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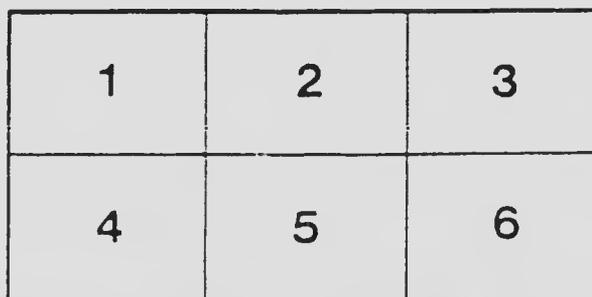
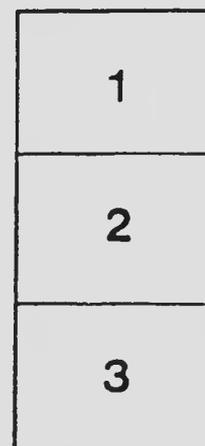
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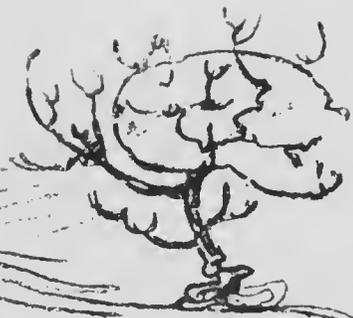
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UNDER THE
CHRISTMAS
STARS *SS*
GRACE S RICHMOND





Fonie MacLennan,
Sydney, Nova Scotia.



UNDER THE CHRISTMAS STARS

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

On Christmas Day in the Morning

On Christmas Day in the Evening

Brotherly House

Red Pepper Burns

Mrs. Red Pepper

Strawberry Acres

A Court of Inquiry

Round the Corner in Gay Street

With Juliet in England

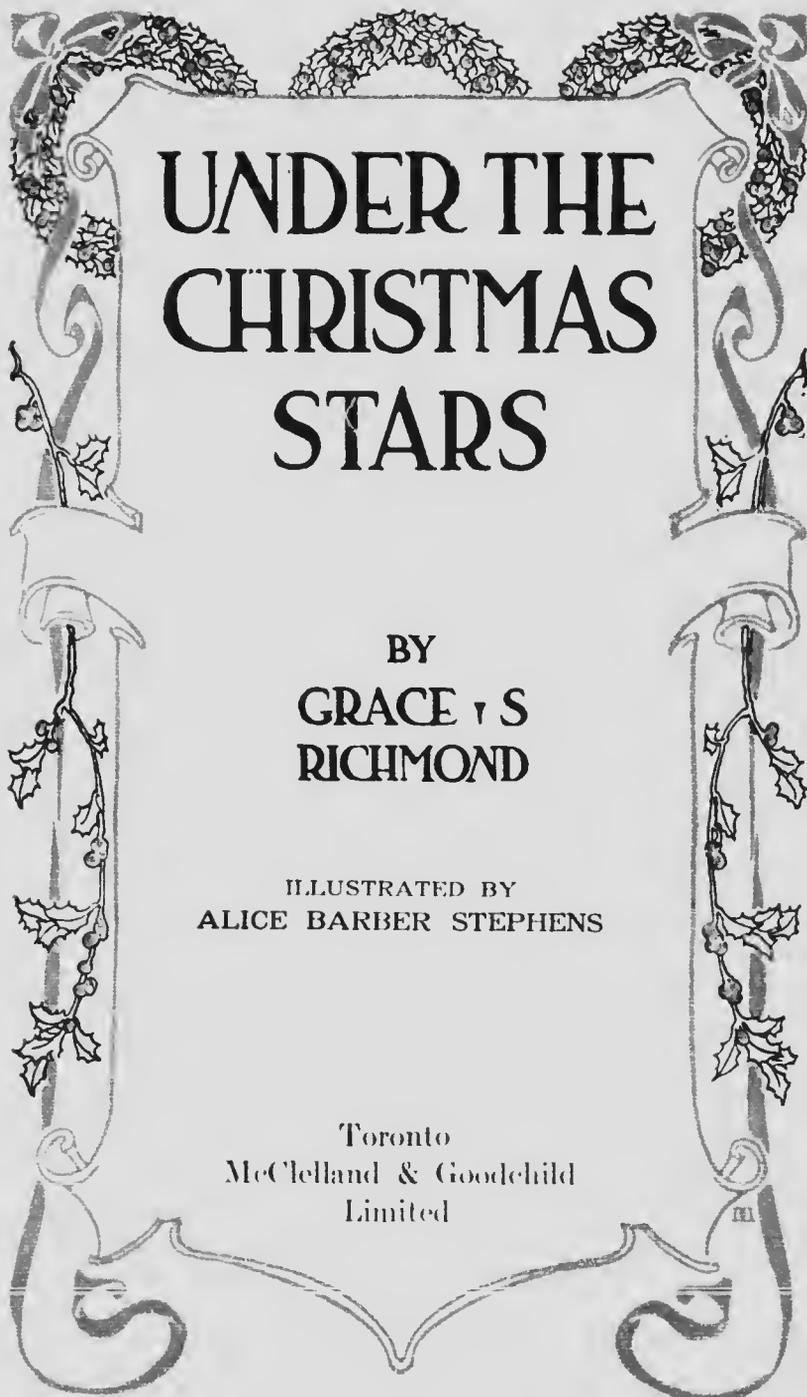
The Indifference of Juliet

The Second Violin





"Old John Fernald and his wife welcomed them with open arms."



**UNDER THE
CHRISTMAS
STARS**

BY
**GRACE T S
RICHMOND**

ILLUSTRATED BY
ALICE BARBER STEPHENS

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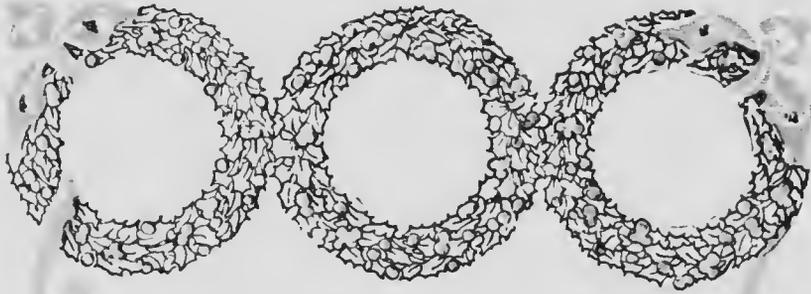
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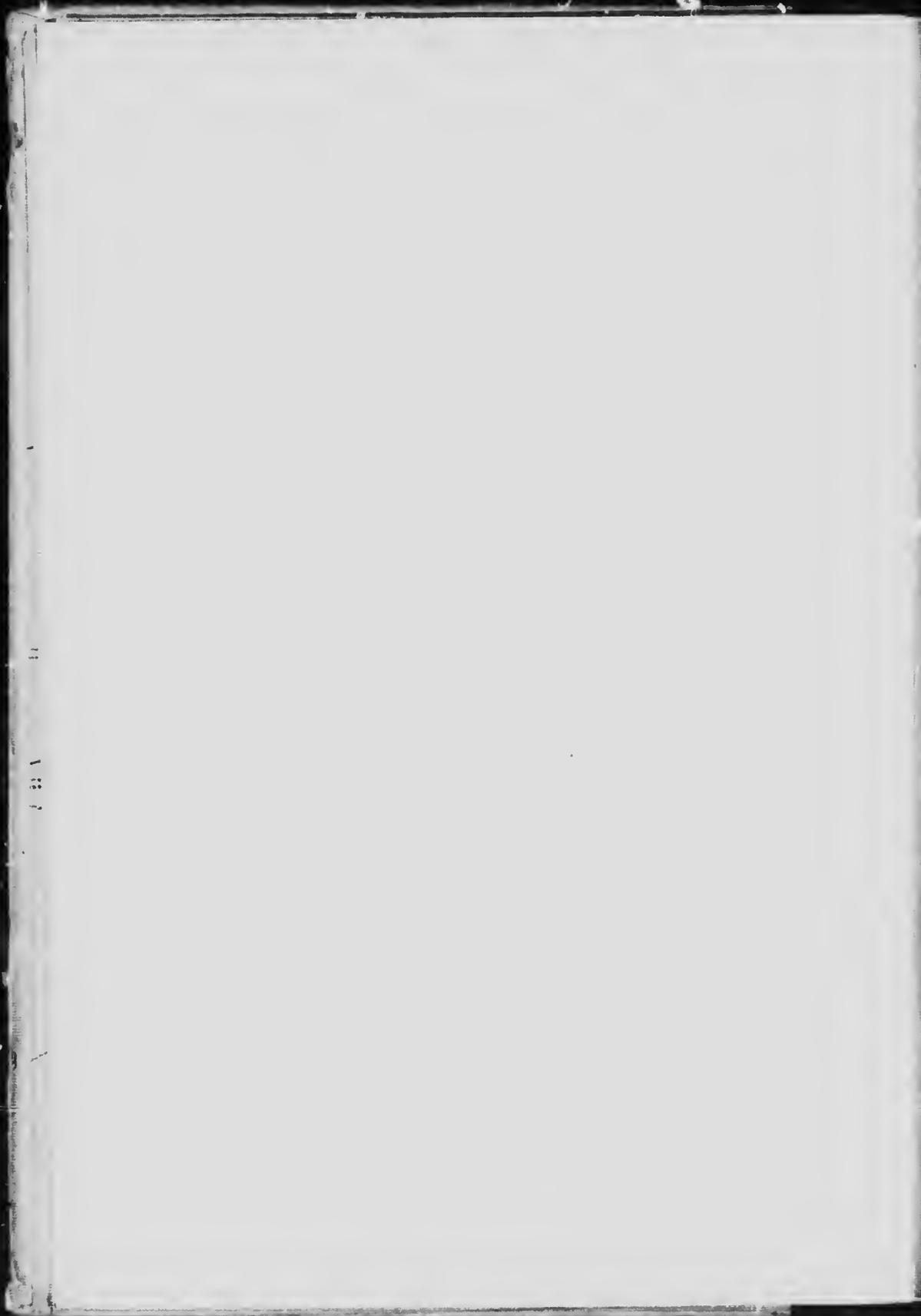
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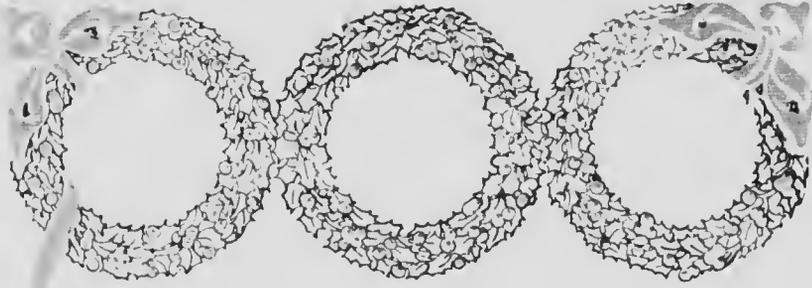
“Old John Fernald and his
wife welcomed them with
open arms” . *Frontispiece*

