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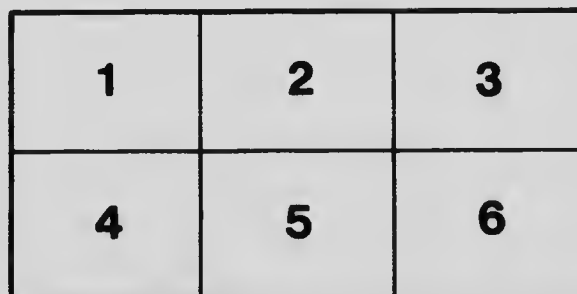
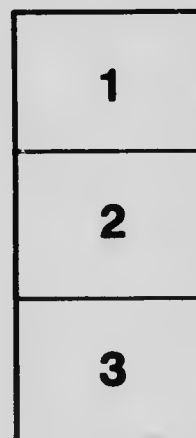
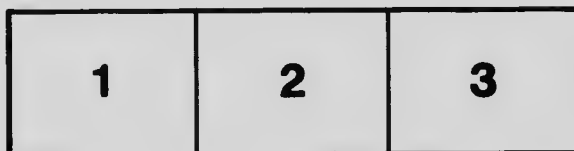
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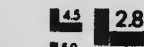
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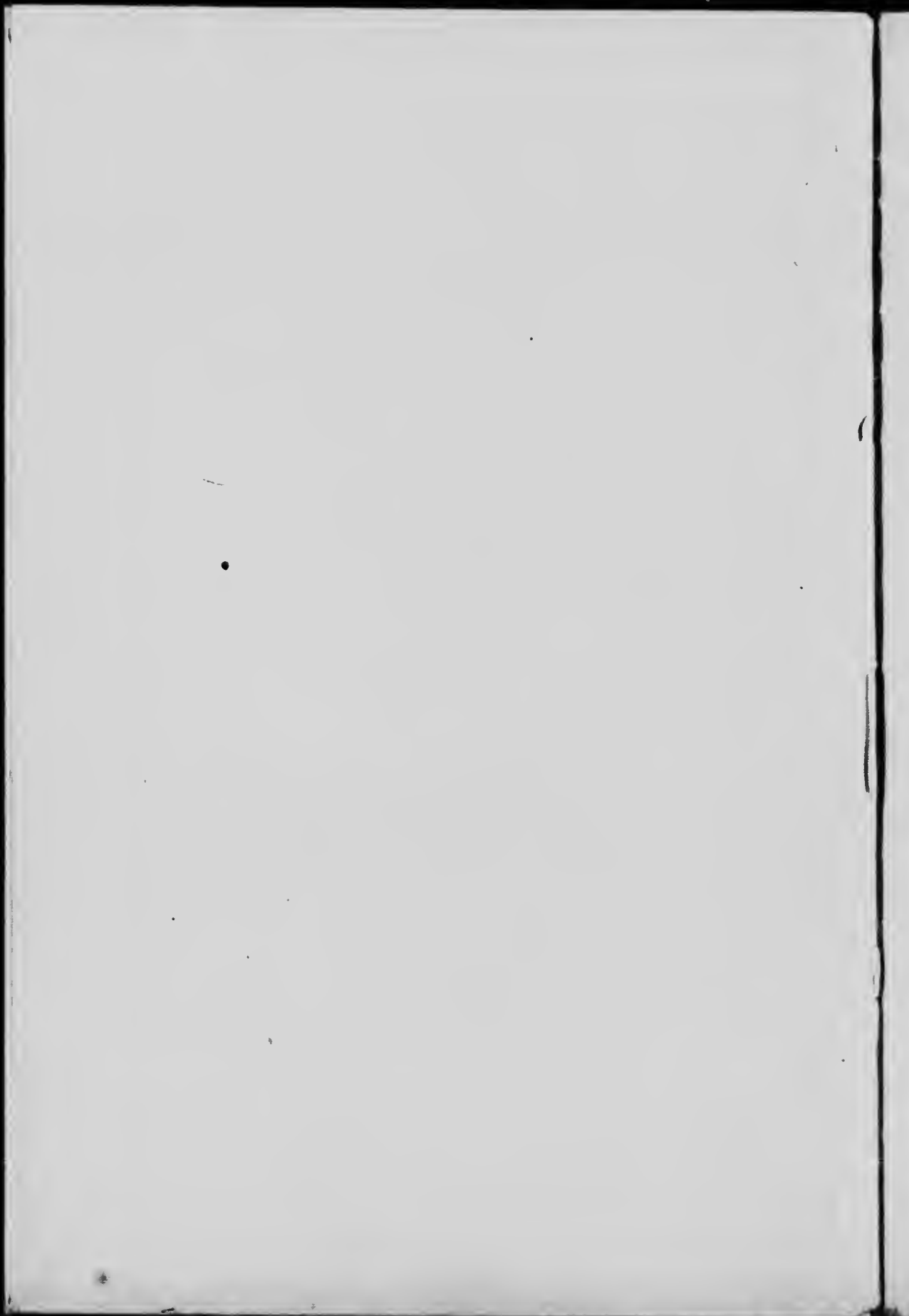
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A Christmas Robin

by

Mary Wallace Brooks



MONTREAL

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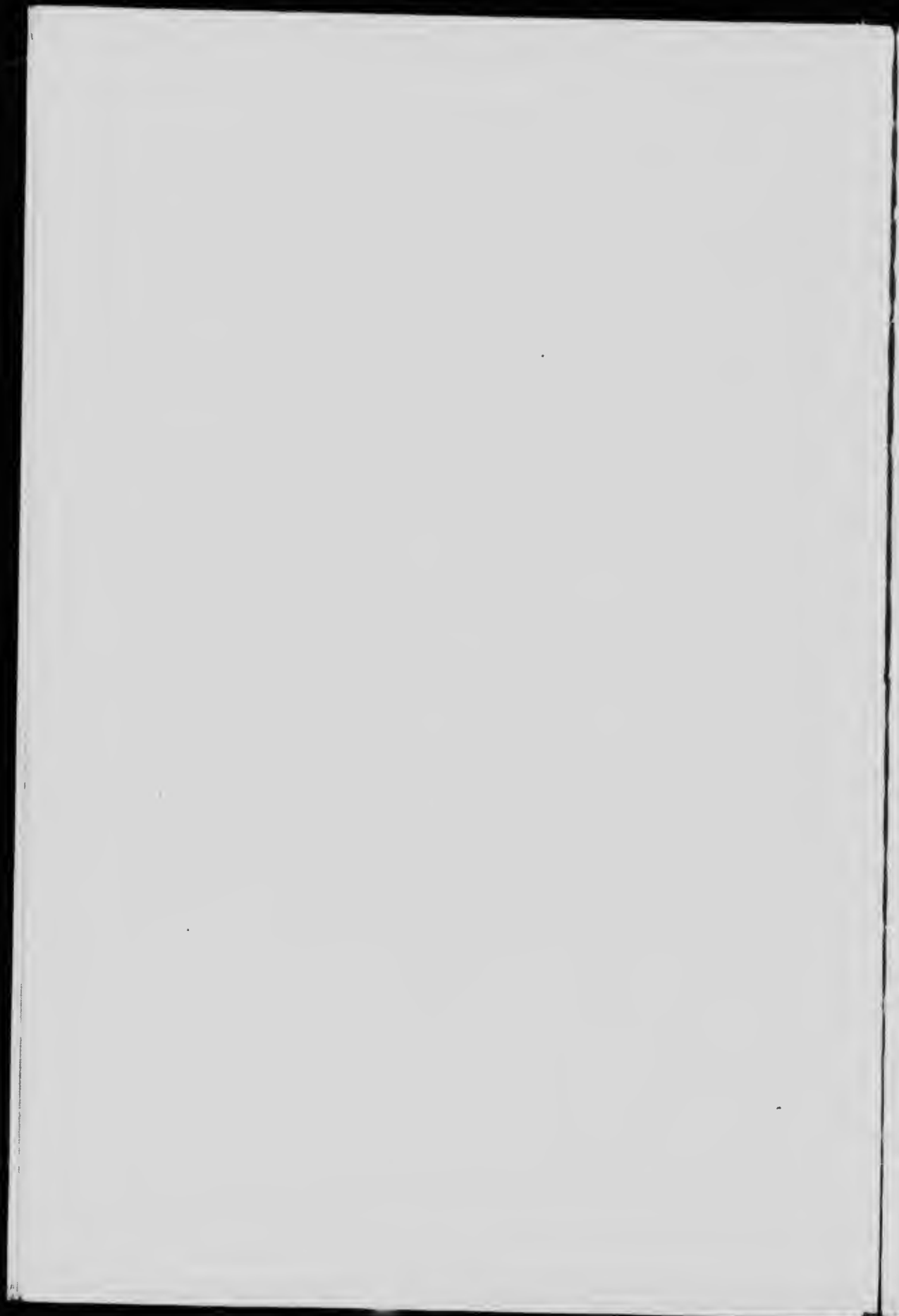
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To

Gladys and Robert North





A Christmas Robin

I.

THE fragrance of English violets filled Mrs. Fitzgerald's library, as Marjorie lifted the white papers and silver cord from a dainty violet-colored box.

"A box of posies for each of us, Auntie," she said gayly, as Mrs. Fitzgerald entered the room.

"For *me*?" The elder lady was immediately in a happy flutter of emphasis. "Why, it is *years* since any one has sent *me* flowers on Thanksgiving Day! I have *always* had to buy my own votive offerings. I shall tell the rector at dinner how truly thankful I *am* to-day. Let me see!" Marjorie was opening the second box as her aunt spoke. "Roses—red and white!—child, child, of *course* I might have guessed. They are from your Jack."

"My Jack, indeed!" Marjorie laughed, her cheeks growing suddenly pink. "Please don't tell the rector that," she added half seriously, as she turned away. "Now, if you like, I will get the flowers ready for the table."

"If you will, dear. There is church soon, and Miss Huntington immediately after, and the rector later, and a final seance with black Martha Washington in the kitchen. Will you look around to see if I have left any of my eye-glasses in breakable places? Or if *Bella Donna* or any others of the horrid books I *never* read but always expect to, are lying out in plain sight? What *should* I do





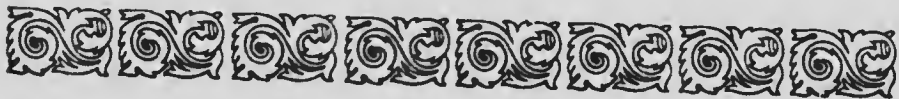
without you, dear? Thanksgiving has often been a dull day for me. I can't be thankful enough I have you here this year." The bright black eyes under the white hair grew suddenly dim as Mrs. Fitzgerald kissed Marjorie's soft cheek. "I can't be thankful *enough* your father and mother went honeymooning off to Europe and left you to me. I shall tell the rector that, *anyway*." And with an emphatic little nod of approval, and the swish of softly emphatic black silk, Mrs. Fitzgerald bustled off to interview black Martha Washington in the kitchen.

When she was alone, Marjorie took the violets and sat down for a moment in one of the big chairs by the window. A few adventurous snow-flakes were already floating down from the gray sky. It would snow hard before night.

As she looked down the quiet Caryville street, Marjorie thought of Jack Wilmott and his disappointment that she had decided not to visit friends in New York this Thanksgiving time. He would, of course, take some other girl to the big football game, the last of the season!—Then she smiled in some self-amusement as she proceeded to count her blessings. She had enjoyed the two months she had spent in Caryville; she was glad she was here to-day; and—she had the violets. Perhaps, before Christmas, she might be gone.

