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"SHE STUDIED THE ADDRESS WITH AN INTERESTED FACE."
(See page 4.)

MISSENT 

The STORY OF
A LETTER 



By "PANSY"
(MRS. G. R. ALDEN)

BOSTON
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Missent ❖

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I

Found

“**T**HERE!” said Miss Stafford, as she pulled the last book from the box and, with a glance at its title, tossed it carelessly into one of the numerous piles with which the floor was strewn. “I suppose I feel better now. I ought to, after making all this litter. I wonder why I needed to have that box unpacked? The particular book for which I am hunting wasn’t in it after all; and if it had been, I could have waited a few weeks or months longer until I was settled. I wonder where I shall settle, and when I shall set about looking for a place to take root for a while? Great use in my talking about taking root! If I should undertake it, I should be torn

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up before there was a chance for any tendrils to form. Perhaps, after all, I shall stay here; why not? I don't like living in a hotel; at least, I always said I didn't, but this is a pleasant room."

She looked about it complacently. It was a somewhat narrow room, but quite long, with unexpected angles and niches here and there to break the evenness. Miss Stafford delighted in these. She would have borne with a much smaller room for the sake of that curious little oblong corner at the left of the chimney. The furnishings were substantial rather than elegant, but there was one regular "sleepy hollow" of a chair that made up, in Miss Stafford's eyes, for many deficiencies. At this moment, however, she sat on the floor, and regarded, with no very complacent eyes, the litter of books that she had made about her.

"It is time they were unpacked," she said presently, but in a dissatisfied tone. "The shut-up-ness of years is upon them. How many years? Let me think. Why,

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it must be — yes, it certainly is — almost five years since I packed this box. Wait! was it before I went abroad that last time? Oh, yes; of course it was. These books were packed at the old farm. Five years in June it will be since they saw the light. Poor old things! How many interesting events you have been tucked away from! but, on the other hand, what a lot of boring you have escaped, or would have escaped, if you were human beings instead of only thoughts. I don't know what I am ever to do with all my books! I suppose a great many of them are growing musty. Things wear out, it seems, even though they are packed away in boxes."

At that moment her eyes rested on a certain leather-bound volume that had broken its sides, and she reached for it.

"Have your thoughts been too much for you, old friend?" she said, "and burst through the leather at last? I don't remember this book. It must have been one of Aunt Jane's collection. I ought

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to have a catalogue of my books ; I don't remember half of them. Dear me ! here is a postal card shut up in this one ! I never did that, anyway. When I cannot remember where I stopped reading without using a book-mark, I'll stop reading the book, as one not worth the trouble. If this isn't a postal that never reached the post-office ! How curious ! There isn't the semblance of a postmark on it anywhere, and it looks fresh, even after having been shut away for so many years."

She studied the address with an interested face.

"'Mr. J. S. Manning, 12 Kirkland Row.' Well, Mr. J. S. Manning — or J. L. ; which is it ? I hope your postal was not important, since you never received it. I suppose I might read it ; nothing very secret can have been put on a postal card, and it is more than four years old, anyhow. Some of Aunt Jane's numerous careless nieces wrote it, I suppose, and waited in impatience, perhaps, for a reply.

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I wonder which niece it was ; not on our side of the house, I'll venture."

She turned the card quickly and studied the signature.

"'Eunice F. Dennison' ; never heard the name. Aunt Jane had no Dennisons among her connections. This grows interesting. Let us see what Miss Eunice said to Mr. J. S. Careless creature she was, certainly ; not even a date on her card, save 'Tuesday P.M.' Moreover, she wrote that distressing schoolgirl hand, all flowing lines and curves, fitted for all purposes except intelligibility ; it is just as well that 'J. S.' didn't get it ; he couldn't have made it out.