FACING PAGE

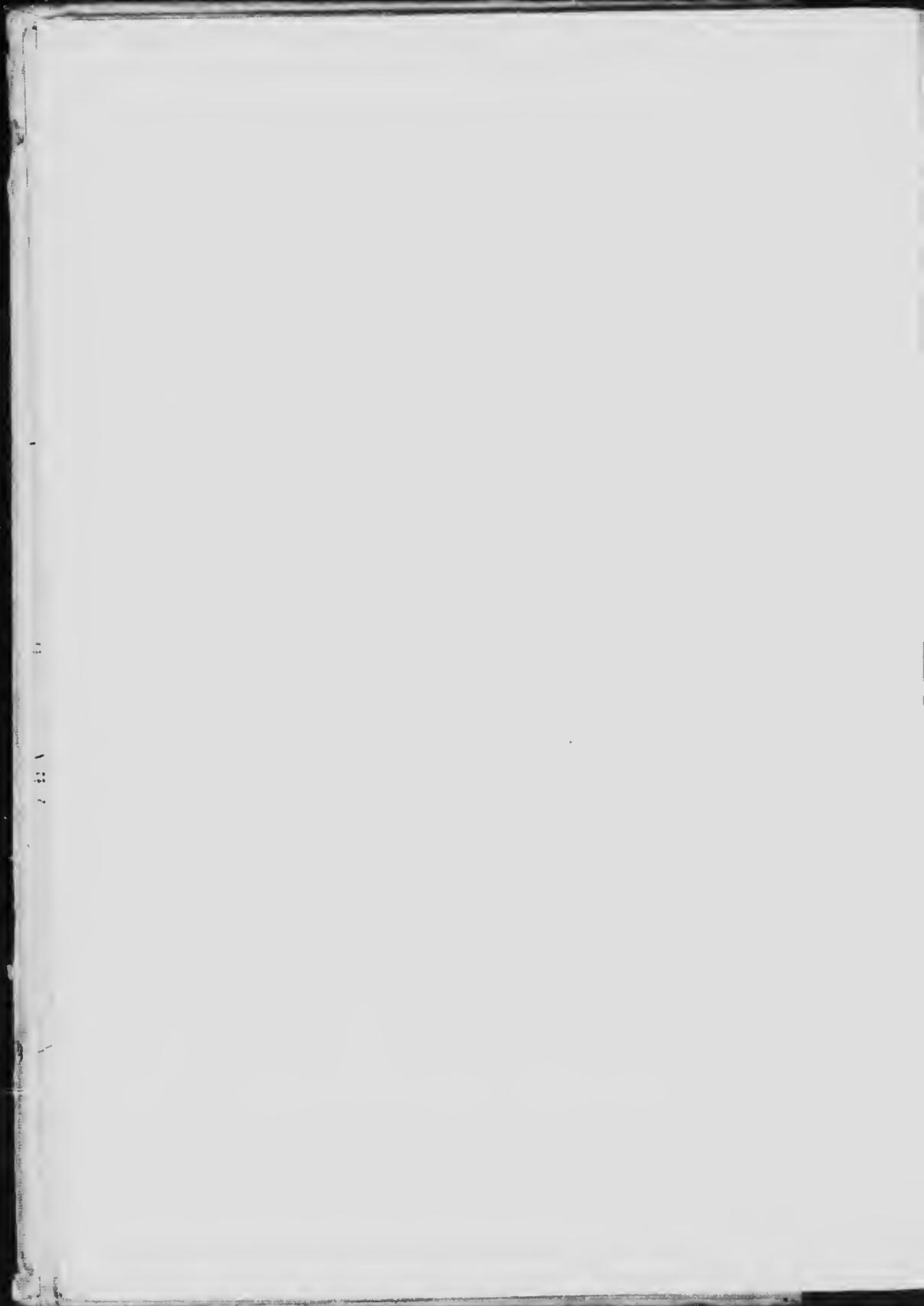
“Molly, her arms bare, was
flying about, apparently
doing laundry-work” . 34

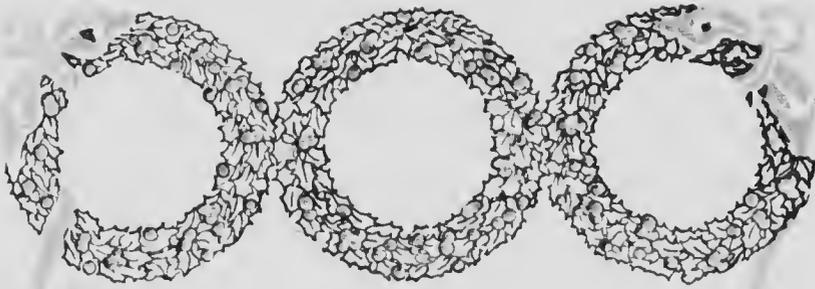
“I know how you feel. You're
plumb crazy with joy. So
am I. So is everybody” . 46





UNDER THE CHRISTMAS STARS





Under the Christmas Stars

THE old-style engine that was pulling the little Branch train puffed, snorted, and came to a standstill. The drifts were getting pretty heavy, as usual, in the cut just before the North Estabrook station. But it was necessary that the train should push through, for it was crowded to the utmost of its decidedly limited capacity. And, as it was the day before Christmas, its passengers were mostly members of the Fernald family, going up to spend two days at the old home. All the children and all the children's nurses were along, too, so it was small wonder that the other passengers, chiefly village folk who lived along the line, formed merely a background



Under the Christmas Stars

of onlookers for the interesting and well-dressed city people.

As the train came to a standstill in the cut, Marian, Oliver's wife, looked apprehensively from the window. Marian was usually apprehensive, and never more so than when she reluctantly submitted to what had now become an annual necessity. The Fernald son and daughters had taken their stand upon this point: so long as Father and Mother Fernald should be spared to them, as many of them as could manage it would leave their city homes, with their wives and husbands and children, and make this pilgrimage up into the hills, to spend the Day with the old people. Although Marian, the eldest of the Fernald wives, had only one well-grown daughter and no small children to bring, as had the others, it was she who always came most reluctantly. The journey was hard upon the facial neuralgia which was her greatest



Under the Christmas Stars

enemy, and as she now looked out upon what seemed to be a decided increase in the snowstorm which had come with them all the way, she felt an exceedingly severe twinge of that enemy, and it caused her to speak sharply.

"We shall be very fortunate," she observed in rather penetrating tones, "if we are not stalled in this cut. What in the world should we do if we could not get through?"

"Oh, we'll get through!" prophesied Edson Fernald comfortably, and his wife, Jessica, nodded, smiling meaningly across the aisle at her sister-in-law, Carolyn, Mrs. Charles Wetmore. Behind them, Nan and her husband, Samuel Burnett, were playing with Jessica's two-year-old boy, a rosy youngster whose spirits had suffered no decline during the two-hour journey from his city home.

"And if we shouldn't," said Guy easily, "we'll be a Christmas Story.



Under the Christmas Stars

Every year there's a new Christmas Story about a lot of people snowed into a railway car." He looked at his wife, Margaret. His arm lay along the back of the seat behind her, to make the uncomfortable low lines of it a bit easier for her. He was taking the most solicitous care of his wife, because he was not really sure that she ought to be making this journey at all.

"I wonder," said Margaret, smiling back at Guy, "if Ralph and Molly are there, or if they are blocked somewhere. Coming from the other way they would be even more likely than we to be stopped, wouldn't they?"

Nan, giving Jessica's boy over to Sam, crossed the aisle and leaned over Margaret. "I can hardly wait to see what Ralph's bride is like," she said.

"I do hope they're there before us," Margaret answered, her sweet face taking on the charmingly maternal expression which it often wore when



Under the Christmas Stars

other people's feelings were considered, and which seemed a foreshadowing of the state she was soon to enter. "It will make it much easier for her if she's there when we come in, instead of having to arrive after we do and face us, all in a critical row. Won't it, Guy?"

"I suppose it will. It's like you to think of that," Guy admitted.

Mrs. Oliver Fernald, overhearing, turned in her seat. "I shall call her Mary from the first," she announced. "Whatever else she may be, she doesn't need to inflict on us such a childish name as 'Molly.'"

"I've an idea you'll call her about what Ralph does," Guy observed sagely. "She suits the old boy, and so does her name; and Margaret and I have made up our minds she's going to suit us. I advise the entire Fernald family to do the same. Ralph has knocked about the world a good bit, and the girl he's at last



Under the Christmas Stars

married must be a pretty good sort even if her name isn't Mary Jane."

"I have seen her, you will remember." Mrs. Oliver's tone was uncompromising, and it spoke volumes.

"And Oliver's seen her, too," Guy added. "You've both seen her for half an hour, in a little Western railway station, on a horribly hot day, when you were fractious with the heat. But I haven't heard Oliver——"

Margaret's fingers, unseen, took gentle but firm hold on his arm. She and Nan exchanged swift glances. Nan broke in upon her brother:

"What do you suppose dear old Marietta will have to eat when we get there? Do you suppose we ever shall get there? Oh, we're moving!"