The thought reminded her that time, too, was going. She sprang to her feet with the bright eagerness, the quick, birdlike lifting of her dark head that always heralded her interest in new duties. She loved to be useful. For the next fifteen minutes the mirror above the mantelpiece in the dining room reflected charming glimpses of a slim, dainty figure in brown; of a little head crowned with lovely brown waves of hair; of brown, sparkling eyes and small piquant features. If the mirror had only had phonographic connections, it might have recorded sweet snatches of song as well.

After church she hurried back to forestall, if she could, Miss Huntington's proverbially early descent. Miss Huntington, a lonely little ex-teacher, had from time immemorial been invited to Thanksgiving dinner at Mrs. Fitzgerald's; and, from time immemorial, Miss Huntington had always come too early. So, after a moment's





regret that the rector would expect to walk home with her, Marjorie slipped away quickly from the church door. But as she did so a hand stole suddenly into hers in her muff, and a sharp voice asked querulously:

"Why are you running away?"

Marjorie turned to find the little deformed girl who belonged to her Sunday afternoon class. The thin woman's face was looking up at her unsmilingly, the long unchildish fingers held hers tight.

"Only because I must, Jane," she said warmly. "I wish I could stay to walk home with you. But it must be next time."

"Very well, Miss Hunt."

The unsmiling face looked less sharp. The thin fingers disengaged themselves quickly, to help Miss Hunt go.

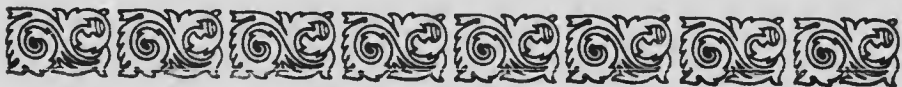
As Marjorie walked on, she thought with lingering affection of the strange little child-woman, Jane Warner—the Sharp-Voiced One, as she had first called her. When, two months before, at the request of her aunt's rector, Marjorie had undertaken a Sunday School class of little girls, all impressively correct in appearance, she had not thought of encountering any special problem in teaching. She had often had classes of settlement and mission school children and had enjoyed them. But on the second Sunday of her appearance as a teacher in Caryville, the rector, Mr. Crawford, had sought her out with an eager question written all over his face.

"I wonder if you would take charge of a little friend of mine?" he had said. "She is Jane Warner—a deformed girl."

Marjorie could not refuse his winning smile. "Of course," she had said without misgiving.

Jane Warner had entered Miss Hunt's class with dignity. "I suppose you think because I'm little I am as young"—with scorn—"as the rest of these girls."

"I don't usually ask people's ages when I first meet them," Marjorie said, smiling.





"Well, I'm nineteen—going on twenty," retorted the Sharp-Voiced One, unexpectedly. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-five," said Marjorie at once.

For some reason Jane asked no more questions that day. The other girls had heard her cross-questioning of pretty Miss Hunt with less surprise than amusement; they knew the Sharp-Voiced One. But Jane's keen eyes never left Marjorie's during the lesson. It took all the young teacher's courage to meet their unwinking challenge.

Later, when Sunday School was over, Marjorie had had a second surprise. Jane, lingering, had said, "I'd like to walk home with you—please."

And so their friendship had begun.

When Marjorie had told Mr. Crawford of her tilt with the Sharp-Voiced One, he had smiled back reassuringly at her.

"She was only testing you," he said. "Poor little drop of bitterness, she thinks every one is ready to snub her. Perhaps they have," he added, consciously ungrammatical, "when she tested *them*."

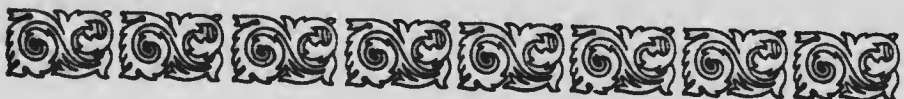
Marjorie felt very happy over the implication in the emphatic "them." She had not, by the way, told Mr. Crawford her age.

On Thanksgiving morning, Jane lingered at the door of the little church until the rector came out. He, too, looked disappointed as he glanced up the street.

"She has gone," said the Sharp-Voiced One, enigmatically. "She had to hurry, she said."

The rector was a tall man, perhaps forty, perhaps less. The good color in his cheeks deepened a little under Jane's keen gaze, but the fine gray eyes were wonderfully kind as he looked down at her.

"Who is *she*?" he asked, with a merry look.





"Why, Miss Hunt!" retorted the small woman, disapprovingly. "You know! I wanted to walk home with her."

"And won't I do—to-day?"

"Well, I like you next best," Jane admitted grudgingly. "But you're not going my way, are you?"

"Perhaps I am, to-day. Mrs. Fitzgerald has asked me to dinner, you see."

"O—h!"

Owen Crawford read envy in the sharp-drawn monosyllable, and felt sorry that he had spoken.

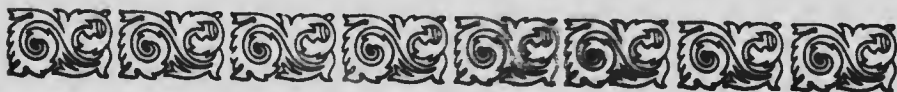
"Perhaps, if you're good, Miss Marjorie will come to see you this afternoon sometime."

"Miss Marjorie! Is that what you call her?"—still enviously.

"Well, I haven't—yet," he laughed. "Do you think she would mind the familiarity?"

Jane shook her head indignantly. "Not a bit of it! Why, I asked her her age once, quick as a wink, and she looked at me straight out of her brown eyes, and said, 'Twenty-five'—just like that!"

"Twenty-five," Owen Crawford repeated musingly. And Jane, looking up at him sidewise out of her sharp blue eyes, wondered why he looked so far away, and what he was thinking of that "twenty-five" made his gray eyes shine so.





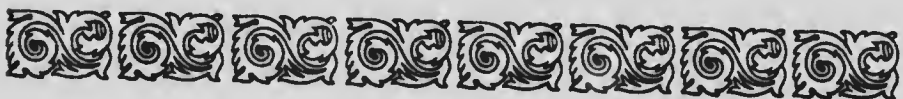
II

FROM the hall, Owen Crawford heard the gay buzz of conversation die down as Mrs. Fitzgerald's black maid, Portia, announced his name; and immediately his hostess came forward to greet him.

"So sorry I could not be at the service," she murmured feelingly, as she helped him out of his coat, "but I had to be Martha to-day, and I sent my Mary to church instead. If I had gone, I should have worried every minute about the cranberry and the stuffing. So I am afraid I could not have served God with a quiet mind—especially if I were wondering how I could serve Man with a burnt dinner. Now, *please* don't be shocked! You know how incorrigibly young I am. But I *am* truly thankful to-day, Mr. Crawford. I could name ever so many blessings, the greatest of which is Marjorie. You are one yourself. How glad I am you did not fail me! A Thanksgiving dinner without a man is, I always say, positively *ghastly*.—But you are cold! Come down to the fire at the end of the hall, and warm yourself. Yes, you had better. Miss Huntington is here. And that reminds me—excuse me a moment. Be sure to come in when you are ready."

Crawford had followed Mrs. Fitzgerald halfway down the long hall; then, as she disappeared into the library, he sought out the fireplace, according to command, and stood for a moment looking down into the cheery blaze of hickory and maple. He had forgotten that he was cold. It was very good to be here.

A light footstep on the stairs at his left; a slight figure blotting out some of the light from the windows on the landing—or was it that the light was all concentrated in that one sweet face?—and Mar-





jorie came down to him. He took an eager step forward; then their hands clasped quickly over the railing.

"I was getting a photograph for Miss Huntington," she said, flushing a little. (Why should she feel an excuse was necessary for their meeting alone?)

"You didn't wait for me after church." His voice reproached her.

"No. I never keep leap year," she smiled.

"But you might have known I was hurrying to catch up with you, to get out of my cassock as quickly as possible. It will catch in the sleeves sometimes."

She laughed a wicked ripple of a laugh.

"How awkward of it! Is it—ripped in the lining, perhaps?"

"How saucy of you! No—I can use a needle and thread as well as anybody. What else have I been a bachelor for, for——"

"For—?" she prompted merrily, as he paused laughing.

"I see Jane Warner is making a good pupil out of you. Well, I am not afraid to tell. For thirty-eight years. There, I thought your eyes would open wide! Does that seem a long time?"

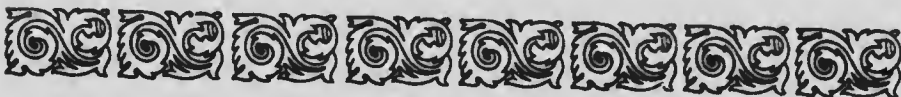
"Not when one is sixty. I am very, very old—almost old enough to command occasional respect from Jane herself."

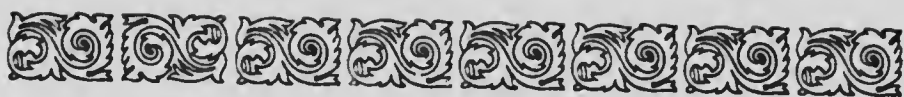
"How do you manage it? One can't learn in thirty-eight years. But speaking of Jane reminds me—she missed you so this morning. Won't you go down to see her sometime this afternoon—"

"I mean to," said Marjorie.

"—and take me? That is the part of the bargain I wasn't sure of."

She looked down steadily for a moment into his eager gray eyes. Then, "What can we take her to help her celebrate the day?" she asked anxiously. "Jane would not accept a dinner, of course."





The little confidential "we" brought the glad light flooding to his face. "She might—if you cooked it, perhaps," he said, half seriously.

Something of the adoration the Sharp-Voiced One felt for Miss Hunt may have sounded in his voice, for Marjorie suddenly remembered her duties.

"We must take ourselves away from here," she said, gaily evading the point, "and be polite. If we don't go soon, the grass will be up to our shoes and Miss Huntington will refuse my photograph. She will say that this"—she held up the card—"was taken in prehistoric times."

But she did not offer to show him the photograph. Perhaps she thought it unkind to help him break the difficult tenth commandment. And Crawford did not ask to see it. Perhaps he thought it wise to devote himself to Miss Huntington for a space. Who knows?

Miss Huntington, a wiry little spinster of fifty-odd summers—or was it frosts?—was anxiously awaiting them, her thin hands clasped nervously in her best silk lap. To her the rector was always her catechist, she in his presence the Sunday School pupil who might fail in her examination. She stood up now very straight to meet him, and to his kind inquiry said deprecatingly:—

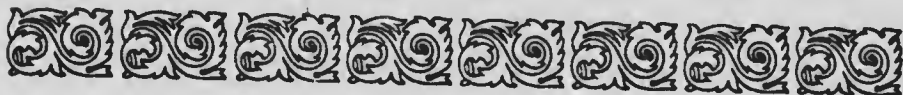
"I thank you, I am very well, Canon Crawford."

The rector was always "Canon" to Miss Huntington—she had repeated her first catechism to a Canon, and with Miss Huntington, habits tended to persevere. In vain Crawford had told her that he had no right to the title. She had always brushed away his modesty with a wave of her thin hand.

"You deserve it, anyway, Mr. Crawford. And I shall be the first to call you that. Perhaps I have the gift of prophecy."

It was impossible, indeed, to argue with Miss Huntington when she thought she was quoting Scripture.

At dinner, in answer to Mrs. Fitzgerald's neighbourly inquiries,





Miss Huntington forgot for a time the rector's presence in discussing her newest grievance—the milkman.