"'Mamma works' — no, 'writes' — that isn't it, either. 'Mamma wishes' — that will do — 'me to send you a card this morning, aching' — bless me ! that can't be the word — 'aiding you to' — 'aiding' — 'ailing' — what writing ! Oh, '*asking* you to come and take an infamous' — O *dear*, no ! — 'informal Christmas dinner with us at three o'clock. No

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grunts' — *what?* No — 'no *guests* invited.' Dear, dear! what was Mr. J. S., pray, if not a guest? Well, and so he didn't get his Christmas dinner, poor fellow! unless, indeed, Miss Eunice saw him afterwards and delivered the 'informal' invitation in person. But in that case why didn't the careless creature destroy her postal card, instead of leaving it for me to puzzle my brains over, years afterwards? Let me see where she lived, '14 — or 18 — Morton Place,' no mortal can tell which. I hope Miss Eunice was a school-girl and has since learned to write! That is a pleasant part of the city. I wonder if they live there still. Some people do stay several years in a place, even if I don't."

She sat for some minutes, looking at the card with an amused, interested face. These people of whom she knew nothing, not even whether they were still in existence, had somehow got hold of her imagination in a curious way. She smiled as she realized it, and then sighed as she told

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herself that, if she had interests of her own to occupy her, the mere names of strangers would not take such hold of her.

A peculiarly lonely woman was Miss Stafford. Oh, she had hosts of friends, of course; too many friends, she sometimes told herself when she was in a cynical mood. Given, a well-dressed, cultivated woman of forty or thereabouts, who is known to have no near relatives, and an independent fortune, friends are as common as grasshoppers in August. But there were times when it seemed more than sad to this little maiden lady that she should not have so much as one very dear and precious friend this side of heaven. It must be her own fault, she told herself. A woman with a soul and even a small handful of brains ought surely by this time to have found some one who loved her dearly for her own sake, and whom she could love in return.

She had had such friends. Heaven was growing into a very wealthy place for her. Mother and father not only, and sisters,

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and one precious brother, but a nearer one yet than all others, one whose name she was to have borne, had, within three weeks of the day when she was to have become his bride, crossed over to the other side and left her desolate.

But that was twenty years ago. Miss Stafford lived to realize that young, healthy people do not die of grief, however much they might at times desire to do so. She lived to say good-by one by one to those others, to care with exceeding tenderness for her mother through a long invalidism, to hold her hand and pillow her head and speak sweet, strong words of comfort up to the very last moment of time; and now, six years afterwards, she knew herself to be a person of many friends, yet one who felt quite alone.

She had come, but three weeks before, to this city that used to be her home when she was a girl, after an absence of several years abroad. Fifteen years and more since she had lived in this city, and yet, because some of the happiest hours of

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her life had been spent here, her heart kept constantly gravitating toward it, and she had known for at least two years that she would some time or other "go home." Then suddenly, without any good reason for doing so, she had started.

Sounds in the halls below presently warned Miss Stafford that the hour for luncheon was approaching; and, gathering herself up with some difficulty from her cramped position, still with the postal card in hand, she went over to her dressing-bureau. On the way she passed her writing-table, and noted a number of letters ready to mail, — one to her friends in London, who would imagine themselves to be anxiously awaiting news of her safe arrival, one to her dressmaker, and one to the lawyer who had her business matters in charge.

"What if I should mail this card?" she asked herself, laughing over the bewilderment, perhaps confusion, which she might create, supposing there were persons of the same name now resident in this city.

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Then for the first time the coincidence of date struck her forcefully.

“‘An informal Christmas dinner’!” she read from the card, “and it lacks but four days to Christmas. I believe I would better mail the thing! Who knows but ‘J. S.’ is in want of a Christmas dinner this very year?”

The sound of a warning bell hastened her movements; she tossed the card on her bureau, and began the process of dressing without further delay.

After luncheon she strayed into the parlor, and there met a lady whom she used to know; the two sat for some time reviewing past years, and asking and answering questions. Once in her room again, she found letters awaiting her, and a message from the dentist that took her out as soon as she could assume street attire. It was not until she was making ready for rest at ten o'clock that evening that she thought of her unmailed letters, and with an exclamation of dismay walked over to her writing-table.

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“I forgot to take my letters down,” she said. “How unfortunate! especially for one of them.”

She really spoke to herself, although the chambermaid was in the room, opening the bed, laying aside pillow-shams and other devices belonging to the day, and doing all those little offices that people of wealth and abundant leisure are in the habit of having done for them.