There was to be no Christmas Story written about the Fernald family storm-bound in a railway car. In an hour more they were at the tiny station of North Estabrook, and Father Fernald's roomy sleighs were



Under the Christmas Stars

conveying them all — twenty of them including the children and the nurses — over the three miles to the old homestead, where so many of them had been born.



Under the Christmas Stars

AT THE house, lighted from top to bottom by firelight and lamp-light, old John Fernald and his wife welcomed their children and their children's children with open arms.

"And Margaret, too," Mrs. Fernald said, with a glad note in her voice, as Guy's young wife kissed her. "Dear, we didn't dare expect you and Guy. Are you sure —"

Margaret nodded, smiling.

"Quite sure," she whispered. "Guy wouldn't have come without me. I couldn't bear to have him miss it — and I couldn't miss it myself. Have Ralph and Molly come? I'm so anxious to see them."

"Molly's here," said a voice behind her, and Margaret, a dainty figure in



Under the Christmas Stars

trailing gown and voluminous laces, turned to find herself in the embrace of a tall, splendid young person who kissed her heartily on both cheeks, exclaiming:

“I can’t stand it to be stood up and looked at, so I’m taking the women of the family by storm, before they get their wraps off. Some of you are pretty formidable” — she glanced toward Mrs. Oliver, lowering her voice — “but you look to me like a kind-hearted youngster who’ll take your brother’s wife on trust, on his account.”

So this was Molly. They were all looking at her now, the Fernald wives: Marian disapprovingly, Carolyn with a startled expression, Jessica wonderingly, Nan with a twinkle of amazed merriment in her brown eyes. Margaret — well, one could not have told just what Margaret was thinking, but she returned the greeting in her own pleasant way.



Under the Christmas Stars

"We were hoping you and Ralph would come first," said she, "so you could have Father and Mother Fernald all to yourselves for a little, and find out how dear they are."

"They're all right," returned Ralph's bride heartily. "The old man's got lots of stuff in him yet — I can see that. And Ralph's mother," — she turned to Mrs. Fernald, senior, laying a warm young hand on that lady's shoulder — "she took me in just the way Ralph said she would, never stopping to see what I had on."

What did she have on? Margaret had not looked to see, yet she had received the impression that it was something not so suitable for traveling as that which the Fernald women were accustomed to wear. There was a peculiar dash and daring and general gorgeousness about Molly's attire which did not express that well-conceived conservatism in dress which would be likely to appeal to Mrs.



Under the Christmas Stars

Oliver, or to Mrs. Edson, or to any of them. Yet Margaret liked the face she saw before her. It was a very striking face, with lines and tints of undeniable beauty; and the eyes were of the finest, their glance, under the exquisitely marked brows, as frank as that of a boy.

“Well, I flatter myself we’re a complete family now,” declared Ralph the stalwart, as they sat about the fire — those of them who were not putting little children to bed upstairs, or directing others how to do so. “I’ve been pretty slow to qualify, but I congratulate myself I haven’t lost by waiting for the right girl.”

He slipped an arm about the shoulders of his bride, laughing over at Guy, who smiled back contentedly. The Fernald men had one and all looked at the face of Mrs. Ralph, and had seen there youth and beauty, and, best attribute of all, to their minds, royal good humor, and had congratu-



Under the Christmas Stars

lated Ralph without reserve. Oliver, the husband of Marian, and longest married of them all, therefore the best acquainted with what neuralgia can do to undermine a man's home, had said to himself that Ralph was likely to have a good many years of undisturbed felicity before the foe should take hold of that round cheek.

"Yes, all you boys have done well — done well," mused Father Fernald, regarding his four sons with pride. "And, as I say every year, it's a pretty nice thing for us to see you all come back with your wives and children to the old home. Isn't it, Mother?"

Mrs. Fernald, senior, nodded. Guy, her youngest son, sat on the arm of her chair, his arm about her shoulders. In her lap a sleepy grandchild lay cuddled, awaiting the summons of his nurse. Molly looked over at the trio enviously.

"I can see why you were so plumb crazy to get home to *her*," she mur-



Under the Christmas Stars

mured in her husband's ear. "She's the real thing in the mother line."

Upstairs, at the moment, Carolyn, tucking little Charles Wetmore, junior, into a crib in which his Fernald uncles had all successively slept before him, was saying in an explosive half-whisper to Nan, sitting on the edge of the bed, "How did Ralph come to do it? Does traveling all over the world all the time spoil a man's taste? I always thought he'd come back and marry Lucy Ames. Lucy's such a sweet girl, I've hoped he would. But Lucy's a violet, and this girl's a — hollyhock!"

"It's partly those dreadfully striking clothes," mused Nan. "I wish I could put her into a simple frock — and do her hair. Isn't it a mop? It's all her own, though, I think. And she *is* pretty, Carol."

"Pretty? Perhaps, though I don't care for that violent style myself. But her manner — that bluff and



Under the Christmas Stars

boisterous manner — that's the worst of it. She'll never get over it."

"She will, if stiff and disapproving ones are catching. Did you ever see Marian more haughty? She means to be simply dignified, but the result is appalling. There's something about Marian's mouth —"

"I know. I think so much neuralgia has twisted it a bit. Poor Olly!" And Carolyn sighed sympathetically as she stooped over the bed where lay her youngest, already asleep.

Nan slipped away downstairs, and presently her brother Ralph determinedly caught her in a corner. "Well," said he, a defiant question in his eyes, "are you one of the pitifully few discerning ones who can see past the front door and discover what's inside the house?"

"Ralph, dear, what's the matter?" Nan whispered uneasily

"Matter? Is Marian an iceberg



Under the Christmas Stars

or a human being with blood in her veins? Jessica evidently tries not to follow her lead, but she's far from the cordial creature I always thought her. Carol puts up a bluff of sisterliness, but I can see she's not herself in it. Margaret — bless her heart! — is the only one who acts natural. Even you —— ”

“Why, Ralph —— ”

“Yes, even you, who I always thought could tell gold from brass every time, are led astray by a dress that may not be your idea of suitability, or whatever you call it. Or maybe it's her breezy way of talking. She comes naturally by that — brought up on a great ranch, though she's been away to schools, and good ones. What's the harm in it? Look here! You know your brother. He's traveled a fair bit about this country and others, and seen too many women to be fooled as easily as you people think he is. I want you just to



Under the Christmas Stars

reserve your judgment a little bit, and not condemn my wife until you know her, because some day, I promise you, you'll regret it, when you find out what she really is."

Bluntly straightforward though she always had known Ralph Fernald, his younger sister had never seen him take a situation by the horns more uncompromisingly than he was taking this one. Evidently he had come home prepared to meet a prejudice against his bride on the part of his sisters and sisters-in-law, and he did not intend to let it get well under way before he interfered.

"The boys are all right," he went on, before she could draw breath to reply. "Men have sense in such matters. Why women can't show as much —"

"We will," said Nan promptly. "Or, at least, I will, and Margaret. And you mustn't mind too much about Marian. Neuralgia and a



Under the Christmas Stars

naturally critical spirit do make an unfortunate combination. The worse your neuralgia gets the more critical you grow, and the more critical you grow the worse ——”

Ralph grinned in spite of himself. But he grew grave again. “There’s just one thing about it,” he declared. “If Marian and Jes and Carol don’t come round and treat her as they ought to, they’ll brea’ with me; that’s all. I won’t stand for their bad manners. And I can’t give ’em much time to mend their ways. Molly and I have to start back West day after to-morrow; so whatever warming up there is, has to get under way mighty soon. You just open up the drafts — will you? — and blow the fire roaring!”



Under the Christmas Stars

IT WAS the middle of the night — the night before Christmas. Guy, a startled and anxious expression on his face, had come downstairs half-dressed and lamp in hand, and was knocking at his mother's door. When she came he spoke in a tense whisper:

“Mother, I was a fool to let Margaret come. We're in for it, I'm pretty sure, and here we are, up in the hills. We might as well be a thousand miles from all our preparations. And it's storming great guns, and blowing a tempest. There'll be trouble about getting a doctor here. We'll have to send for the North Estabrook man. I'm going to wake up Ralph and have him drive in. Is old Doctor Wake-



Under the Christmas Stars

field all right? Are you sure? There isn't anybody else, is there?"

"No, dear, there isn't anybody else. But the old doctor is as good as anybody in the world. Don't worry." His mother spoke earnestly and quietly, yet into her delicate old face had leaped a flood of care and solicitude. "It may be hours yet before you really need any one. I will be up as soon as I can dress."

Guy rushed away. Mrs. Fernald dressed with unsteady fingers, then gently woke her husband and spoke into his best ear. "John, wak' up a little. You needn't get up. I'm going upstairs. I may not be down. Margaret needs me."

Father Fernald struggled awake. "What's that?" he muttered drowsily. "Somebody sick? Who? What? Margaret? What's the trouble? She looked healthy as a baby at supper. What? What's that you say? . . . Oh! . . . Well!"



Under the Christmas Stars

Father Fernald was wide awake now, but his wife was gone. "Well, well," he repeated, staring at the dim light from the burning candle Mrs. Fernald had left behind her. "That's too bad! Poor little girl! And she came up just so's Guy wouldn't miss being with the old folks at Christmas. Well, well! So the old house is to see one more of those times — *one more* — in its old age! Guess I'd better get up too. Somebody may need me. I'll start up the fires. I guess I'll call Marietta. . . . Well, well!"



Under the Christmas Stars

THERE are no drifts like those which smother the roads in the hills about North Estabrook. They sweep in during a single night and pile themselves in certain cuts and valleys, so that to get through them is impossible, and to circumvent them is out of the question. When a northeast blizzard comes on, the inhabitants of a certain area resign themselves to days of solitude and isolation. Knowing the possibilities of the winter, they are always well stocked with provisions, and only when they are in urgent need of medical aid does the matter of being snowed in become serious. Many a mile, in his earlier years, has Doctor Wakefield covered on snow-shoes, when his horses could



Under the Christmas Stars

not push through. He is the only physician in the hamlet of North Estabrook, and now that he is getting so far past the years of activity, another man is sorely needed—when the drifts are deep.