"He is so forgetful," she complained. "Sometimes I think I will live on bread and water for the rest of my days. He either leaves a quart when I have told Maggie I want a pint, or a pint when I have said a quart. On days when I have ordered none at all, he is sure to leave more than usual. To-night I suppose I shall find an extra supply."

"Thanksgiving seems to mean an extra supply of everything good," said the rector, looking absent-mindedly from the bountifully spread table to Marjorie across the way.

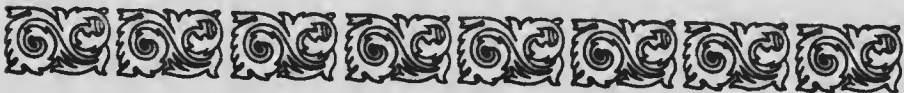
"But what about your Maggie?" demanded Mrs. Fitzgerald practically, as she wrestled with the turkey, "Surely she ought to know better than to let him leave the wrong amount. Have you asked her about it?"

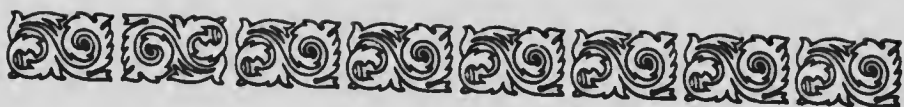
"Oh," Miss Huntington shook her head with conviction, "Maggie always is so busy when he comes! She gives him the order and he is supposed to fill it. Why, when I went into the kitchen the other day when he was there, I found Maggie ironing so fast and hard that her face was as red as a beet. She hasn't time to worry about him—I have often heard her snub him, in fact. And I—" Miss Huntington's voice grew pathetic—"I simply can't take her to task about it. The modern maid-of-all-work is so independent, Canon. And Maggie has been a treasure since she came to me, three months ago.

"Well, I—" Mrs. Fitzgerald became severely emphatic—"should not be at *all* surprised if you Maggie and your milkman were in love. It is strange that they are *both* so absent-minded about the milk. I'd inquire into it, if I were *you*."

Miss Huntington looked anxiously at the rector, fearing that he would be scandalized at the levity of the conversation.

"Oh, it is the milkman's fault. I know, Mrs. Fitzgerald," she said hurriedly. "He is apt to be light-headed and forgetful. I often





tell Maggie I wonder how so heedless a man will ever get out of this world alive."

Above the violets the rector's eyes met Marjorie's in a flash of joyful understanding.

Miss Huntington, seeing, immediately recalled her unlearned catechism. "Did I—did I say anything out of the way?" she faltered, her lips a little tremulous.

"Not at all." Crawford apologized, ashamed of himself. (Yet the joyous sparkle would linger in his eyes!) "To be truthful, Miss Huntington, my thoughts had jumped a long way. It's queer how one's mind will take flying leaps at a chance word or expression. What you said about the milkman's getting out of this world alive made me wonder—please excuse the liberty—whether there was not some Celtic strain in your ancestry."

"O—h!" returned the little ex-teacher, very much puzzled. She felt that here indeed might be the beginning of a fearful catechism. So she dropped the subject of the milkman as if it burnt her.

It was late in the afternoon, after an hour's talk around the comfortable library fire, that Owen reminded Marjorie of her promise.

"What about Jane Warner? You need exercise—Miss Marjorie," he said bravely. "Shall we go now?"

Marjorie rose at once gladly. "But the something I must take—" She wrinkled her forehead in perplexity. "Oh, I know!" And she ran away, to reappear almost at once with the violets in her hands. She disengaged a small bunch from the mass, and held the others out to Crawford.

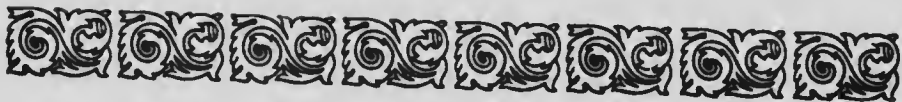
"Will you see that they are wrapped up for Jane—I don't want them to get the least frosted—while I hurry to get ready?" And she was gone up the stairs too quickly to heed her aunt's indignant exclamation.

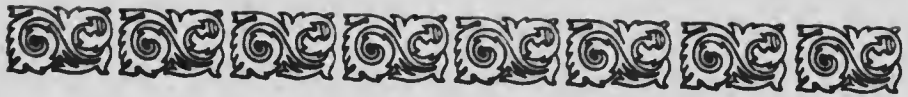




"You are making Marjorie far too devoted a Sunday School teacher, Mr. Crawford," mourned Mrs. Fitzgerald. "The idea of the child's sacrificing her Thanksgiving nosegay like that! Why, it was from Jack—Jack Wilmott, the nicest young fellow imaginable. He has been devoted to Marjorie for *years!*"

When Marjorie, looking very sweet in the brown velvet suit that Jane especially loved, came down the stairs again, Owen Crawford, waiting for her in the hall, did not look up or step forward impulsively to meet her, as he had done before. When she paused beside him, he gave one quick stern glance at the violets in her coat, then looked away. She wondered, a little hurt, if he thought her selfish to keep a few fragrant blossoms for herself.





III.

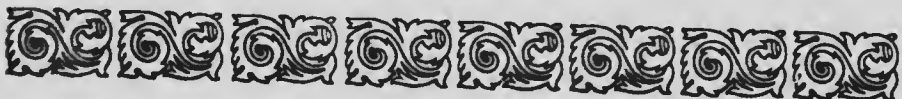
THE Sharp-Voiced One lived with her step-mother and two young brothers in a neat little white cottage half way between the church and Mrs. Fitzgerald's house. Mrs. Warner was "good" to Jane, the neighbors said. She had trained her to sew, to knit, to mend, to cook when her strength was equal to it, to keep the house neat, and, in moments of relaxation, to crochet. Surely no stepmother could do more than this—especially for "a cranky girl like Jane." Mrs. Warner, in a word, lived and moved and had her being in the domestic arts. It was these she had imparted to Jane; it was the knowledge of these things, she felt, that was beyond money and beyond price.

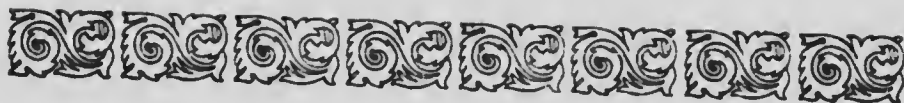
As the rector and Marjorie approached the white cottage on Thanksgiving afternoon, a sharp little face that had been pressed against the front window long before the two had come into sight, drew back quickly into the growing dusk of the sitting-room. The steaming tea-kettle that stood on the back of the glowing coal stove might have heard a long-drawn breath of delight, if it had stopped long enough in its cheery whistling to listen. But it was too bubbling over with its own concerns to care.

"Jane! Jane!" said Miss Marjorie's glad voice at the door. "May we come in? Were you expecting us this afternoon? Or, aren't all the Thanksgiving dishes washed up yet? If they're not, I mean to help."

"And so do I," said the rector, laughing. "We deserted Mrs. Fitzgerald's dishes to help you with yours, if you wanted us."

Jane was a little shocked. Did they think she would let them work—and Miss Hunt in a brown velvet!





"Why, they are all done," she said, drawing Marjorie to the most comfortable chair near the stove. She seemed to take it for granted that Crawford would follow—as he did. Then she perched on the broad arm of Marjorie's chair, and began to stroke the fluffy muff softly. The rector, from his seat near Marjorie, saw that Jane's sharp face was smiling.

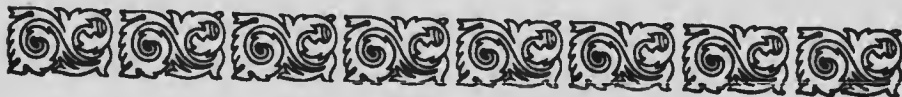
"Has it been a good day, Jane?" he asked—to make her feel at home with them.

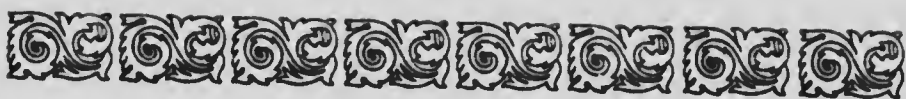
"Well," retorted the Sharp-Voiced One, with a wicked look, "it's nice now that you and—*Miss Marjorie*—have come. At first, when she couldn't wait to walk home with me, I thought everything was going to be hateful. But I remembered your sermon about being thankful, and what Miss Hunt said last Sunday afternoon about looking for spots of brightness every day, and not letting a day skip without being on the watch, and I felt better about it all. But I didn't really think you'd come on Thanksgiving Day, just the same. It seemed to me about as likely as seeing the Christmas Robin you told us about, Miss Hunt."

"A Christmas Robin!" exclaimed Owen, turning eagerly to Marjorie. "What is that?"

"Suppose you tell him, Jane. I am proud of my pupil's remembering."

"Well," again began the Sharp-Voiced One, in her most didactic manner, "Miss Hunt told us one day in S.S. not long ago about how she loved robins, and how when they came in the spring they seemed to her messengers of good-will and friendliness. She said there was no need of Christmas robins, because then people had the spirit of good-will, anyway, so it was better the birds came in the spring when we might be forgetting the Christmas sermons and good feelings, and be getting careless, maybe. But she said, although the birds weren't needed, she wanted each member of her class to be a real Christmas Robin herself—to be a friendly messenger of love and sympathy to some one who was sad and in trouble this year. Even if we couldn't give them money, we could love them—Why are you laughing, Mr. Crawford?"





"Because you and Miss Marjorie can preach such good sermons that I feel my day of usefulness is over. But you mustn't mind me. I am going to be on the watch for Christmas Robins this year, I promise you."

"I wish I could see a real one," sighed Jane. "He'd sort of help matters along, wouldn't he, Miss Hunt? I don't feel like loving anybody new, someway—and it won't count if I just go on loving people I love already."

"But I forgot," she added, jumping down from her chair. "Ma says I'm to make you a cup of tea—if you'll kindly have it."

The last remark was so evidently a quotation from some less sharp-voiced source, that Crawford could hardly save himself from laughing again.

In a moment a tiny table had been drawn to Marjorie's side, the tea was steeped and in a shining teapot, and Marjorie was requested to be the goddess dispensing nectar into three pink cups.

"Shall we have a light?" Jane asked then, anxiously.

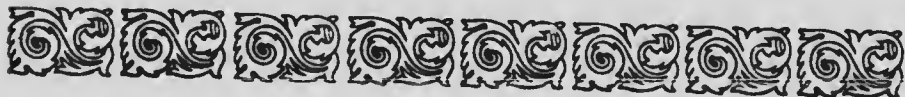
"Oh no, please. This lovely bright coal stove is nicest. Why, one could see to read by it! Besides, if there were a light Mr. Crawford could see how many cups of tea I am going to have."

"You're such fun!—and you're *always* happy," said Jane wistfully, as she stroked the brown velvet sleeve near her.

"But you have seen spots of brightness to-day, dear, so you must have been happy too. Won't you tell us what they were, Jane?"

Jane looked almost shamefaced for a moment.

"I guess they're not worth mentioning," she said finally. "One spot is this big red coal stove you have just been speaking about, Miss Hunt. Whenever I felt kind of glum to-day and shook myself—you know the way I do when I'm disgusted—I'd get turned round facing the stove, and someway that bright red face would always make me feel like laughing. It seemed to say there was a good joke somewhere—and I didn't mean it should be on me. I decided the red face and I had better laugh together."





"That was certainly a big spot of brightness," smiled Marjorie, holding one of the thin hands tight.