The young woman considered herself addressed, and turned quickly. “Oh, ma’am, I mailed those letters just after luncheon; I came up with the one-o’clock mail, and saw them lying there ready, and I thought you might like them taken up in the next round; so I dropped them in the box.”

“Oh, thank you,” said Miss Stafford, much relieved; “that was very thoughtful in you, Lucy; the note to my dress-maker I was especially anxious to have go promptly.”

“There were three letters and a postal card,” said Lucy, desirous of having it

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understood that she did her work accurately and with intelligence.

“A postal card?” repeated Miss Stafford, perplexed. “Why, I didn’t write a card, did I?”

“Yes’m; at least, there was a card, ma’am, all addressed ready to go. It wasn’t with the others; I found it on the bureau when I went to lay your clean handkerchiefs down; but, being it was addressed, I thought you would like to have it mailed with the rest.”

Miss Stafford caught her breath, and tried to look in a way that would not startle Lucy.

“What time did you say it was when you mailed them?” she asked.

“For the two-o’clock take-up, ma’am; the postman came along a little while afterwards.”

And now it was ten! By this time Mr. J. S. Manning — if there was such a person — was puzzling over his invitation. There was really nothing that Miss Stafford could do but go to bed and lie awake

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until after midnight, wondering who would get that card, and what, if anything, would result.

She thought about it more or less during the entire following day. It interfered so completely with her unpacking that at last she gave up any attempt to put her effects in order, and resolved to wait until she felt more settled. What she would really like to discover, if she could contrive any way of doing so, was whether there was any sort of Mr. Manning to be found in Kirkland Row; and, if there was, the next important thing would be to learn whether there were Dennisons in Morton Place. Suppose there were, what then? Why, nothing, of course; only she could conceive of amusing, possibly embarrassing, results. Perhaps she even ought to look into it, and explain the blunder that had been made.

II

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THIS last thought took such possession of her conscience as to give her no peace, and by three o'clock of a fine December day Miss Stafford might have been seen stepping from a car at the corner of Kirkland Row, a short cross street that separated two great thoroughfares and seemed to be almost entirely given up to physicians. At least, as Miss Stafford gazed at the doors she was amazed to see rows of placards announcing the office hours of any number of "Physicians and Surgeons."

"Dear me!" she said, as she passed the dozenth announcement of the kind; "it can't be that any of the people on this street are ever ill; or else they all are, always. I wonder why the doctors huddle together in this way. So that if

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the one sought happens to be out, the luck may chance to fall on one of the others, I suppose. But I should think a young physician would be frightened out by this array of talent. I wonder if — why, there is the name!”

In her excitement she halted before it, and read the sign carefully, then stepped back and looked up at the number. “J. L. Manning, M. D.” There was no mistaking these letters. She remembered that she had not been sure whether the card said “J. L.” or “J. S.” But this was not number 12. Instead, it was “21.” It struck her as a curious coincidence that the number should be made of the same figures, transposed.

Wouldn't it be extraordinary if this Dr. Manning should get hold of her postal card? He had not been addressed as “Doctor”; still, if there should be no other of the same name on the street, the postman would certainly try him; people sometimes make mistakes about titles. If he got it, would the poor fellow think he

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had been invited to a Christmas dinner, and hunt it up? Dear, dear! what a muddle she had made simply by tossing that old card on her bureau and leaving it there!

What if Dr. Manning were a gray-haired man with a wife and several grown-up daughters? In that case, he would certainly have sense enough to know that the card was not sent to him.

She stood gazing up at the door so long that it presently opened, and a young man asked in a respectful tone whether she was looking for Dr. Manning.

“Oh, no;” she said hurriedly. “I was only looking at— at the house.”

She felt the lameness of her reply, inasmuch as the house was exactly like five others in the block, and there was nothing distinguished or unusual about one of them. She hurried on, after this, as fast as active feet could take her, feeling unpleasantly conspicuous, until she had left 21 Kirkland Row in the distance, and reached the crowded thoroughfare.