Covered with snow Ralph drove back into the Fernald barn at day-break, his horses breathing heavily with fatigue. The watchers at the windows noted with dismay that he was alone. Guy, with Nan's husband, Sam Burnett, dashed out. Ralph met them at the barn door.

"Say, old boy, keep cool — but poor old Doctor Wakefield's sick."

"Sick!" Guy paled.

"I'd have gone on to Estabrook, or telephoned, but the roads are blocked and the wires down. They hope to get shoveled out by noon. I've engaged a messenger to drive over, the minute he can get through, and bring the best man there — Holt, they say his name is."



Under the Christmas Stars

"The wires to the city are down too," said Sam Burnett. "I've been trying for two hours to get the connection. But the Branch road isn't running anyway. The cut is full to the top, they say."

Oliver came wading out to the barn, pipe in mouth; but the pipe had gone out and he had forgotten to relight it.

"Couldn't get him, eh?" he questioned Ralph.

The latter shook his head, with a pitying glance at Guy, who was pacing the floor.

"Nine chances out of ten it'll come out all right anyhow," suggested Oliver. "The women ——"

Guy looked up quickly. "Who? Marian?"

"Well, perhaps not Marian. She hasn't had any experience. But Mother and Marietta ——"

"It's not in their line. They've been good neighbors, and helped with the sick, and all that, but —— you see,



Under the Christmas Stars

if anything should go wrong — you fellow needn't laugh —” Nobody was even smiling. “ — But I've had more than one talk with Grantley — that's the specialist we've engaged — and I know the possibilities. We've got to have somebody who's competent.”

“Boy,” — Ralph's hand was on his brother's shoulder — “I tell you to keep cool. They'll have that road to Estabrook passable by noon. I promised them everything I could think of if they'd do it. Holt will get here in time. All you've got to do is to sit tight and never let on but that he's coming. Fix up that face of yours and keep jolly.”

“Jolly!” Guy gazed indignantly at his brother, who had but within the past week left the state of bachelorhood. “I can fix up my face all right, but pretending this is a beautiful summer day is a little beyond me.”

“Poor chap,” murmured Sam Bur-



Under the Christmas Stars

nett, as he watched his young brother-in-law plunge back through the snow to the house, bareheaded in the cutting wind. "I've never been there, but I hope when I am I won't have to face a situation like this. The question is, what can we do to help him out?"



Under the Christmas Stars

IT JUST shows how foolish this idea of getting us all up into the hills is, in the winter. I've known something would happen — I felt it in that wretched train. It always means a heavy storm when I begin to suffer so with my face. If Guy wants to get Father and Mother Fernald to spend their Christmases with their children's families by turns, that's very well; but to ask us to risk our health and our children coming up here, where there's always trouble with drifts, is senseless, and I, for one, shall not consent to it again. And now we see what's happened from it!"

Marian addressed her sisters-in-law, gathered in Carolyn's room, from which they had ejected the children.



Under the Christmas Stars

It was ten in the morning of the strangest Christmas Day any of them had ever known. Downstairs the children were penned in the sitting-room, with two nursemaids in charge. In the formal parlour, a room ordinarily little used, the men were keeping one another company as best they might. There was nowhere to go to in the storm except the barn. Now and then a pair of them could be observed escaping to that more remote refuge, but it was too cold there to remain long, and they would presently be seen returning, hands in pockets, and that expression of more or less stolid endurance on their faces with which their sex is wont to get through times of enforced waiting when there can be no relief in action. Looking out upon her husband and Ralph dismally starting off, pipes in mouths, upon such a barnward trip, Nan answered Marian's last gloomy speech.



Under the Christmas Stars

“What’s the use of talking about next year, or any other year but this one? All I can think of is getting safely through to-day. I’d walk to Eastbrook myself, on my hands and knees, if that would help things any. Oh, if we could only *do* something except sit helplessly here and wait!”

“Molly’s doing something,” remarked Carolyn. “I met her on the stairs just now, with hot water. She had on one of Marietta’s dresses, and her sleeves were rolled up. I shouldn’t think Margaret would want her, of all people.”

“Molly! Well, of all the officiousness!” Marian’s tone was sharp. “I shouldn’t even think of offering, unless I were experienced. As for that girl — bold, inquisitive thing! She —”

“Marian!” Nan’s usually amiable voice took on a tinge of exasperation. “She doesn’t mean to be officious —



Under the Christmas Stars

I know she doesn't. She said to me, when she first heard the news, that she wished she could take Margaret's place just for the day, because she was so strong she could bear anything, and Margaret looked such a little thing. She has a warm heart — you can see that in her face."

"Warm hearts are not skilled hands," Marian retorted. She was holding a small hot-water bag, wrapped in flannel, against her neuralgic cheek, and her expression took on a curiously distorted and sardonic aspect thereby. "It would be quite like such a self-assertive person to thrust herself forward and do some harm."

"Somebody's got to thrust herself forward, if the doctor doesn't get here. Oh, *look* at the storm! It's growing worse every minute!" Nan's voice was a wail.

They looked. It was true, or seemed to be true, for at the moment



Under the Christmas Stars

a heavier gust of wind than they had yet observed shook the substantial old house, flung a smother of loose snow against its sides, and set rattling in their frames the windows from which the four were gazing.



Under the Christmas Stars

DOWNSTAIRS, Ralph and Oliver, stamping into the kitchen from their fourth trip to the barn, encountered a scene which struck them as singular. Molly, her arms bare, was wearing a pink-and-white print dress which belonged to Miss Marietta Cooley, maid of all work, and was therefore not constructed exactly upon the lines of the present wearer. She was flying about, apparently doing laundry-work, for a wash-boiler was sending up a cloud of steam, and the table near by was heaped with white things.

“Good gracious, girl!” ejaculated Ralph, pausing with Oliver on the threshold, “you don’t mean to say that anybody has caught mother



Under the Christmas Stars

short on linen, and you're doing a washing?"

"Not on your life," returned his wife. "I'm sterilizing; that's all. It's quite a different thing from washing."

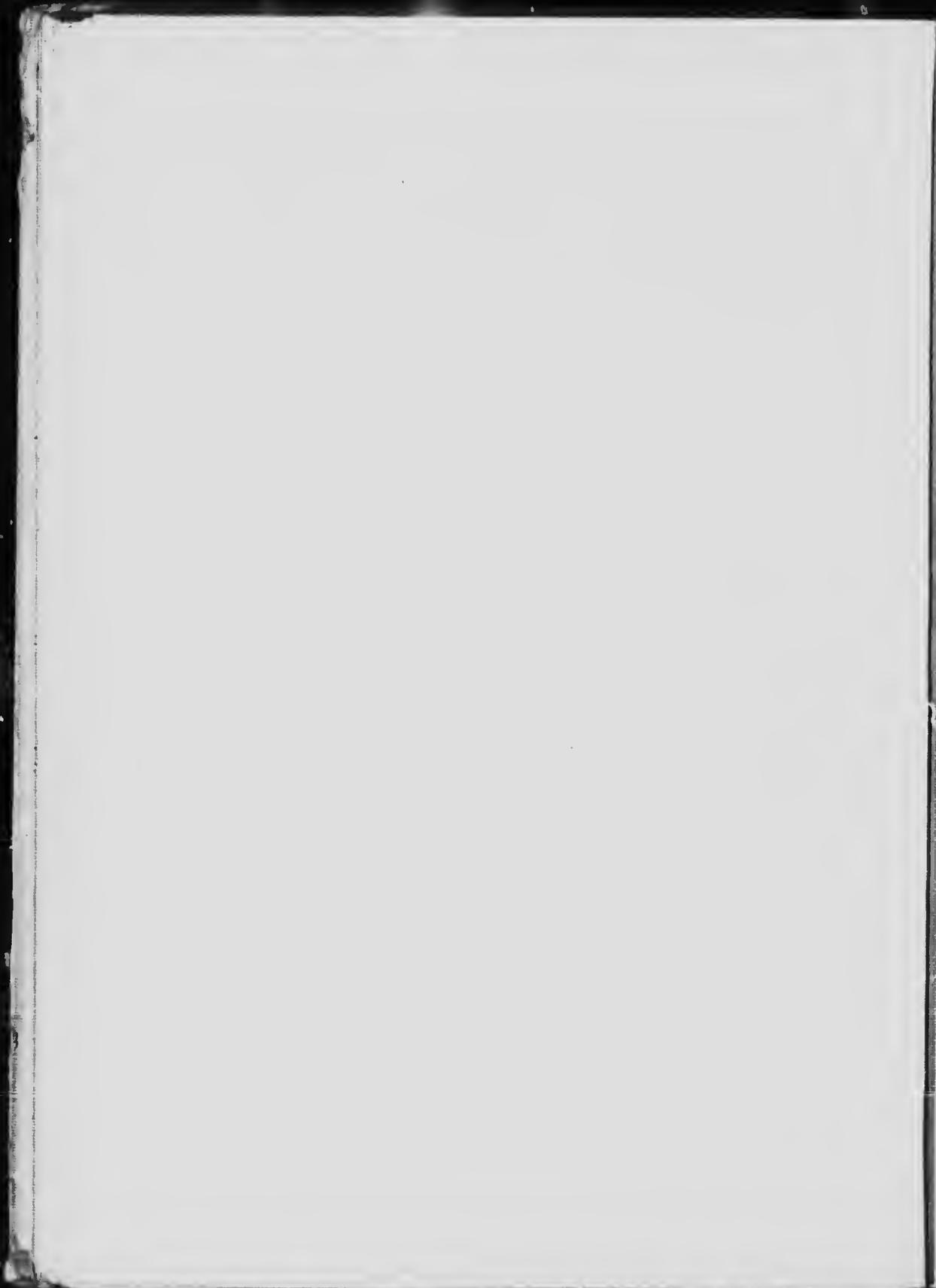
Awestruck, the men passed on, Ralph throwing back a look of high approval as he went, which Molly was too busy to notice. Both husband and brother-in-law took with them a remembrance of a splendid white throat from which the inadequate collar had been rolled back, and of sturdy young arms whose outlines were those both of beauty and of capability.