"But there was another—several more," persisted the Sharp-Voiced One. "When Ma heard you were perhaps coming this afternoon, she looked kind of mysterious for a while, and then she brought me a queer-shaped parcel. It was these three cups. She had meant to give them to me at Christmas, but on second thoughts she felt I'd rather have them to-day when you came. I told her she did just right," concluded Jane, virtuously.

"Oh!" Marjorie's fingers trembled a little as she carefully put down the rather thick pink cup from which she had been drinking. "How good of her!"

"And there was another spot still?" asked the rector.

"Why, of course! There was you and Miss Marjorie and the brown velvet suit—all together! That was the best of all.— But you're not going, Miss Hunt? You're not going yet!"

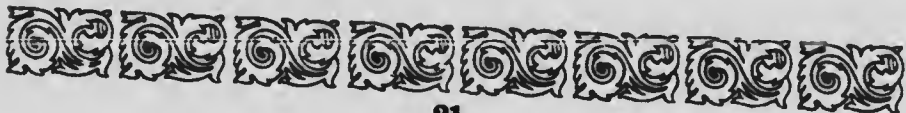
Marjorie shook her head, but she did not speak as she crossed to the door. Crawford, springing to open it for her, saw by the light in the hall that her downcast lashes glistened with tears. He looked at her very gently while he waited.

She came back, bringing the violets they had left in the hall, and unwrapping them, gave them to Jane.

"With so many spots of brightness, happy Jane," she said, very low—her voice had never seemed so sweet, thought Crawford—"you hardly need a spot of sweetness too. But please take these, anyway—with my love."

Jane drew several long, wondering breaths before she could speak. She could only bury her face deep down into the violets, to make sure they were real, that they were hers. "Oh, Miss Hunt! Oh!—Oh, Miss Hunt!" she said at last, breathlessly. Owen felt a lump rise in his throat at sight of the radiant thin face.

And then—what was hardest of all for him—Marjorie bent and kissed the face.





IV.

WEN Crawford did not live in Caryville; his home was in Luther, six miles away. It had been the proudest day of his mother's life when he had come back to preach in the town where he had been born. So, although Caryville was the more important of his two parishes, he had lived in Luther with his invalid mother until her death. After that, he had kept reminding himself that it would be more convenient for him to live in Caryville, more central, less exhausting. He did not seem, however, to get beyond the reminding process. The pleasant old home that had sheltered the boy, held the man too strongly. He felt that he could not turn his back on it—yet, at least.

But the fact of his living in Luther often complicated his Sundays. On the first Sunday in each month he came over to Caryville for the early communion service at eight, breakfasted—usually at Mrs. Fitzgerald's, returned to Luther for the morning service and communion, returned to Caryville for an afternoon service followed by Sunday School, and finally returned to Luther for the night. On the other Sundays in the month he had morning service and afternoon Sunday School in Caryville and an evening service in Luther. As Mrs. Fitzgerald was wont to observe, there were extenuating circumstances if any one went to church at the wrong time in Caryville, or even—a more personal application—forgot to go at all.

But this was before Marjorie came to visit her aunt. Some way, Marjorie's memory was better than Mrs. Fitzgerald's about the early morning service every month.

On the first Sunday in December Marjorie and the rector walked home together after the early communion. The air was





very clear and cold that day, so cold that the furry edge of Marjorie's muff frosted as they walked, and her laughing breath seemed to congeal in the air. As they went, Crawford watched the happy sparkle in her eyes, the bright color in the cheek that was turned to him. Now and then when her muff came up to rub the crimson spot and see if it were freezing, it was all he could do to avoid taking the little gloved hand in his and threatening to keep it. He was rather silent to-day, thought Marjorie. Was it the remembrance of communion? The service had brought to her the thought of "love and charity with all men," and so she spoke of Jane and other members of the church happily, wondering a little at his silence.

Later, while the two stood together near the library fire, Mrs. Fitzgerald not yet having made her appearance, Marjorie again found she had to do all the talking.

"I am so sorry I shall not be here for Christmas after all," she said at last. "My friends in New York won't let me off. I promised them some time ago, you see."

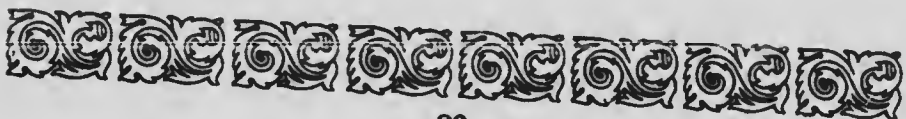
"You are going away—for Christmas?" Owen stammered. The fire, as he looked into it, seemed to his eyes to have grown suddenly ashen gray and lifeless.

"Yes," he heard Marjorie say. "I thought I must tell you soon, because there is my class to be looked after. I don't know what Jane will say to my deserting—do you?"

She looked up into the gray eyes and saw that they were hurt and questioning, like a child's. And then—how it happened she never knew—her head was on his shoulder, his strong arms held her close, and the sudden glad light in the gray eyes was lost as she closed hers—for he had kissed her.

"I can't let you go," she heard him whisper joyously. "I can't let you—darling! darling! Don't you know what you are to me?"

And then, as he would have kissed her again, she freed herself with a little frightened cry, and stood before him, trembling.





"Oh, how could you?—how could you?" she cried. "You had no right."

His face grew white, as his arms fell to his sides.

"You!" she said brokenly, turning away.

"I forgot—I should have remembered," he found voice to say—"I had heard there was someone else who cared. Put what of that? I am not ashamed."

You!" she said again. And he came a step nearer impatiently.

"Yes, I—I! I love you! Did you think I was less man than clergyman? Do I seem old and worn to you? You are only twenty-five—I am thirty-eight. There are thirteen unlucky years' difference, I know—but I love you all the more for that. I shall always love you. I have a right to say this. You have a right to hear."

"I have no right to hear," she said at last, hiding her face from him.

"But you don't understand"—he drew the hands gently down. "Won't you listen to me? Why won't you hear?"

"Please go! Please—if you care." It was only a whisper.

It was very hard for him to obey, but he rallied all his courage to show her that he had spoken true.

"Because I care, I will," he said, very gently. "Tell your aunt there are sick people I must get back to in Luther. It is true."

He looked at her, where in the big chair by the fireplace she sat turned away from him; and, as he looked, the dark head bent lower, the brown waves of hair fell over her guarding hands to hide her face, to hide the eyes that were brimming with tears.

"Good-by—Miss Marjorie," he tried to say bravely at the door—but there was no answer.





When he had gone, the tears fell. That she, Marjorie Hunt, had never *seen!* That she had hurt him so! And worse, there was the letter from Jack, the letter she had thought to answer when she got to New York, the letter repeating the question he had asked before. And while Jack Wilmott, with all his long devotion and loyalty, waited for her answer—the word she had decided so lately would be “Yes”—she had let another man kiss her, tell her that he loved her.

A sudden desperate thought made her lift her head defiantly. She had been taken unawares—she had not understood—Had she—or had she not?—returned the kiss?





V.

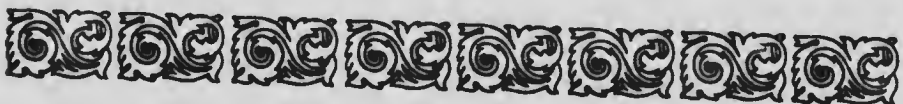
YOU look as though you had a headache child. I certainly should *not* go to the afternoon service if I were you. I think it would be *most* unwise—it is really very, very cold to-day. You probably caught a chill when you went out this morning. Now that I think of it, you haven't looked well all day. And if you are planning, as you say, to go on to New York to-morrow—Now, *do* settle down by the fire with me, Marjorie, and let us have a cosy farewell chat. To-morrow will be here much too soon to suit me. *Please!* Mr. Crawford will forgive you this last day."

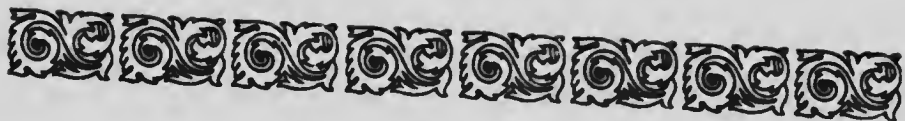
Marjorie had been standing irresolute at the foot of the hall stairway, but at Mrs. Fitzgerald's last words her head lifted a little, proudly.

"It is my class," she said clearly. "I can't go away, Aunt Helen, without saying good-by to them."

Mrs. Fitzgerald lifted her plump white be-ri-inged hands deprecatingly. "Of course not, child. Don't be provoked with me—I know I am a selfish old bother. But if you see Mr. Crawford you might tell him I think it was most *unkind* of him to sneak off as he did before breakfast, after seeing you home." Marjorie turned and went slowly up the stairway. "Now that I think of it, it was decidedly *qucer!* . . . And, Marjorie!"—the girl paused on the landing, but she did not turn—"be sure to tell him that my rheumatism is particularly bad to-day."

Marjorie proceeded up the stairs without smiling. Her head did ache hard: and at the thought of speaking again to Owen Crawford, her heart had begun to beat painfully. Well, the messages must go undelivered to-day! Marjorie hoped she was honorable in





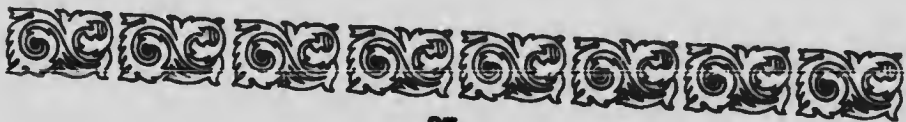
little things—that she should deliberately plan to avoid delivering her aunt's messages, pricked her with a sense of unfaithfulness. And then she almost smiled, though it was only a pathetic attempt at her usual blithe joyousness. Was she less honorable than her aunt, whose rheumatism had developed alarming symptoms—alarming because of their suddenness—since dinner time?

As she contemplated a pale face in the mirror in her room, she asked herself why she went at all. She had been telling herself all day that she would go to service as usual this afternoon, to show him that she did not care. What he had said to her, what she had said to him, must make no difference in her Sunday afternoon duties. She would not, for a great deal, have Jane think her a hypocrite—Jane, whose sharp eyes could always see more than most people's; little Jane, the would-be Christmas Robin. It would be hard enough to explain to the girls her departure; she must not sneak out under fire. It would soon be over. To-morrow, she would be on her way to New York, and there she would see Jack! She would know, when she did . . . And then, perhaps, this cold, tight feeling about her heart would mercifully loosen, and the pain would pass.

But the other pain—his pain! Marjorie wondered dully if his heart—and he had been turned away—could ache more than hers. And she had sent him away.

As she sat alone in her aunt's pew in church later, the pain seemed to grow more stifling. The manly voice that had always filled the little church with such power and sweetness, sounded different to-day. Sometimes at the close of a sentence, it held a strange weariness. Marjorie wondered if the congregation were at all antagonistic to him this afternoon—he seemed to her so far away, so alone! The gray, pleading eyes of the morning haunted her. Once, when their eyes met unexpectedly during the sermon, he paused, faltering a little . . .

The Sharp-Voiced One was unusually silent as she walked away with Miss Hunt after Sunday School. Marjorie was trying to cheer her, saying she would write—





"But, Christmas without you!" Jane snapped, suddenly. "It makes everything seem wrong side out."

And then with a rush, her disappointment and loss found vent in a storm of petulant words—for the tears were not far away. And Jane would not cry—not even for Miss Hunt.