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What had she accomplished? She knew now that there was a Dr. Manning, but whether he was twenty-five or seventy-five was still a matter of mystery. Ah! perhaps he had a son who was Mr. J. S. Manning; that complicated matters. He might be the very son who had been invited to the Christmas dinner four years before. In that case, if he were still living, he was probably intimate with the Dennison family, if there was now a Dennison family; and under such circumstances the card could not do much harm. But the poor young man might be dead. In that case it would be very sad for his father, perhaps for his mother, to receive a card addressed to him.

The more Miss Stafford puzzled about her handiwork, the more confused she became, as possibility after possibility presented itself, insisting on being thought out to a logical conclusion. As she made her way back to her hotel, realizing that she had done none of the errands for which she had told herself she was going

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out, she said that she must really get away from this ridiculous topic, and settle down to work; it wasn't like her to allow a trivial circumstance of that kind to upset her so; perhaps she was growing nervous, like so many ladies of leisure that she had known. The next thing, she should have to call a physician. In that case, should it be Dr. Manning? Then she laughed to see how persistently her mind moved around to that subject.

However, she reproved herself sternly, and said that it was high time she was settled and giving herself to matters of importance. Should she stay in this neighborhood? Why not? It was pleasant enough; and a small, carefully kept hotel like this was better in some respects than a private house. Besides, she should then be near Dr. Bristow's church, and she liked him as well as any clergyman she had heard since she came home.

Last Sunday when she heard the missionary meeting announced she had said to herself that she would attend it. She

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always gravitated toward a missionary society, by a law of her nature. Instead of going to the meeting she had gone on this silly chase after Mr. Manning. What was she to do with him, now that she had found him? She wished that she had left that box of books packed for ages, rather than have distracted her mind in this way.

She stopped at the office and secured an evening paper, and told herself, as she was whirled upstairs in the elevator, that, if there was a meeting of any kind announced for the evening in Dr. Bristow's church, she would go out to it, and begin to make herself feel at home.

No sooner was dinner disposed of than she set herself resolutely to work to find that evening appointment. Just where were the religious notices?

"If one wanted to go to a theatre," she told herself grumblingly, "there would be no lack of opportunity, and abundant room for choice; but, if one wants —" and then she uttered an exclamation whose orthography eludes all attempt, and re-read

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with almost painful interest a notice which ran as follows:—

“For rent, furnished, with or without board, two very desirable rooms, one a front room with southern exposure, suitable for a private parlor for one or two persons, with sleeping room communicating. Terms reasonable. Call at 18 Morton Place, or address Mrs. C. B. Dennison.”

Was ever a stranger coincidence than this? How well Miss Stafford remembered studying over the number on that card, and expressing her indignation with the writer because she could not make a figure so that one could be sure whether it were a 4 or an 8! “Call at 18 Morton Place.” To be sure, it might not be the same family; four years, she had grave reason to know, make changes; but even then the coincidence of a family of the same name would be very strange.

Dr. Bristow's church was forgotten; the bell tolled and *tolled*, calling people to the midweek prayer meeting, and Miss Stafford did not even hear it, as she sat with

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the newspaper in her lap and went over and over again her interesting puzzle. The conclusion that she finally reached was inevitable.

“I shall certainly call there to-morrow; it will do no harm to look at the rooms. Morton Place is a very pleasant part of the town, and No. 18 cannot be very far from Dr. Newland’s church. If there should be a Eunice in the family, I should almost be superstitious about it; but what utter nonsense! Things do not happen in that way in this commonplace world. And, if there were, what could I do about it?”

Behold her, the next morning, at the earliest possible hour, making her way down the handsome square called Morton Place, looking eagerly about her for No. 18. Yes, it was one of those fine old houses that she delighted in; having the front door in the centre. It stood on a corner, too, and had a bit of a front yard, and a wide piazza, and a yard of considerable size at the rear that must certainly be lovely in the spring.

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"If the bedroom looks out on that back yard," said Miss Stafford, "and they cultivate flowers, I shall be tempted to go there, without knowing whether they can make bread and broil steak decently or not. Isn't this the queerest thing I ever did? But I always liked this part of the town; I didn't know that anybody in Morton Place ever took boarders."