Five minutes later, Guy, his face haggard, thrust his head into the kitchen. Seeing only the bride, whose friendly aid he had already experienced several times during this nightmare of a morning, he advanced. Molly turned and saw him.

"Come here," she said. "I'm



“My, her arms bare, was flying about, apparently doing laundry-work”





Under the Christmas Stars

making some coffee for you. I was going to take it up, but you'd better drink it here. You look like a ghost."

Guy advanced. "I'd have more pluck, Molly, if the doctor were on the way."

"Maybe he's on the way — very likely he is. And the little girl's doing all right so far without him. Here, drink this, and keep your knees stiff. Such a frightened lot of folks I never set eyes on. Do you think no life ever came into this world without a whole hospital corps to sign the certificate? Your mother'll do all that's necessary, and Marietta and I'll back her up all we can."

"Oliver says nine chances out of ten there'll be no trouble. But it's that tenth chance that scares me stiff."

"Ninety-nine chances out of a hundred is a better way to put it, with a woman like your Margaret. Come,



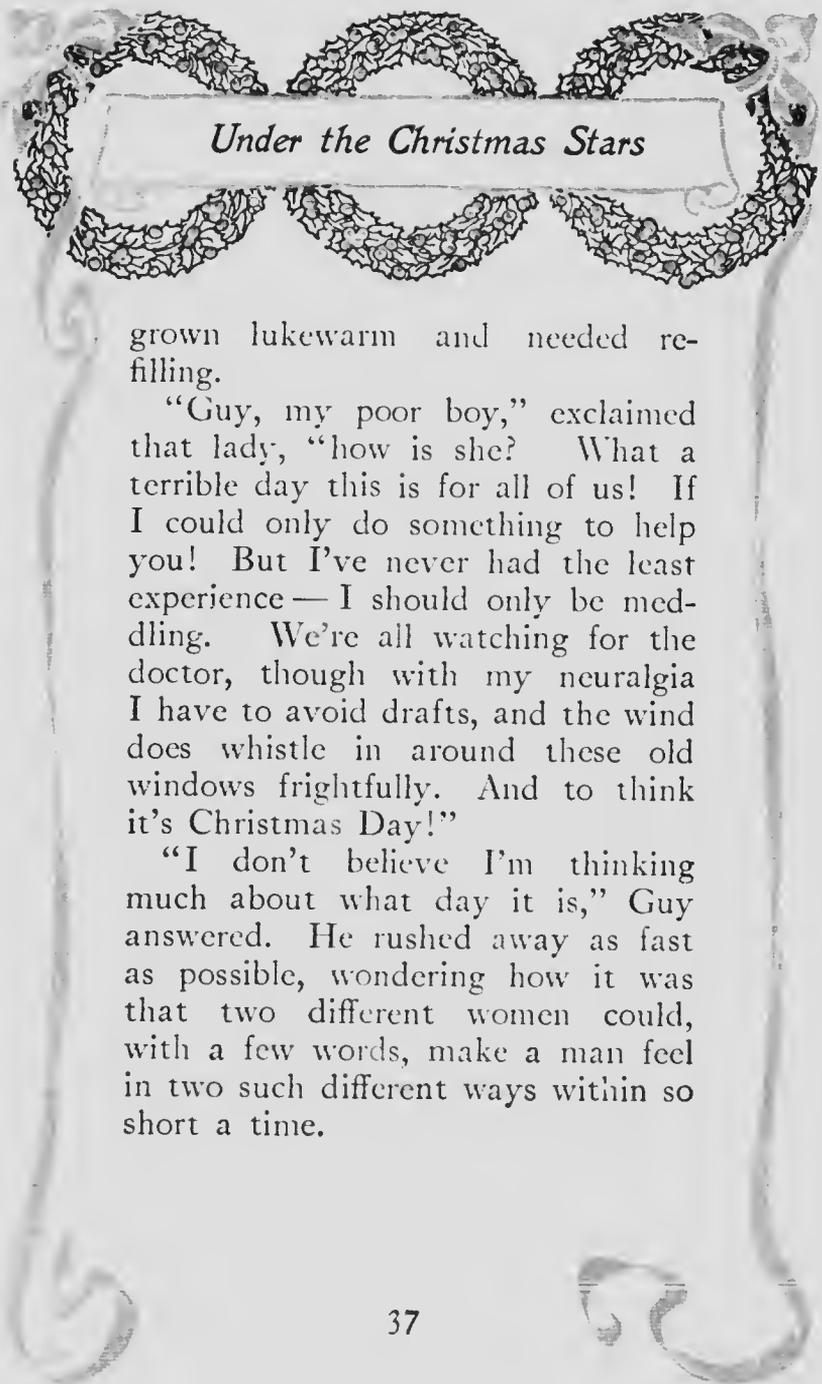
Under the Christmas Stars

brace up! *She's* all right. I wouldn't let her beat me."

"Molly, you're an angel," murmured Guy, as he gulped down the last of the cup's contents, feeling already the stimulating effects of the coffee and the conversation.

"No angel, but I'm sure sport enough not to refuse to jump a fence when I see it in front of me, and no way round. It's not for nothing I've lived on a ranch and been called on in all sorts of emergencies. I've helped surgeons and doctors often enough; that's how I happen to know about this trick." She indicated her improvised sterilizing apparatus. "You're looking better," she added judicially. "Now run along, and don't let me see you get on that '*we're-up-against-it*' expression again!"

She waved him cheerily away. But in the dining-room he met Mrs. Oliver, whose hot-water bag had



Under the Christmas Stars

grown lukewarm and needed re-filling.

"Guy, my poor boy," exclaimed that lady, "how is she? What a terrible day this is for all of us! If I could only do something to help you! But I've never had the least experience—I should only be meddling. We're all watching for the doctor, though with my neuralgia I have to avoid drafts, and the wind does whistle in around these old windows frightfully. And to think it's Christmas Day!"

"I don't believe I'm thinking much about what day it is," Guy answered. He rushed away as fast as possible, wondering how it was that two different women could, with a few words, make a man feel in two such different ways within so short a time.



Under the Christmas Stars

O SAM!" Nan caught her husband's arm and pulled him into their room. "It's three o'clock, and the doctor hasn't come, and we can't get a wire anywhere. Oh, *what* if things go wrong?"

Sam Burnett patted his wife's back as she clung to him. "Hold steady, dear," he urged. "Nature's equal to a good many emergencies, and this is an old story — to her. Just the same" — he looked down at her dark, bent head fondly — "I can't help being thankful it isn't you."

"If she gets through all right I shall wish it were I," Nan breathed into his shoulder. Then she went on hurriedly: "Mother's so tired. This is a frightful responsibility for her."



Under the Christmas Stars

and she's so old now. Father's so worried about her." Quite suddenly Nan began to cry, and Sam Burnett took her by the shoulders.

"Listen to me, my girl. This is Christmas Day. Nineteen hundred years ago a Baby was born — in a stable, or a cave, wasn't it? And no record of any city specialist, or even of a good old country doctor. Many another has come along into this old world the same way. Suppose we trust the good Lord a bit."

"O Sam, I've been asking Him — all day!"

"So have I. So has everybody, I think — in their hearts, whether they know it or not. I expect if Margaret really needs him, the doctor'll get here — just in time."

"Sam," — Nan's face lighted up — "why don't you boys go out with the horses and meet him? His horses will probably be tired out."

"By George!" Sam broke away and



Under the Christmas Stars

started for the door. "Why on earth didn't we think of that before? We'll take shovels, too. It's not so bad here, but it may have been drifting worse down by the river, and that might delay him."

Ten minutes afterward Jessica, Edson's wife, watching by the windows, saw a sleigh-load of her brothers-in-law, armed with shovels, drive away from the door. Every one of them except Guy had gone, eager to be doing something. Oliver, Edson, Ralph, Sam Burnett, Charles Wetmore — they waved their arms at her as the horses ploughed their difficult course through the old stone gateway.



Under the Christmas Stars

THERE he is!" Ralph waved a triumphant arm.

"Hold hard! It's somebody — it may not be the doctor."

"Who else would be pushing through? Two horses and a cutter. Now, aren't you glad the bunch of us got down here and shovelled out this cut?"

It was the doctor — from Estabrook. He had had a bad time of it getting through the seven miles, four to North Estabrook, three out to the Fernald farm. But they did not let him stop to talk. Ralph made him get into the Fernald sleigh, while Edson took charge of the physician's own team, panting with fatigue. In fifteen minutes more, just two hours



Under the Christmas Stars

after the sleigh-load had left the house, Doctor Holt was there.

The door opened as the men came up. Nan and Jessica and Father Fernald, their faces radiant, began all to talk at once.

“It’s all over — half an hour ago.”

“It’s a boy!”

“O Ralph! Molly saved the baby! They thought he was gone. They couldn’t make him breathe. Molly *made* him breathe! He’s all right now.”

“O Doctor! please go up at once and make sure they’ve done everything properly.” This was Marian, coming down the stairs. She had abandoned the hot-water bag, but was still extremely agitated. “I can’t believe the case is safe.”

The doctor went up with the air of one prepared to straighten matters out, if they needed straightening. But when he came down again he was smiling.