"I shan't be able to be a Christmas Robin after all, Miss Hunt. You needn't expect it—indeed you need *not*. I shall be like Jenny Wren, or like a horrid blue jay, saucy and disagreeable, one of the two, I *know*. What is the use of your having been here all the time to improve me, if you won't stay to see that the work is thoroughly done? But it's always like this! I never, never, never get fond of any one but they die, or get married, or go away deliberately. I think it is very cruel!"

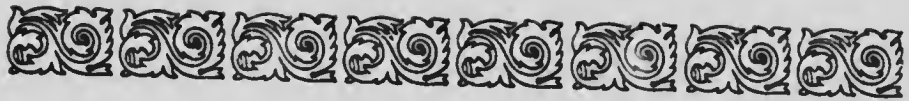
"Oh, Jane!" Marjorie's voice was very sweet—"I don't believe that you will disappoint me. I should not go, dear, unless I thought it was right, unless I—I had to. I, too, hate to say good-by, but it will make it less hard if I know that, wherever we are, we are working together to make people happier, to bring them friendliness and good cheer, as we promised we would. And, Jane"—Marjorie's voice broke suddenly, but she faltered on, "there may be some one not far away who is in trouble, some one whom you can help more than you think. Be on the watch. Promise me, Jane, you will watch for some one who is lonely. It may be some one you have never thought of as needing help, some one who is usually bright and cheery, perhaps—"

But Marjorie's sentence was never finished. Quick, familiar steps sounded behind them, and the next minute Jane found the rector on her other side, on the side next the street.

"I thought it was about time you were catching up," said the Sharp-Voiced One, disapprovingly. "Though we hadn't exactly missed you perhaps. Had we, Miss Hunt?"

Two hearts that had ached dully all day throbbed together painfully for a moment before Marjorie answered.





"We seemed to be doing a good deal of talking," she said, slowly. "At least I—I was."

(He was very kind: he was not looking at her more than he could help, but even so it was hard to find words.)

"But Jane"—Marjorie tried to smile—"was distinctly cross. She was forgetting that she was to be a Christmas Robin. She wasn't being at all forbearing with me."

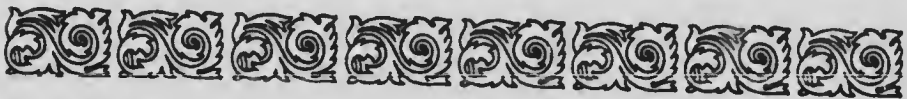
"Well, Miss Hunt is going away," the Sharp-Voiced One remarked petulantly. "Did you know that?"—turning quickly upon Crawford. "It makes the world seem upside down. It makes me feel queer and dizzy—just as if I was holding on to the ceiling. Did you ever have that feeling, Mr. Crawford?"

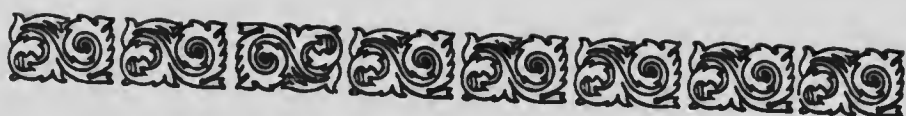
(And still he did not speak.)

"Please don't blame me any more," Marjorie said quickly, and something in her voice, something "lost and rather near crying," so Jane thought, made the little deformed girl slip her hand quickly into Miss Hunt's in the muff, to comfort her. She did not understand what was the matter. There was something in the air; some atmospheric change that occurred, perhaps, when the world was upside down. But she divined in her shrewd woman's heart that Miss Hunt felt very, very sorry about something—going away, probably—and so she gave her hand an extra loving squeeze when they stopped before the white cottage. By that time, she had almost forgiven Miss Hunt for going to New York.

"I will say good-by at the station to-morrow, Miss Hunt," she said, as she went up the steps. "And, if you like," with her best air of condescension, "I might write you a train letter, too." And then the opening door hid the small woman.

"I did not mean to intrude," he said at once, when they were alone. (And again that weariness in the voice, and the gray eyes trying to look steadily ahead!) "But there was one thing I forgot to say—this morning; something I felt I must say to you. You may not want to hear it, you may even think it presumptuous—but you will listen, I know, because you always have been kind. I know



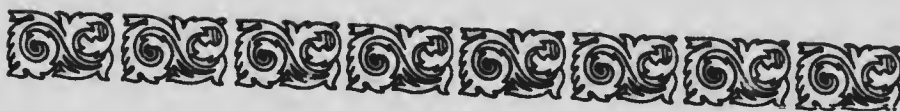


now, that you have been forbearing often, when I wearied you. I have been selfish enough to take all the time I could from you."

She tried to speak, but he would not let her.

"What I came to say is this. If ever you find that you have changed, if something I dare only dream of should come true, and you find you do need me, after all, remember it would take only a word to bring me to you. I would go to the end of the world if you called me. But—more glorious still—if you should care enough to come to me!"

And then, when she could not speak, he left her. He had not even touched her hand.





VI.

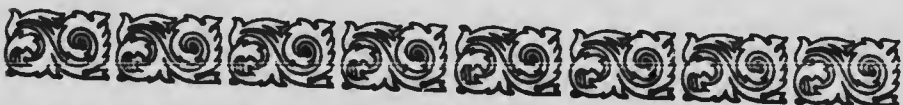
MARJORIE meant to be very gay and light-hearted. She emphasized this repeatedly to herself during a long day's journey to New York. There was no reason, she told herself, why she should not face the situation squarely, and then be normally happy once more. Because she felt sorry for Owen Crawford was no reason why she should not give Jack Wilmott his due. She meant, indeed to look at Jack with new eyes. For two years she had accepted his devotion as something she had almost deserved. Was she the kind of girl who could accept everything and return nothing?

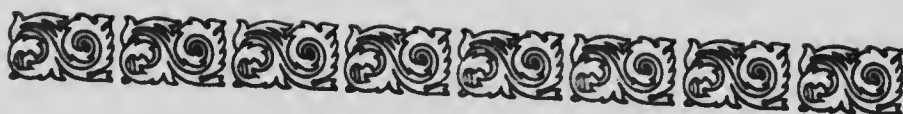
But then other thoughts came rushing in to retangle the skein she was trying to unravel, and her heart beat fast and her cheeks burned, ever and again, at the thought of yesterday. How long ago it seemed!

But she meant to be very happy and carefree—and so she dared not think of *that* any more.

Jack—she was always coming back to Jack's name for anchorage, so it seemed to her—had asked her to marry him two years before, but they had known each other very slightly at the time, and her father and mother had wanted her to wait. After that, their acquaintanceship had grown into a deep friendship. And now Jack had again asked her to marry him. She felt sure she could decide now.

And then the thought of yesterday came obtruding, unbidden. She did not know it, but she smiled—a tender little smile, unbidden, too—and two or three passengers in the car, who had been watching





her, unnoticed, felt certain that she was in love with some one at the journey's end.

Through the mazes of the Grand Central Station, Mrs. Whitfield, her mother's friend, came herself to meet her. And while they threaded their way to the waiting carriage, the elder lady, a tall aristocratic dame with high silvery masses of hair, talked enthusiastically.

"What have you found to do with yourself in that dull old town of your aunt's?" she asked, finally. "How could you stay there all this time, disappointing us?"

"Aunt Helen, who is the most cheerful darling in the world, kept assuring me she was lonely," Marjorie apologized.

"She wrote to me you were much given to church-going, and good works."

Marjorie blushed. "I rather like being useful," she said.

"But why, my dear, when you are so very ornamental? Now, I insist that while you are with me, you have the best time imaginable. You know my husband and I have always adored young people in general—you in particular. And by the way, that reminds me. That Jack Wilmott of yours has been bothering me at the telephone all day long. Some telepathic instinct must have told him that I had a telegram from you this morning. But I said he was not to see you till to-morrow—that you would be much too tired to-night. He was really quite cross about it."

Marjorie laughed. And then wondered at herself that she could laugh. And then wondered at her own surprise. For was she not going to be very gay and happy—at once?

"To-morrow will be better," she said with an unconscious little breath of relief. Mrs. Whitfield gave her one sudden, blinding look of curious scrutiny. In her the match-making instincts were well developed, and she had some time before decided on Jack Wilmott for Marjorie Hunt. She had actually prided herself on piquing Marjorie's interest and impatience by making Jack postpone his visit





till the morrow, and here was Marjorie not even pouting over the delay. Strange child!

However—Mrs. Whitfield preened her drooping bird-mating feathers as she watched the girl's delicate profile and softly flushed cheek—Jack would probably be his own best argument as early as decency allowed, to-morrow.

Marjorie submitted with willing grace to the petting and spoiling which Mr. and Mrs. Whitfield proceeded to mete out to her. To have a devoted maid all for herself! To be propped up in bed in a fluff of dainty cushions on the morning after her arrival, and entreated to breakfast off a tray so beautiful to look at that it seemed almost ogreish to do anything but admire it! And then, while her maid piled her long brown hair in high elaboration on her head, to be pelted with a shower of her most devoted girl friends, all enthusiastic over her arrival, and even more so over the dances, dinners, and teas to be given in her honor!

Marjorie found herself lifted breathless on the crest of a wave of such joyous enthusiasm that she wondered if there could ever again be any ebbing reaction.

And Jack.

He came himself in his car the morning after her arrival to take her for an eleven o'clock spin. On very short notice, too. He had merely telephoned Mrs. Whitfield that he would come at eleven, if Marjorie could see him; and Mrs. Whitfield, the would-be arbiter of his matrimonial fate, had said at once, "Of course."

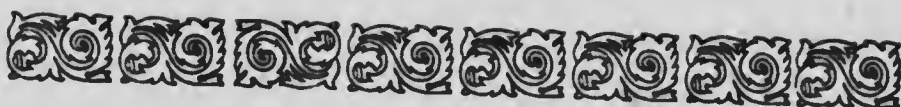
"What a sight for sore eyes you are, Marjorie! Don't you know that mine have grown dim waiting to catch reflected glory from yours?"

Very gay indeed were his clear brown eyes, as he laughingly said this.

"Poetic Jack! Have you been writing a romantic novel in my absence?"

"You—Puss!"





"You—Poet!"

They got into the waiting car, and had a glorious spin. He was nice, she decided—nicer than ever. And it was doubly nice of him to ignore so completely and charmingly the fact that he had re-proposed to her lately, and was still waiting for his answer. She knew him well enough to appreciate that his silence cost him something, but that perhaps his chief motive for it was that he wanted her to be at ease with him again. So he talked entertainingly about their friends, the plans he had for her enjoyment—about everything, in short, that was not too suspiciously personal.

"What sort of a time did you have without me in your aunt's town?" he finally demanded, regarding her keenly, though a provoking smile twisted his lips.

"Beautiful! Just the kind of time I have everywhere," she mocked, gayly. "And I did such things—useful things—that you won't ever believe me capable of!"

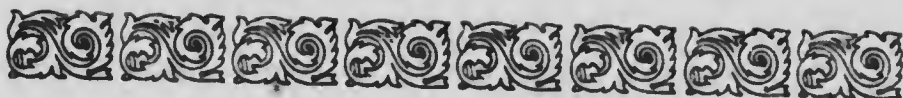
"I can guess," he returned, with a smile of resignation. "Charitable things!—the things you would go wild about, you little nun, if your people and friends would let you. But you are meant to be lovely and lazy, or lazy and lovely—whichever you wish. I like you best as My Lady of the Car."

There was no doubt that he meant it. But he restricted himself to these personalities only—for the first day.

