



XII

CHRISTMAS EVE AT SWAMP'S END

AS for poor little Pattie Batch, all this while, she sat alone, a doleful heart, in the shack at the edge of the big, black woods, quite unaware of the momentous advent of a Christmas baby at Swamp's End. The Christmas wind was still high, still shaking the cabin, still rattling the door, still howling like a wild beast in the night, still roaring in the red stove; and snow was falling again—a dry dust of snow which veiled the wondering stars. It was no longer a jolly, rollicking Christmas wind. The gale, now, it seemed, was become inimical to the lonely child: wild, vaunting, merciless, terrible with cold. Pattie Batch, disconsolate, sighed more often than a tender heart could bear to sanction in a child, and found swift visions in the glowing coals, though no enlivening tableaux; but—dear brave and human little one!—she presently ejaculated “Shoot it, anyhow!” and began at once to cheer up. And she was comfortably toasting her shins, in a placid delusion of stormy, mile-wide privacy, her mother's old-fashioned long black skirt drawn up from her dainty toes (of which, of course, the