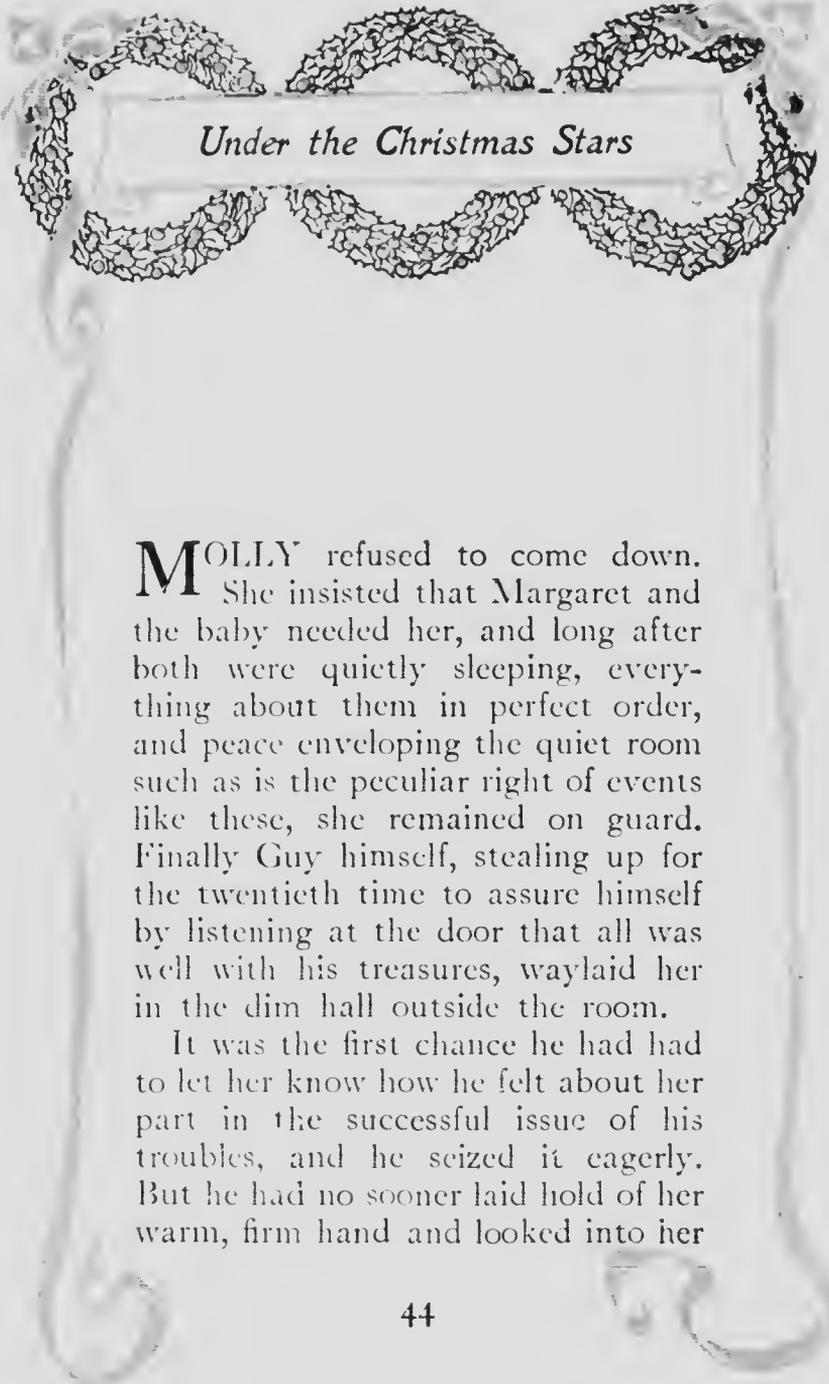


Under the Christmas Stars

"Things could hardly have been better done," he acknowledged. "The young woman you have there has managed very well indeed — very well. She has certainly saved the child. She tells me she is not a trained nurse."

"She's my wife," announced a triumphant voice behind him. "I suppose in the confusion nobody presented you. I shall have that honour when she comes down."

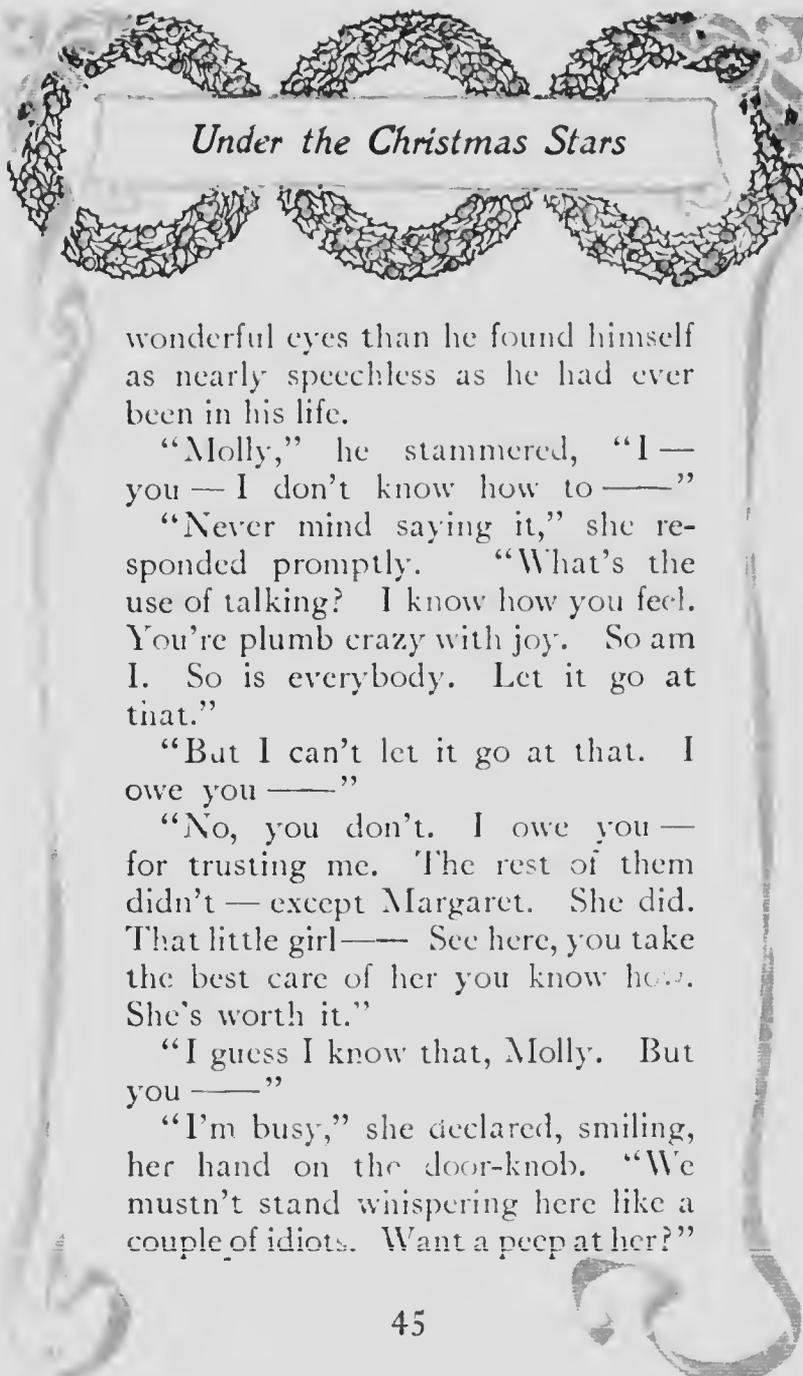
"I believe somebody did tell me," admitted the doctor. "But she herself — she called herself a 'super.'" He laughed rather confusedly. "I should be inclined to add a *b* to that word. One doesn't find that sort everywhere."



Under the Christmas Stars

MOLLY refused to come down. She insisted that Margaret and the baby needed her, and long after both were quietly sleeping, everything about them in perfect order, and peace enveloping the quiet room such as is the peculiar right of events like these, she remained on guard. Finally Guy himself, stealing up for the twentieth time to assure himself by listening at the door that all was well with his treasures, waylaid her in the dim hall outside the room.

It was the first chance he had had to let her know how he felt about her part in the successful issue of his troubles, and he seized it eagerly. But he had no sooner laid hold of her warm, firm hand and looked into her



Under the Christmas Stars

wonderful eyes than he found himself as nearly speechless as he had ever been in his life.

"Molly," he stammered, "I — you — I don't know how to —"

"Never mind saying it," she responded promptly. "What's the use of talking? I know how you feel. You're plumb crazy with joy. So am I. So is everybody. Let it go at that."

"But I can't let it go at that. I owe you —"

"No, you don't. I owe you — for trusting me. The rest of them didn't — except Margaret. She did. That little girl — See here, you take the best care of her you know how. She's worth it."

"I guess I know that, Molly. But you —"

"I'm busy," she declared, smiling, her hand on the door-knob. "We mustn't stand whispering here like a couple of idiots. Want a peep at her?"



Under the Christmas Stars

Guy nodded and let her lead him back in, herself reappearing in the hall. When he tipped his hat again his eyes were wet.

"Molly, I've got to thank you!" he murmured. "That for . . ."

"He's a beauty, isn't he?" she replied — and she saw her own white teeth flash as she smiled. "But you don't mind a good warm colour, do you?"

"Look here, Molly, you've got to come down a while."

"Got on your life!"