He soon managed to make himself indispensable to Marjorie, "in the good old way," as he called it:—her escort, under Mrs. Whitfield's mating wing, to dances or the theatre; her companion at dinners formal or informal; her chum in crisp, wintry walks through the Park or in long motor spins on glorious sunshiny mornings of December.

And every one thought it was only fitting and natural that they should be much together. Jack's devotion to Marjorie had long been considered a matter-of-course by all who knew them. Marjorie's equal interest in Jack was also taken for granted. Which





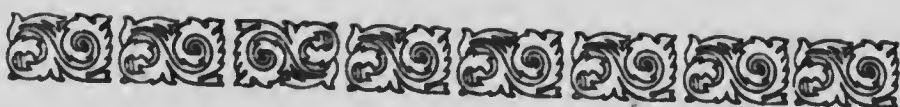
of her own girl friends could have resisted a man so handsome, interesting, attentive and—eligible?

Marjorie scarcely felt herself drifting toward that inevitable sea where other girls she had known had drifted before her, propelled insensibly by the rudder of their friends' sanction and approval, and urged on by the soft, luxurious current of expediency. Unconsciously, the thought of the Other whom she had liked, faded a little each day. How could it be otherwise, when the world was so full of deep plans for her happiness, all joyously projected by Jack?

Yet in her heart of hearts, almost unknown to herself, there persisted a tiny, unanswered question.

Did she *need* Jack? . . . Did Jack need her?



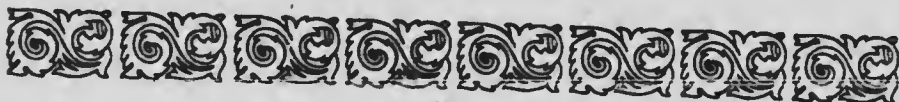


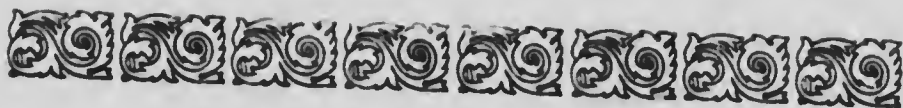
VII.

COLONEL and Mrs. Rankin, friends of Marjorie's parents, and, more or less, of all the young people who were regular visitors at Mrs. Whitfield's, invited Marjorie and eight or ten of her friends to join a house-party at their New Jersey home for the week-end preceding Christmas. Marjorie, remembering with delight certain visits of her childhood to a beautiful old Colonial home (where a devoted black mammy fed her with sugar cookies on the sly), accepted with alacrity. The Rankins had lived in the South then, had moved North later to be near a married daughter, but their home remained the same wherever they were—noted for its simple, charming hospitality, its unwavering welcome to old and young, its quality—somehow inseparable from the very walls and furnishings—of bringing out the best in every one.

Marjorie could not quite account for the lightheartedness which she felt as she dressed for dinner on the evening of her arrival. Jack had motored her out that afternoon; he was to be one of the house-party; they were both to be with people she specially loved. Was this all the reason for her rejoicing? Or was there some subtle undercurrent of feeling lifting her high? Something she scarcely understood?

She decided that she did know the reason for her elation. Before the week-end visit was over, she meant to give Jack his answer. Her life lately had been such a whirl that she had had no time to think soberly, but it would be different—here. It would scarcely need now to be an answer to Jack's question. If she should let her hand linger in his a moment longer than usual when he helped her out of the car, or if she should look at him in a certain





meaning way, all would be said. The fact that she had decided to make him happy, made her happier even than her wont. Being a girl, she felt that she alone held him back from renewing the subject; and, being a woman, she knew that it was cruel to delay longer, now that she was sure.

She went in to dinner that night on the courtly arm of Colonel Rankin, proud to be the honored guest of her old friend. Jack, smiling a bit ruefully at the distance between them, watched her intently from his place halfway down the opposite side of the table. She was witching to-night, he thought—from the yellow rose tucked into the shining bands of her dark hair, to the sole of her yellow satin-shod foot. She laughed and talked gaily, unconscious of the admiring glances of the men, the smiling, half-envious interest of the girls, unaware that across the gleaming length of the table the soft dark eyes of an old lady telegraphed to her Colonel husband: "The dearest girl in the world! Don't you think so?"

Then suddenly, in a lull of the conversation, one of the girls was heard to say to the man at her right:—

"I heard that it was this way. *She* broke the engagement, but he wrote, accepting her decision, on the back of one of his mother's letters."

The announcement was sufficiently startling to make the conversation general.

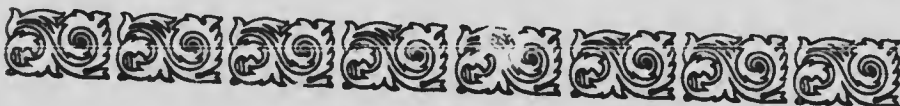
"What was that?"

"*Whose* engagement?"

"Tell us about it!"

The informant, Kitty Simpson, laughed provokingly, then looked carefully up and down the table before she replied.

"No one here knows the girl, I think. Mr. Wilson and I only know of her. She is a Southerner, of a good old family. A year or two ago, she fell in love with this Northern man, a rather fine fellow who had worked up from the ranks and made money, and





they were engaged—until lately. But when the girl learned that the man's mother would have to live with them after they were married—he was all she had, and he had to provide for her—she wrote to him, breaking the engagement. The mother was rather sweet and frail, but certainly not in the girl's class—in fact, quite illiterate. The girl really expected the man to provide for his mother in some other way—he could easily have done it, every one thinks, if he had wanted to. Perhaps she thought she would frighten him into it. But he did a strange thing. He released his fiancée, writing to her on the back of one of his mother's ungrammatical letters."

There was a breathless, wondering silence, and then a volley of exclamations.

The Colonel drew himself up in his chair, shook back a lionlike lock of white hair that had a habit of straying across his forehead, and bent his clear blue eyes, under heavy brows, full upon Marjorie.

"What do you think of it?" he asked quizzically.

"Insulting to the girl!" Jack Wilmott broke in hotly. "I'd like to pummle the man!"

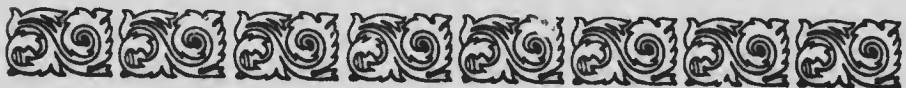
"He as much as said, 'I can't waste a fresh sheet of note-paper on you,'" lisped one of the laughing girls down the table.

"Certainly the offending mother must have handed down parsimonious habits," was the half-sneering verdict of the lawyer who had argued the matter with Kitty Simpson.

"There was a touch of genius in it, nevertheless," retorted Starnes, a dramatic critic.

"One would like to know what line of reasoning suggested his use of the letter." This came from the young doctor seated at Marjorie's right.

The Colonel's searching blue eyes had not turned from Marjorie's face. He could see that its expression, a radiance suggested by some thought within, had not changed to agree with the comments of the others.





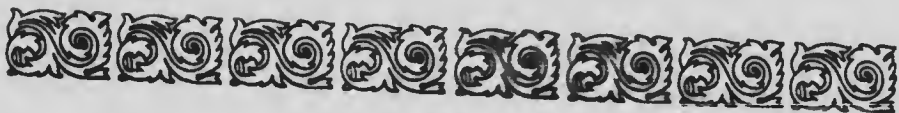
"What do you think of it?" he demanded again, the emphasis of his question slightly altered.

Marjorie looked up at him with that peculiarly frank look which only sympathetic spirits can exchange. Then she found herself saying, somewhat to her own surprise, out of some depth beyond her understanding,

"I believe it was because the letter was precious to him that he sacrificed it—while at the same time he gave it his allegiance—in that way. I think he probably had not understood the girl. You see," she said in explanation to them all, and in a peculiar hush every one at the table listened to the sweet, low-pitched voice, so clear in its conviction, "he really needed his mother more than he did the other woman."

The Colonel said nothing as he leaned forward again in his chair. But his lightning blue eyes telegraphed swiftly to the soft dark ones at the end of the table:—

"The dearest girl in the world? Yes—quite!"





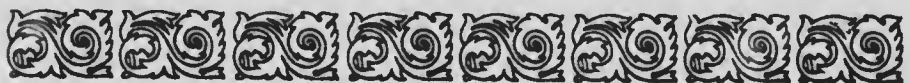
VIII.

THE gay exuberance of spirit which had marked Marjorie's arrival at Mrs. Rankin's had not left her when she awoke the next morning. As she sat up in bed she had a glimpse between the parted curtains, of heavy clouds gray with snow. The naked tree boughs near her windows bent noisily beneath an icy, searching wind. A day when it would be keen joy to shiver away from the windows to the blazing log fire!

But as Marjorie sipped her cup of coffee in bed, she determined to brave the elements. It was Sunday—and she had told the dear little lady of the house the night before that she would not be lazy the next morning, but would represent the house-party at church. The thought of the promise brought to Marjorie the thought of the friend whom she had left. Even if he did not know her whereabouts, her associates, she would not like him to think that, away from him, she was a different girl from the Marjorie he had known. She liked to feel that he would perhaps think of her as listening to the same words, the same prayers that his own lips would utter. But the thought of her would, she knew, pain him—and so she turned from the thought of him, reluctantly. Her heart grew lighter with the effort. This was the day when she meant to give Jack his answer.

"Is there always pain where there is happiness?" she found herself saying later, when the thought of Crawford came again, unbidden. She put it from her resolutely.

When she was looking her snuggest and prettiest in her brown velvet and furs, she came downstairs to survey the field, the lazy after-breakfast field of a Sunday morning, and discover possible





recruits for church. As she turned on the landing, she caught sight of one or two men smoking before the blazing hall fire. The hall, as large as a living-room, was blue with the veiling smoke of their cigars. Jack Wilmott turned, starting to his feet at sight of her, and the expression that crossed his face as he advanced to the stairs to meet her, instantly caught her attention. Pleasure at seeing her, mingled with a slight, though polite, boredom because of the day, because of his preconceived knowledge of her errand: ennui tempered to patient expectation—because he cared for her; because she led, and he would have to follow.

In a sudden blinding flash she saw the face of a man who had waited for her at the foot of other stairs, the light of glad expectation kindling in his gray eyes. He had been glad because she came, and she had been glad because they had seemed so much in accord. It had been Thanksgiving Day, and they had been glad to be together.

"You are going to church, of course?" she heard Jack say with a tinge of resigned, admiring wonder in his voice. "Such a day!"

"The day does not trouble me," Marjorie returned blithely.

"Let me send for my fur coat. You are not going without me."

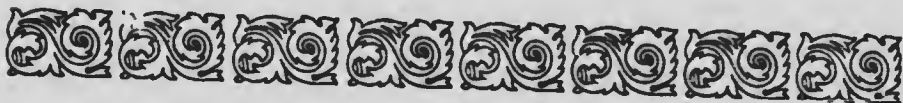
"Perhaps I am. You don't want to go, and I shall be able to get along by myself."

"Independence! That is exactly why I mean to go—because you can get along without me so well. I like to be a nuisance."

"Well, I don't," returned Marjorie. "And I don't mean to risk my patience by having a bored man on my hands. Go back to your fire—and be extra polite at dinner for being let off."

"You are sure you don't mind?"

Unexpectedly from the landing boomed Colonel Rankin's laughing voice:—





"All aboard!—whoever's going to church! Step lively there!"

