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OUR STRANGE GUEST.

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CHAPTER I.

Sunday, December 26th, 1875—Christmas Eve. This has been a stormy week, snowing and blowing almost every day. Here from our upper windows I can see the whirling snow clouds rush down along the drifted road, and there must be fully three feet deep of snow in our clearance. The tall pines, thickly draped in white, stand up around like mourners, and when the cold wild wind passes through them, they bend to the rude blast like creatures in adversity. Now and again, as the wintry gale sweeps onward, one might imagine the thousand flakes which fall from the burdened branches, to be almost suddenly whisked into an icy mist or like the frozen tears of bereaved ones who are sorrowing for the flowers, the once beautiful summer flowers, that lie fading and withering under the vast white pall which seems to cover the whole earth. Ah, how often I could wish that some shroud, some dense veil, would hide from my memory the faded flowers of my heart, the once glittering gems of hope which have been lost to me forever.

The church bells are ringing a cheering peal to many—yet the sound in the distance comes to me like a deep, melancholy wail. The faint tinkle of sleigh bells is singularly cheerless, yet many persons are no doubt happy while driving to church beneath the dismal sky, which now makes the steeples of Portville look far away, though that village is little more than a mile distant. This is a joyful season to

many, to almost all, yet its annual return brings but sadness to us here in our lone home, a fresh consciousness of having been left forlorn forever; and the effort we make to hide this feeling from one another, especially from my mother, only serves as it were to bring back a keener recollection of the past and the revival of a parting scene which can never be forgotten. As comets come back at stated periods from immense distances bringing brightness, so in every life, as a contrast, there are memories of the long ago which return to bring but gloom. And now for some dreary time past, before each succeeding year takes its farewell, a shadow falls upon our house and upon our hearts, a deep shade which keeps out the sunlight and hope for the time, and which makes Christmas to us a period of the most painful remembrances.

Let me think—twelve years already gone! Twelve springs, twelve summers, twelve autumns, and nearly twelve winters; almost twelve entire years. How quickly they have passed! What a gloomy gap out of my life-time. Yet, notwithstanding this bleak flight of successive seasons, it seems only yesterday since my younger brother John, everybody's favorite, my mother's idol and Anna Strong's betrothed, came in just after tea, dressed in his uniform as sergeant of a company of Canadian volunteers, to tell my father that he had just received a letter from my brother Thomas in Rochester, which stated that he had been drafted for service in