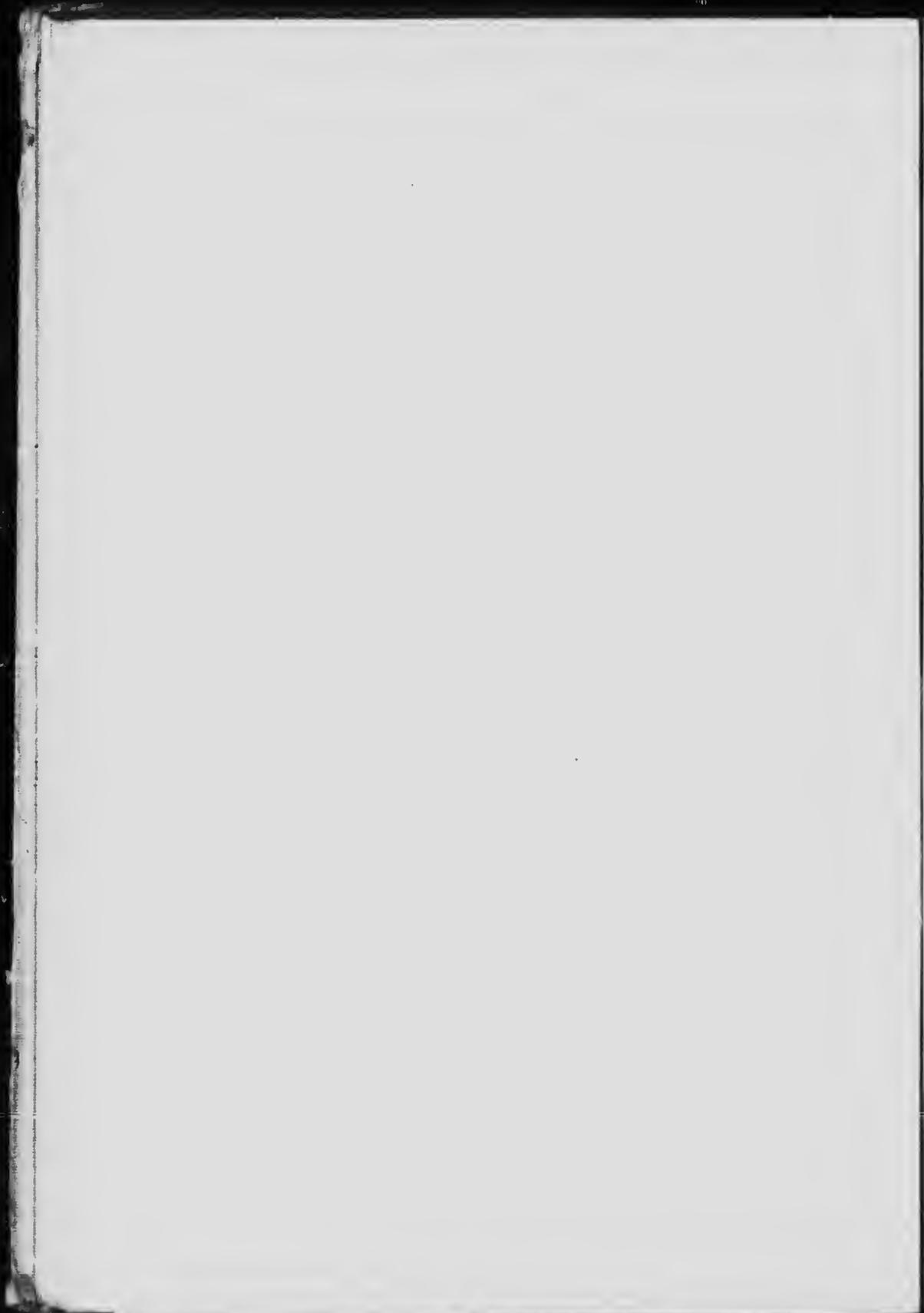
"But you must. Everybody goes back in the morning, if the rains are running, and Ralph says you and me must start by night. It's not only a chance to know you. They haven't had any yet."

"They won't know me — not in a thousand years," she said, and her eyes told him something he had begun to suspect.

"They must. I'll make them. Come, won't you? I ask it. Maria . . ."



*"I know how you feel. You're plumb crazy with
joy. So am I. So is everybody."*





Under the Christmas Stars

will stay with Margaret. Just a little while — an hour. Please! Ralph told me to get you down, if I could. He said he couldn't."

"He couldn't. Neither can you."

"Look here, Molly. It isn't fair to him not to. You're not needed up here just now. He needs you downstairs. If you stay away he'll think it's because you're afraid. Why should you be afraid? What are we but a lot of incompetents, anyway?"

He was looking steadily at her now, and she gave him back his look as steadily. Suddenly something gave way.

"If you really wish it," she said then, "I'll come down a little while."

"Good! I'll appreciate it," and Guy ran downstairs feeling that it was his chance to do Ralph the service of his life, by showing the family his Molly at an hour when they might see her for herself.

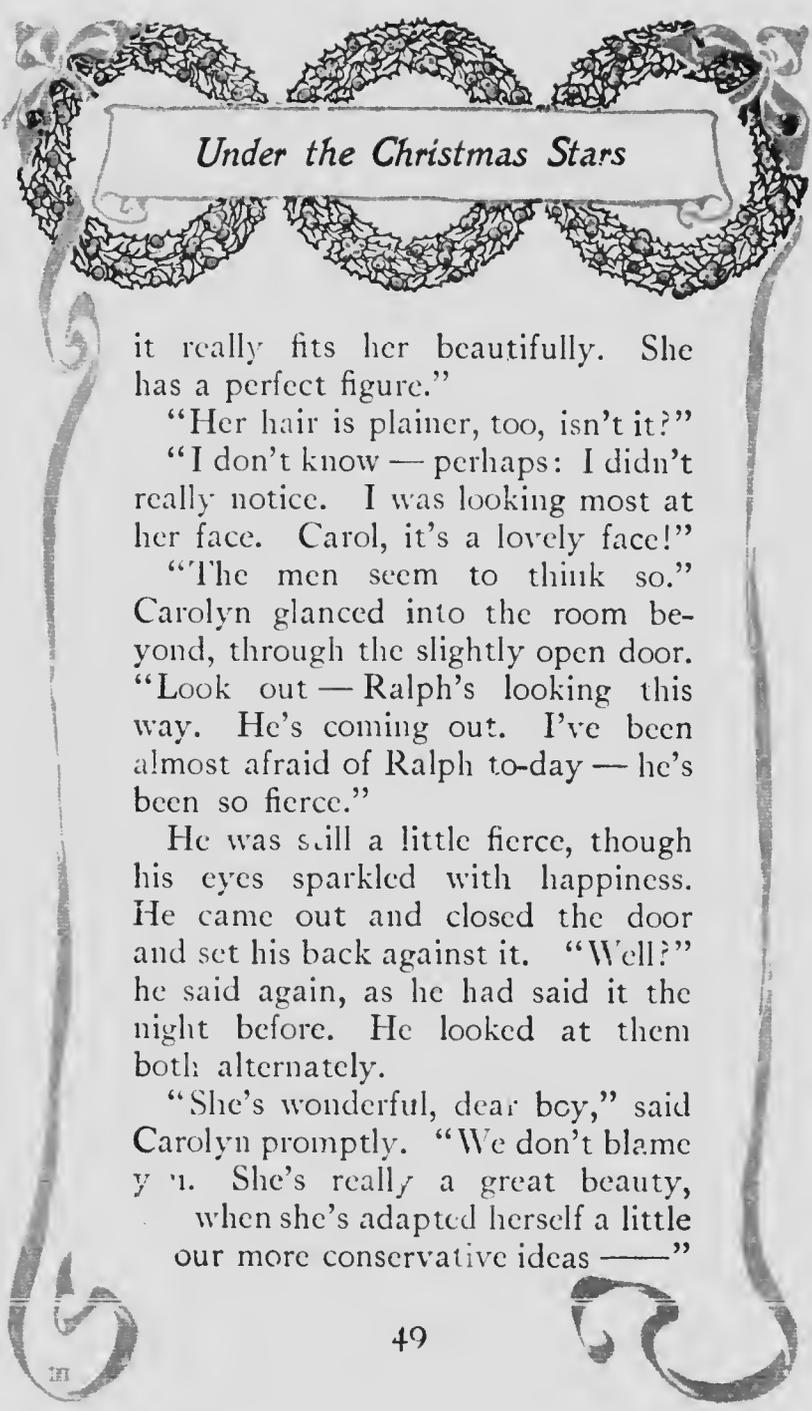


Under the Christmas Stars

So, presently, Mrs. Ralph Fernald appeared quietly among them, wearing once more the black velvet traveling-dress of the morning. The men got to their feet at once; the women, smiling, gave her cordial greeting. Ralph led her proudly to a chair beside his father, who patted her hand and called her "Daughter" with a fatherly air of possession.

"Somehow she looks different," whispered Carolyn to Nan, the two having met shortly afterward by accident — or intention — in the dining-room, where Marietta was excitedly preparing to serve a belated Christmas banquet composed of everything in the house that had been compounded for the two days' onslaught of the Fernalds. "What do you suppose it is?"

"She's left off something, I think," Nan whispered back. "Something that glittered, or swung, or bobbed. The dress seems much plainer — and



Under the Christmas Stars

it really fits her beautifully. She has a perfect figure."

"Her hair is plainer, too, isn't it?"

"I don't know — perhaps: I didn't really notice. I was looking most at her face. Carol, it's a lovely face!"

"The men seem to think so."

Carolyn glanced into the room beyond, through the slightly open door. "Look out — Ralph's looking this way. He's coming out. I've been almost afraid of Ralph to-day — he's been so fierce."

He was still a little fierce, though his eyes sparkled with happiness. He came out and closed the door and set his back against it. "Well?" he said again, as he had said it the night before. He looked at them both alternately.

"She's wonderful, dear boy," said Carolyn promptly. "We don't blame you. She's really a great beauty, when she's adapted herself a little to our more conservative ideas —"



Under the Christmas Stars

“Conservative ideas would have been of fine use about the time she was making that boy breathe the breath of life, wouldn't they? Conservative ideas! If that isn't the East all over! Its one notion is to chisel and polish and refine every bit of material it can get hold of down to a certain little ideal of its own. Doesn't it ever strike you that you can refine and polish a bit too much? I wouldn't give *that* for your polishing, if it made my wife into the tame sort of creature most of you are — afraid to make a move that hasn't been made first by some other woman, doing no thinking of your own, just reflecting other people's ideas in everything, from your clothes to your religion! Thank heaven, Molly is not that sort!”

“Why, Ralph!” The hand of his sister Nan was on his arm again — the sinewy, powerful arm of the born man of action. “You don't do us



Under the Christmas Stars

justice, dear. We do see that your wife is a splendid woman — we just want everybody to recognize it. And they'll recognize it much more quickly, believe me, if — well — if ——" She hesitated, for Ralph's direct gaze was a trifle disconcerting.

"Yes — *if!* — I understand. Well, maybe if you had seen her as I have, riding over the Rockies with the sunrise behind her, you wouldn't be so anxious to make a dressmaker's lay figure of her, or to superintend her use of a few picturesque idioms. Speaking of those, it's funny — isn't it? — that it seems to be Oliver, of all the boys, Oliver, the fussy bank president who never has a hair out of place, who seems to like Molly best! But I can tell you, all the boys like her, down to the ground, including the husbands of you two. Queer they're not bothering about the picturesque idioms, isn't it?"