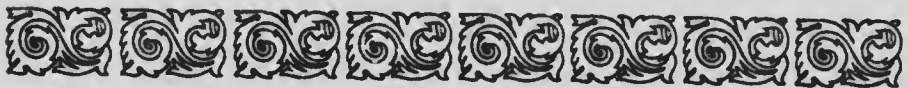
With a mocking wave of her hand, Marjorie called back to Jack, "Good-by, your Laziness," and turned to meet the Colonel at the door.

But as she walked beside him to church, and, later, as she sat in the Rankin pew in the pretty little suburban church, she grew more and more conscious of a leaden weight of oppression. At first, she thought it a moment's disappointment with Jack, and chid herself for expecting him to play up to her lead, always. If Jack had no particular enthusiasms—and how many of the young men she knew were enthusiastic about church-going?—he certainly had no vices. No, it was not that she missed Jack this morning. The oppression seemed something extraneous, compelling her sympathy, weighting her heart. She tried indifference, judging it to be an unprecedented case of "nerves"—but the leaden pressure remained. It had something to do with her environment—the thought, perhaps, of the depression of that Other who cared for her. She grew frightened. Had something happened—to him? Absurd! But the fear came again and again. Its repetition tortured her.

Later in the service, the oppression which had enveloped her, numbing her like a cold fog, lifted as mysteriously as it had descended. Marjorie was conscious then of a strange, tingling gladness, a revivifying peace with the world.

Her happiness made her particularly sparkling at dinner that noon. When, with an appealing smile at Marjorie, little Mrs. Rankin asked, "Which of you girls will take something for me to one of my sick people this afternoon?" Marjorie promptly offered to help, and glowed with pride in Jack when he offered to run the "ministering angel" over to the patient rather than have Mrs. Rankin order out the carriage.

When, however, they were seated in the car with a basket for the invalid tucked snugly in at their feet, he made haste to say, "If you will go charity-visiting, I intend to come too. I don't half like this consuming zeal of good works, Marjorie. In fact, I am more than half jealous of it."





Marjorie laughed a half shy, wholly happy little laugh, just as if she had a sweet secret all to herself. What she thought was, "He will not be jealous of my good works very much longer now. Perhaps I shall tell him before this ride is over!"

Her laugh was so alluring that Jack's dark eyes turned upon her with sudden masterfulness.

"Why do you laugh like that?"

Marjorie immediately tried to look grave.

"Jack, tell me why you don't approve of my 'good works,' as you call them."

"Because you are wasting yourself over them. They are the kind of thing that unat—" he pulled himself up short—"unattached girls always devote themselves to. Girls who have to be unattached. I mean."

"You began to say 'unattractive girls.' Confess that you did!"

"I did," he confessed stoutly, "but as there was no special pertinency in the word in this case, I changed the subject."

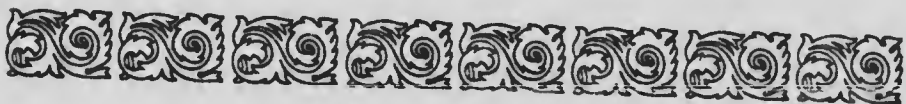
"Hear, hear! What a lot of the charitable element there must be in us womenfolk, by the way! The unattached—as you call them—spend it on the masses; the attached, I infer, concentrate it on the Man!"

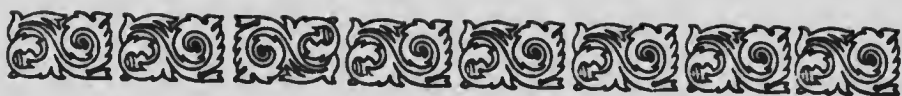
"Oh, I say!" Jack expostulated, a little hurt. "That is cruelty to animals. Suppose we don't argue any more?"

They were slowing up at their destination, a shabby brown stone cottage at the outskirts of the town. Jack brought the car to a stop at the edge of the broken sidewalk, and helped Marjorie to alight.

"Promise not to be forever," he cautioned her *sotto voce* as he carried the hamper toward the house.

Marjorie stopped, her hand on the knocker.





"Aren't you coming in with me?"

Jack carefully avoided meeting her eyes. "No, thank you, I'll wait in the car. My instinct warns me it will be the only way to get you out again. Besides, you know I am no earthly use at parish visiting. Besides again, sickness always gives me the blues."

Marjorie looked at him appealingly. "Mrs. Rankin says this little woman is the sunniest kind of invalid!" she entreated.

An expression new to Marjorie, an expression of pure, stubborn male obstinacy, showed itself unexpectedly in Jack's face.

"She would soon lose her sunniness under my influence. You don't want me to sit there twirling my thumbs, like a stone image—I fear my metaphors are mixed—do you? Your sweet charity would be helpless in my presence."

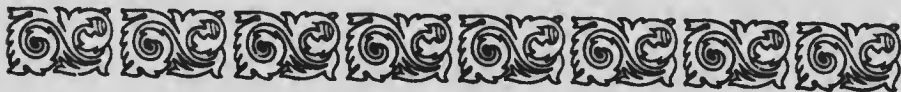
He turned away, laughing carelessly.

And again, blindingly, as on the stairs that morning, there came to Marjorie the thought of Crawford. He and she had together entered just such an unpretentious little home when they went to see Jane. She remembered how Crawford had begged her to go. She had not had to plead! And she thought of the eager light in his face when she had eagerly agreed—the happiness all three had felt over the pink tea cups. All the little unimportant details of that Thanksgiving afternoon came rushing back to her, unsought.

But why should she always expect as much from Jack? He and Crawford were men of different stamp, of different tastes and opinions. Was not Crawford's radiant unselfishness, wholesome though it was, in a sense perfunctory—a necessary part of his parish work?

Was it?

Marjorie caught herself up with a sense of disloyalty. She had never doubted Owen's sincerity. She had no right to doubt it in





order to recorcile herself to Jack's different point of view. Comparisons were not fair to either man.

And again her depression lifted, and again she met Jack in her gayest mood. They were comrades in so many senses. It was with a heightened feeling of bonhomie that they whirled off together in the car to deliver a note for Mrs. Rankin farther on.

Jack was the messenger this time, and while Marjorie waited in the car for his return, her attention was attracted by a group of small boys standing on the sidewalk near by. It was impossible to mistake their enthusiasm over the machine, even though their language was somewhat dimly picturesque.

"Hully Gee! Peach, ain't she?"

(Although their meaning was somewhat obscure, Marjorie did not accept the tribute as offered to herself.)

"Bet your eye! Wonder how she feels inside?"

(Again, Marjorie did not think herself referred to.)

Perhaps the lads noticed her friendly smile, for when Jack reappeared and climbed into the car, they edged nearer, grinning and elbowing one another, and stood shyly expectant near Jack's unconscious elbow.

"You ask 'im, Bob!"

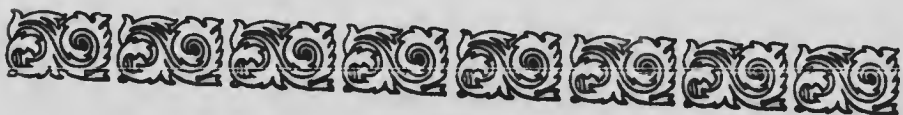
"Yes, you can be p'lite, Bobby!"

"G'wan, Bobby!"

All this with much shoving of a merry, blue-eyed boy quite out at elbows, and quite cheerfully oblivious of the fact.

Then Bobby, very red in the face, and a little breathless, because he was keyed up to a supreme effort, approached the unseeing owner of the car, and, doffing his cap to reveal a thatch of red hair, asked with a merry grin:

"Please, Mister, will you give us a Christmas joy-ride?"





Jack, unhearing, had cranked the machine, when Marjorie's hand touched his arm. He turned impatiently to look down into the boy's face.

Bobby's courage was nothing daunted.

"Please, Mister—just a little way! We've never had a joy-ride yet."

With an impatient, "Look out, there, or you'll be hurt!" from Jack, the car was off. Marjorie had one brief, backward glimpse of Bobby's face, in which a comical surprise mingled with a keen, boyish disgust. She thought it spoke well for the boys that they all began to whistle indifferently.

After all, they were not rude street arabs—only a handful of boys who had never in their lives had a ride in a motor car. "It would have been such a little thing to do," thought Marjorie. But, for Jack, the boys did not exist. He would never be able to understand any one out of his own sphere. What would Jane—her little friend Jane—mean to him?

In a sudden revolt of the spirit, she turned from the man at her side.





IX.

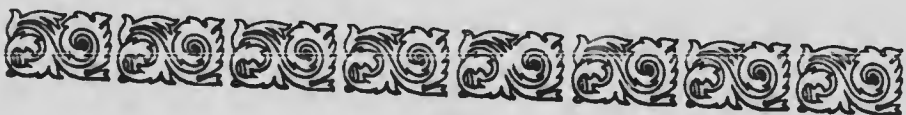
"It is most provoking," Miss Huntington repeated. There was a plaintive note in her voice. "That it should happen just before Christmas too, when one needs all the help one has! I am sure I never thought Maggie would prove such a turn-coat. If it were not for your hospitality, dear Mrs. Fitzgerald, I don't know how I could endure the holiday seasons. They are lonely times for me—and now Maggie—"

"But how did the milkman defend himself when he told you he meant to marry Maggie?" interrupted Mrs. Fitzgerald. The rector, who in his hidden corner of the library had from time to time caught scraps of the conversation in the hall, knew that, as she spoke, Mrs. Fitzgerald's black eyes sparkled mischievously.

"Defend himself!" The little ex-teacher drew herself up with dignity. "He told me he had been 'going with her for the *butt-end* of two years,' and she had been with me only four months out of that time. He wouldn't wait for her any longer. What do you think of such language?"

"Shocking *indeed!*" Mrs. Fitzgerald tried to look shocked herself, but the attempt was so nearly a failure that she hastened on, "That is what *he* said. Now, what did *she* say?"

"She said she had given me a week's notice, as was proper; that she wished to be married at Christmas time because she'd be sure to get some wedding presents then to set up house with; and that she'd always be glad to come back and see me, for she wouldn't live far away. Rather cool of her, wasn't it?"





"*Very*—and yet she probably meant to tell you she liked you. That is what *she* said. And now the world—for I shall always be worldly, my dear—says that you are very well rid of her. The milkman will hereafter bring you the right quantity of milk—after the honeymoon, I mean, of course. Your new maid will not forget to put salt in the potatoes, and *will* probably have a sense of smell when she is scorching your clothes. Certainly the new Biddy will have no possible claim on the milkman. And then think, at this glad time of the year, how happy the two young foolish things will be!"

"Perhaps you are right." Miss Huntington sighed a little, as she yielded her grievance. "Remembering that to-morrow is Christmas Day, I suppose I should rejoice with those who do rejoice. And certainly it will all be much more decent and respectable. I shall never, *never* forget that morning, a week ago, when I came suddenly into the kitchen and found him kissing Maggie! And I am sure, from the way she looked, he had taken *her* by surprise, too."

The rector suddenly rose from his chair, threw down the paper he had been trying to read, and began to pace the floor restlessly. When he paused near the door, his ear caught an agitated whisper.

"The rector *there!* Oh, Mrs. Fitzgerald, why didn't you tell me? I am certain he must have heard what I said about—about kissing. What will he think of me? I must really go now—yes, I must at once."

Mrs. Fitzgerald laughed as she escorted Miss Huntington's hurried steps to the hall door. "I shall see you to-morrow," was all she said, however.

"Yes, indeed," Miss Huntington found courage to say, choosing her words carefully for the "Canon's" ear. And then, as she opened the door, a sudden thought made her close it again. "I think I will really give Maggie a wedding present, after all," she said, hesitantly. "Can you suggest anything useful?"

