old Rastus, who had made his way through the night and the storm to see if all was right with his beloved family. There was something warm and comforting in the old man's presence. His father had served Mamsie's grandfather. In his faithfulness and devotion to her and hers, Rastus represented the stability that had seemed to characterize the old order. She saw that he was drenched from head to foot, the water streaming from the ragged cap in his trembling old hand, and in her sudden solicitude for his

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comfort she almost forgot the storm. Rastus must have dry things to put on, and she went to fetch them. But he was strangely oblivious to his own condition. He didn't seem to be aware that his garments were soaked through. Something of infinitely more importance lay heavily upon his mind. "Whut you all goin' to hev foh yo dinnah tomorrow?" he asked in a troubled voice.

"I don't know," said Mamsie simply, with a sudden, swift recollection of a multitude fed once upon a barley loaf and a few small fishes.

"Hit's mighty cur's to ast folks to dinnah an' not know how they's to be fed," the old man said with a shake of his gray head, expressive of his own deep misgivings.

"Yes, isn't it," and she tried to force a smile, "but that is what we appear to have done."

Before she had ceased speaking, Dr. Gliddon burst in through the front door. He, too, brought in with him a breath of the storm, but unlike Rastus, he was dry. Some provident hand had seen to his protection. A majestic looking old man he seemed under the soft, revealing light from the old hall chandelier which had been set dimly burning, even taller and broader than before.

Mrs. Wait flew to his side.

"Sallie," he said tranquilly, before she had time to speak, "the gentleman will be back presently to remain overnight, possibly through Christmas, with you—he and the child.

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"There's been a washout somewhere up through the mountain road and the wires are down. They are relaying the message to the mother by courier, and say they will get it through before morning, so that her anxiety will shortly be allayed.

"If you would like to have me, Sallie, I also will remain with you overnight. I see Rastus out there. Have him light up the Christmas fires, Sallie, as he used in the old days—tell him to pile on the wood, that there may be a cheerful glow everywhere, upstairs and down.

"This is such a beautiful old house, Sallie—so mellowed by time—so redolent of memories fine and sweet"—the old man's gaze wandered about a moment, then fastened on the stairway—the beautiful soaring stairway disappearing in the obscurity of the shadows above, much as human life vanishes at last in the mysteries of the infinite—"and yet," he continued slowly and meditatively, "you could not have kept the old place six months longer."

"I know," she said with quivering lips and in so low a whisper that he did not hear it, although he somehow sensed the meaning of it.

"And knowing all that, you could yet take a little child in?"

"I couldn't turn one away."

"No, turning folks away from your door is a thing you have never yet learned." He placed his hands in fatherly affection on the shoulders of the woman he had

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held as a child upon his knee. "If you had, things might have turned out to be vastly different both for you and for the child. It would have died—perished in the storm—and there would have been an unassuageable grief in a very grand home tonight.

"You did not know that you were saving the life of what is perhaps the richest baby in all the land—you did not know that—"

"Impossible," cried Mamsie—"you are dreaming."

"Dreaming, am I?"—the old man laughed softly as he thrust something shining and leathery into her hand.

"And is that a dream, too? Within it is the price, a gang of beasts hunted to their lair thought to place on a baby's little life, and since they failed to secure it, it falls to you. There is enough in there to save your home—to secure your future—to—"

"Why—why—Sallie, what are you crying for?"



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