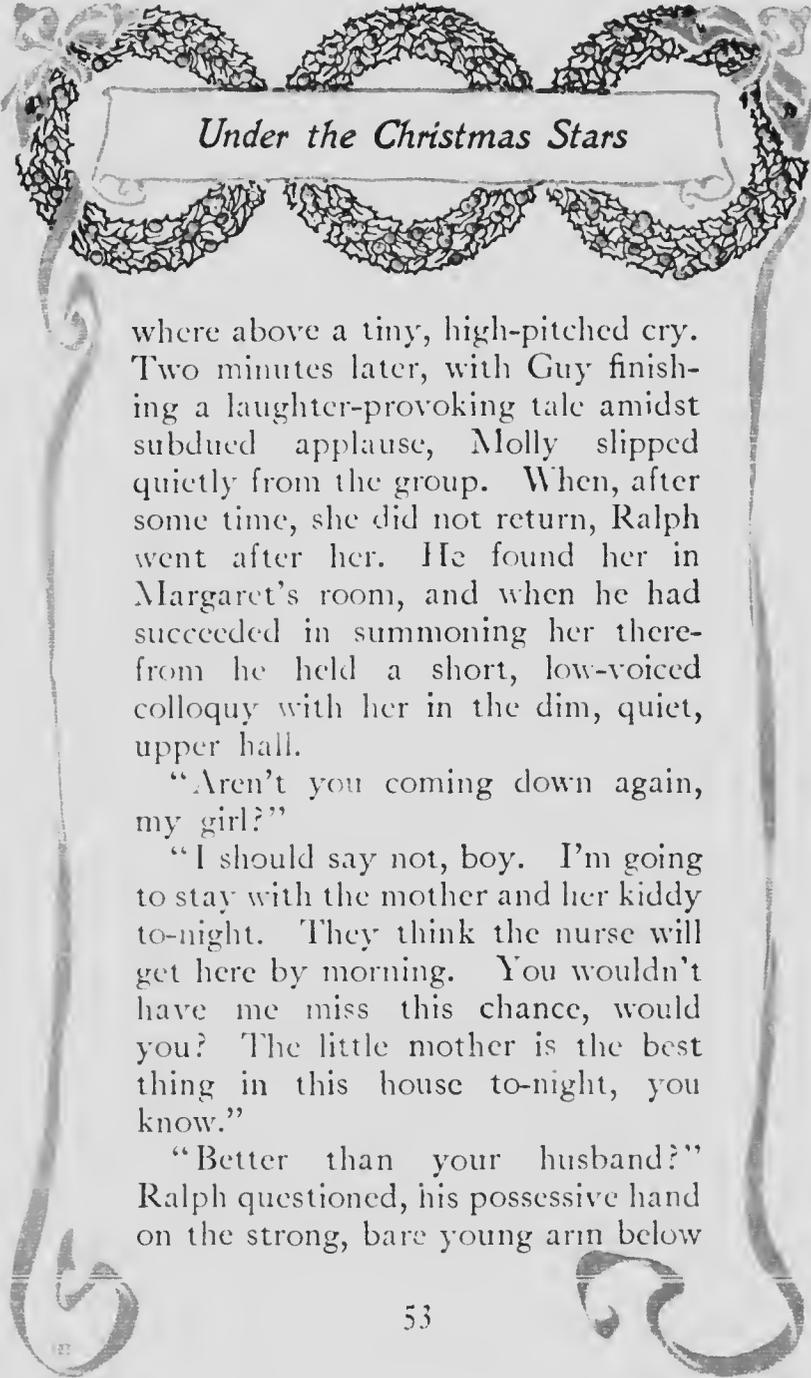
With this parting shot Ralph re-



Under the Christmas Stars

turned to the fireside, where Molly was involuntarily holding court. Nan and Carolyn, exchanging glances which said more plainly than words, "It's useless to argue with him, isn't it?" followed. They took their places on the outer edge of the circle, where they could observe their new sister-in-law. And, as they watched, they were forced to acknowledge one thing which cannot be said of all women who find themselves the centre of an interested group of men and women: as Molly received the attentions of the Fernalds it was with no smallest trace of coquetry, of self-consciousness or of arrogance. Indeed, when one came to analyze her behaviour, one had to admit that in that finest of arts, the bringing out of other people's best rather than showing off one's own, Molly was past mistress.

In the midst of it all, in a moment of silence, there came from some-

A decorative border consisting of a central banner with the title, flanked by two large, ornate wreaths. The wreaths are made of leaves and berries, and the banner is held in place by decorative ribbons. The entire border is framed by a thin, elegant line.

Under the Christmas Stars

where above a tiny, high-pitched cry. Two minutes later, with Guy finishing a laughter-provoking tale amidst subdued applause, Molly slipped quietly from the group. When, after some time, she did not return, Ralph went after her. He found her in Margaret's room, and when he had succeeded in summoning her therefrom he held a short, low-voiced colloquy with her in the dim, quiet, upper hall.

"Aren't you coming down again, my girl?"

"I should say not, boy. I'm going to stay with the mother and her kiddy to-night. They think the nurse will get here by morning. You wouldn't have me miss this chance, would you? The little mother is the best thing in this house to-night, you know."

"Better than your husband?"
Ralph questioned, his possessive hand on the strong, bare young arm below



Under the Christmas Stars

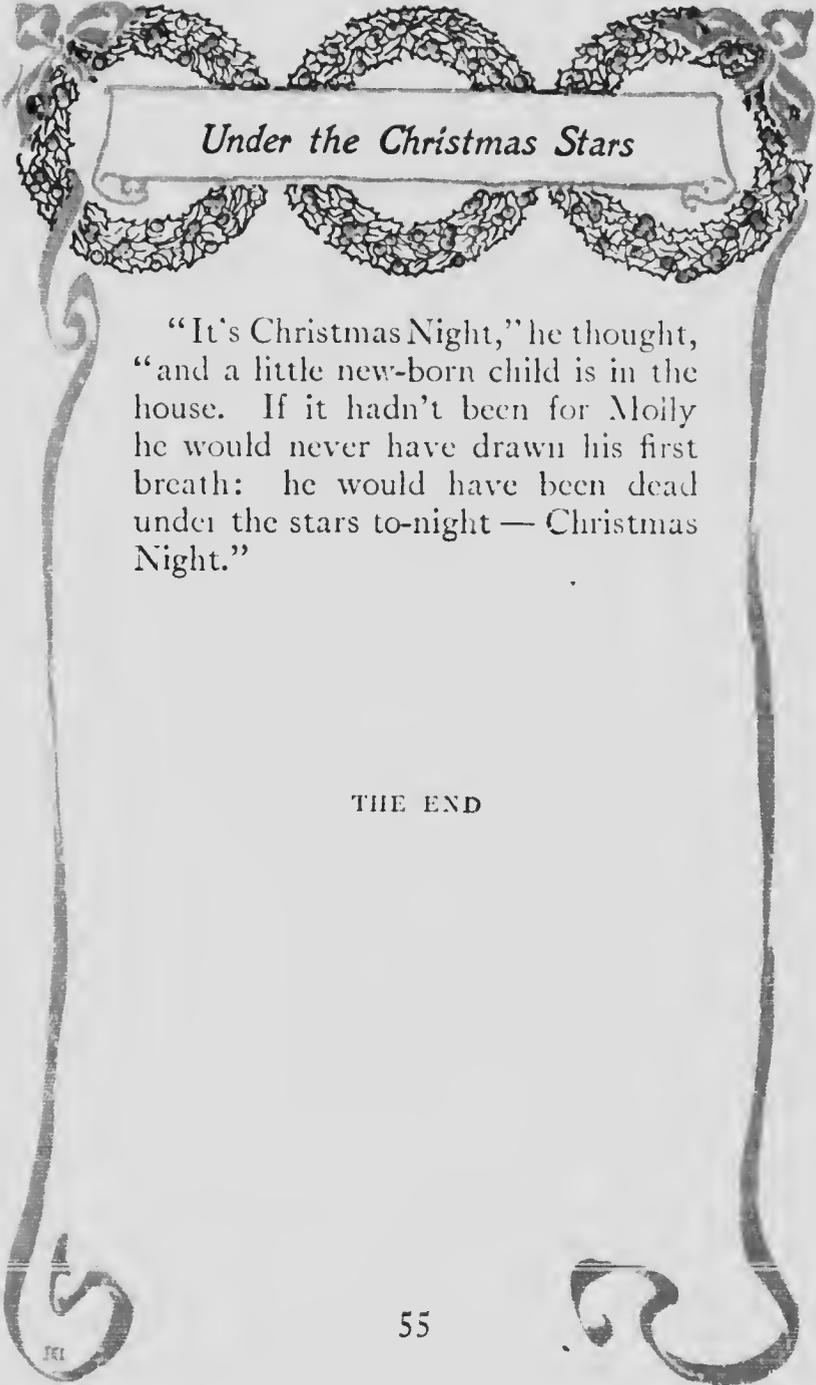
the loose pink-and-white print sleeve of the cotton work-dress.

"Better even than you, to-night," she affirmed steadily. "She can teach me a few things even you can't — things I'll want to know some day."

"You will want to know them?" he whispered, suddenly alive to a new beauty in her.

"Surest thing you know, boy. Don't ask me to talk about it — I can't. But I can look at her, and take care of her — and the little chap, and — it won't hurt me any."

Ralph went downstairs presently, when she had shut the door upon him, her kiss warm on his lips. But before he returned to the group by the fire, he opened the front door and stood for a while in the doorway, regardless of the frosty air which enveloped him. The storm had ceased, the clouds were breaking away; here and there a star pricked through.

A decorative border of a Christmas wreath with holly leaves and berries, tied with ribbons at the top corners. The wreath is draped over a central banner.

Under the Christmas Stars

“It’s Christmas Night,” he thought, “and a little new-born child is in the house. If it hadn’t been for Molly he would never have drawn his first breath: he would have been dead under the stars to-night — Christmas Night.”

THE END



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