"Yes—a good-sized piece of mistletoe, and a chair to sit under





it in. Good-by, if you *will* go." And Mrs. Fitzgerald shut the door upon Miss Huntington's rather puzzled smile.

She came laughing into the library. "And now for luncheon, Canon Crawford!" Then, as she led the way into the dining room, "Did you hear what Miss Huntington said about the milkman? She ran away because she thought you would be horrified at the levity of her conversation. She might just as well have stayed to luncheon."

"She will persist in treating me as if I were an ogre." He smiled a little, but did not say whether he had heard or not. He looked so dispirited to-day that Mrs. Fitzgerald decided he had not; so she repeated the little story to amuse him.

Over the coffee she spoke of Marjorie. "I have not heard for almost a week," rebelliously. "It is not like her to disappoint me, but I suppose the Christmas letter will come to-morrow. She is having a *glorious* time, so she has said positively nothing about coming back this winter. She may, however, go to England to meet her father and mother in the early spring. They want her to."

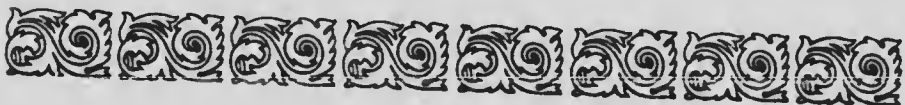
(Allowing even for Mrs. Fitzgerald's enthusiasm, she was evidently very happy!)

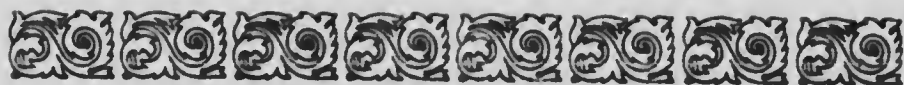
He did not answer for a moment; then, curtly. "Indeed! I hope the trip will do her much good."

Mrs. Fitzgerald shot a half indignant glance at him. After all Marjorie had done for him and the church, he showed very little interest. His voice sounded positively freezing!

"Do have some more coffee," she said quickly. "It will do you good before you go off to the church to see after the decorations. It is cold to-day; I think we shall have snow this afternoon. A good big snowstorm, perhaps—a Christmasy one, I hope. How Marjorie would revel in it if she were here!—But you will think I am always talking of my one pet lamb."

"Why shouldn't you?" he asked, half absently. (Why not, indeed, when he was always thinking of her?)





He excused himself soon after luncheon to go down to the church. They would need him, perhaps, to hang the highest festoons and wreaths. "You see, I am usefully tall at times," he smiled. "I daresay I shall be busy until dark. And—I think I will give you my Merry Christmas now, Mrs. Fitzgerald. I hope it will be a very glad day for you—and yours."

"Won't you reconsider about Christmas dinner?" she urged. She had thought, a moment before, that his voice sounded lonely. "I haven't seen *anything* of you lately!"

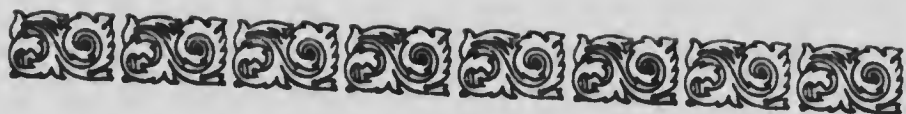
"You are very good. But no—I must get back to Luther tomorrow after the service here. I am sorry—" he looked for a moment lingeringly around the pleasant library; then he shook hands again and went out.

He walked away quickly from the house, unconscious that Mrs. Fitzgerald, watching him from the window, was wondering if she could have offended him. No, it would be some time before he would trust himself in that library again! The weeks did not change the keenness of his feeling. And now, at Christmas time, the wound was still too sore to bear much probing. There was only one small ray of brightness shining through what Mrs. Fitzgerald had said to him. After his first jealous pang at Marjorie's happiness, he had blamed himself for his want of faith. He knew her well enough to believe that she was not happy—yet. Her heart was too tender to forget him so readily, and his unhappiness.

He threw himself eagerly into the work of decorating the little church, longing to forget himself for a time. Jane Warner, moreover, was there to pass comments on his work, so he knew he must do his best. There were a number of fresh-faced boys and girls to help him, a handful of capable women, and a man or two. After helping and directing them for two busy hours, he came back to Jane and sat down beside her to approve the work.

It was, indeed, a transformed church that he saw, and, in spite of him, his heart bounded with pride and pleasure. Against the lighter green of the walls, the dark tracery of the evergreen ropes and the shining green of the red-beaded holly leaves, stood out





strongly, softening the angles, making rich as satin the dark oak woodwork. From the nave up to the chancel, and then approaching the altar, the long feathery green lines crossed and recrossed, always advancing, always pointing in unison to the Christ Child in the beautiful chancel window, to the Star gleaming above the Holy Happy Family.

"Unto us a Child is born, Unto us a Son is given.

As Owen rested his head on his hands, looking up at the star, the joyous Christmas spirit thrilled him, claimed him anew. Of what account his own cross when the crucified lives again in the human heart? If the days were to be hard, he must endure. He was a man. Had not *He* been God, yet Man?

"It is beautiful in here," he heard the Sharp-Voiced One whisper softly. "I never saw it so pretty before. That lovely green makes me think of all the things that are everlasting and world-without-end, Mr. Crawford. I feel like beginning over again more than at New Year's, don't you? It's like the spring feeling in your heart, someway. I shouldn't wonder, if a lot of those unbelievable Christmas Robins got in here by mistake, they would make up their minds to stay."

"Why, here is one already," he said, smiling down at her. He meant what he said. Someway, Jane had seemed less sharp-voiced lately; there was even a touch of womanly sweetness in the way she looked at him. Could it be that she had guessed?

From the vestry door he watched them all troop away eagerly into the whirling snowflakes, and called out to each one a glad message for the morrow. All looked back for a moment merrily—all but Jane, whose sharp face, as she turned, showed a sudden wistful remembrance. Or was it only his imagining? Then he closed the door and came back into the vestry to give a final glance at his sermon for the morning.

But he did not stay there long; he was too restless to concentrate on the close-written pages; and yet a moment before, in the midst of the cheery farewells, he had longed to be alone. He





went finally to the organ and began to play softly to himself, as he loved to do, the beautiful deathless melodies of Bach, Chopin, Beethoven—those melodies, strangely enough, that reveal to the human heart the joy of life, of divine faith and uplift. For are the two not one? And when he raised his eyes, he saw always the soft gleam of the Star—the star in the beautiful chancel window. It was at dusk that it began to shine most brightly.

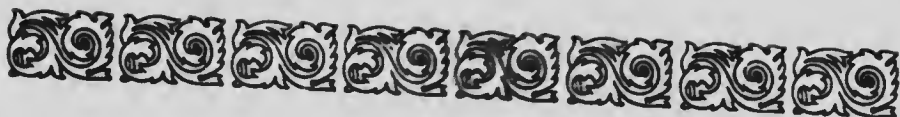
He had been playing for three-quarters of an hour or an hour when he thought he heard a sound in the vestry. An adventurous sparrow, perhaps, beating his wings against the outside door! And he played on—more loudly now—smiling to think that the bird might have come to hear.

The sound came again—nearer this time. The door had opened. Some one had come into the vestry. Some one had come back for something—Owen rose half reluctantly from the stool, pushed the stops back into the organ, and stepped across the threshold into his sanctum. There he stood, his heart stilled.

Against the door, a slender figure in a long brown coat, the shoulders still sprinkled white with arrested snowflakes; a dark head with brown waves of hair, snow-wet, under a white tam-o'-shanter; a pair of eager brown eyes; a flash of crimson at the throat:—a Christmas Robin come to him across the snow.

It was Marjorie.





X.

FOR so cheery a bird, she could find very little to say, it seemed. There was a long moment while she tried bravely to meet his eyes; but her fingers still clung to the handle of the door, as if, should he move, she would immediately run away from him into the snow through which she had so mysteriously flown down.

"I have come, you see," she said at last, very low.

He came nearer to her, moved beyond control, trying to believe. Could it be the fulfilment of his dream? Her hand tightened on the door, but he put his quickly over it to keep her there.

"You have come back—to me?" he asked eagerly, wonderingly. Ah, who could say that the days of miracles were past and gone? Yes, he believed.

The gray eyes, dark and luminous, held so beautiful a light that she could not look away. But she was afraid.

"No one knew I was coming," she faltered. "I came only two hours ago. No one knew. But I had to come. You—you will not think it too bold of me to have come—here?"

He drew the hand he held to his breast. "You remember what I said—what I dared only dream: that, if you cared enough, you would come to me. If it is that—"

"It is only selfishness," she dissembled, smiling through sudden tears. "It was for my sake I came. I could not be happy—I—Oh, I am proud to say it!—I love you. But you"—drawing back a little—"you—?"





"The days have been very lonely," he said; but not sadly. In the glorified present it was as though they had never been. He had already forgotten their long bitterness.

He drew her into his arms, and looked at her hungrily for a moment; and then reverently he kissed her, for this was a holy place, and all around was holy ground. But their love was holy, too. They knew this in that moment's glorious foretaste, as they stood, heart-close, together.

All around the vestry walls hung pictures of wise-eyed prelates who had gone to their reward; but in the gathering dusk the stern eyes of bishops and of priests grew soft as they looked down, not unkindly, upon the two bent heads.

And again Marjorie returned his kiss—this time, with interest. She had known the longing of one who had waited to be sure.

But presently she drew away from him, searching his face anxiously.

"Tell me, Owen—" she said—

His name was so sweet to him that she had hard work to hold him off.

"Tell me," she repeated sternly, "what was the matter with you last Sunday morning. There was something."

He said wonderingly, after a pause, "How did you know about it?"

"I felt it. I felt your unhappiness—and it made me wretched. At first I did not understand, but each day since, I have grown more and more anxious, until," she laughed, "I ran away to you to find out. Tell me!"

Her hands came up to his, to emphasize her claim to know all that concerned him.

"Dear, I wanted you so much," he said then. "I was not well—I could hardly get through the service. Your face seemed before me all the time, yet you yourself were slipping farther from me than ever before. I was wretchedly unhappy—and alone."





She drew a quick breath.

"I can't bear it that you have suffered!" she cried passionately. "Owen, that was the day that told me. I was finding you then."

The beautiful light deepened in his eyes.

"You are God's Christmas gift to me, Marjorie," he answered her, very low. "And 'God's gifts put man's best dreams to shame.'"

He drew her back a moment to see the radiant star above the chancel window, and then they passed out together into the evening light.

"You will come home with me?" she asked as she stood on the step outside, watching the snowflakes sift down on his broad shoulders while he locked the door.

He turned quickly—there was no one in sight—and caught her hand to his lips.

"Yes. But some day soon, you will come Home with me."

The earth and all the inhabitants thereof were forgotten as they went up the street together to Mrs. Fitzgerald's. It was a heaven for two to-night. And so they did not see a sharp little face pressed to the window of a white cottage which they passed on their way, nor dream that two shining blue eyes watched them disappear into the snowy dusk.

"I couldn't believe Ma when she said someone who looked awfully like Miss Hunt had gone by a while ago—but it is she—it is she!" exultantly. "It will be a Merry Christmas, after all, tomorrow."

And then, reflectively, "I guess she knew in her heart he needed a Christmas Robin, and that I wasn't good enough to be one—so she came."

And as Jane would have liked the last word, suppose we let her have it?

THE END.