Then she rung the bell. A neat-looking maid answered its call, who seemed to be capable of giving all possible information. No, the rooms were not yet taken, although there had been several to look at them, and two who were seriously considering them. Yes, the sleeping room looked out upon the garden. Oh, yes, ma'am, there were flowers; jasmine and honeysuckle and some lovely roses. Would the lady like to look at the rooms?

They were delightful rooms. Miss Stafford found her heart going out to them. Simple furniture, nothing so fine even as at the hotel, but looking in every inch of space not like a boarding-house, but a

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home. Dainty little decorations spoke of refined taste and thoughtfulness, as if the rooms had been prepared for some honored guest. There was even a carnation glowing in a tiny vase; but that, of course, was for the pleasure of some one in the home. That and several other touches made Miss Stafford suddenly ask, "Has this room ever been occupied by—by boarders?"

"Oh, no, ma'am," said the girl. "Mrs. Dennison has never opened her house to boarders before. She doesn't need these rooms, and she has had some money losses; so they persuaded her to let the rooms, the young ladies did, ma'am; they thought in some ways it would be easier for their mother."

"Then there are daughters in the family?"

"Yes'm, two daughters at home, and two married daughters; one of them lives not far away. She was married only last October; and Mr. Edward went away then; that is why there are these rooms

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to spare. It is a beautiful family, ma'am. I think the ones who take the rooms will be happy people."

Evidently the girl understood her business; she said nothing obtrusively, and not in the least as if she had been taught to say it, but quite as if her fondness for the family had got the better of her for the moment.

Said Miss Stafford, "Am I to understand that Mrs. Dennison expects two persons to occupy these rooms?"

"Well, ma'am, of course for one to take them would be more expensive; and Mrs. Dennison said she did not suppose that any one would want to pay the price, not in these hard times."

Miss Stafford smiled complacently; the price had not seemed high to her, at all; but then she was used to hotel prices.

The reply to her next question was extremely satisfactory. The girl thought a moment, then said, "I don't know as to that, ma'am; I will ask Mrs. Dennison."

Now what Miss Stafford most desired

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was to see Mrs. Dennison. That lady came in quietly, and at first glance the caller told that inner self of hers with whom she conversed much, that the woman fitted her rooms. A small lady, with threads of silver in her hair, and a quiet voice, and slow, graceful movements, and sympathetic ways. Perhaps there was mutual attraction. She smiled on Miss Stafford when that lady spoke of the view from the back windows, and rejoiced in the flowers.

“That little garden is our delight,” she said. “When we decided to let these rooms, we hoped that somebody would take them who would appreciate the flowers. My daughter Eunice has the most phenomenal success with them; things seem to like to grow for her.”

Miss Stafford hoped the lady did not see the sudden flush of color on her face at the mention of this important name; it would have been so difficult to account for it in a rational way. Her resolution was instantly taken. She would secure these

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rooms, even though the hostess might not be able to make bread at all; and she would have them immediately.

Upon this rock they very nearly split; Mrs. Dennison began by being quite firm; it was so near now to Christmas that they had been resolved upon not breaking into their family circle until after that date.

“We are to have a Christmas gathering of our own family,” she explained, “nieces and nephews and cousins, as well as my own children; and you can readily understand that—”

Oh, yes, Miss Stafford could readily understand that she desired of all places on earth to be at this Christmas gathering, especially the Christmas dinner; she must see whether Mr. J. L. Manning accepted his invitation, and in that case, what treatment he received.

She interrupted the lady. “I quite understand,” she said hurriedly; “and yet there are circumstances that make it imperative for me to get settled at once. I

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could sleep at the hotel on Christmas Eve, if you needed to use the sleeping-room; and I would try not to be in the way. I am alone in the world, have no Christmas friends to gather around me; I hope you will let me come. I think your price for such accommodations is very low; if you will let me come to-morrow, I will pay more than that." And she mentioned a sum which was quite a little more than the one asked.

Mrs. Dennison demurred, and Miss Stafford insisted. Finally the lady asked to be permitted to confer with her daughters, and retired to the next room. There was a murmur of voices; some of the words reached the caller's ear. "Oh; mother! *must we?*" and "Oh, *mommie*, how *can we?* We wanted to be alone just once more!" This last in a kind of wail; Miss Stafford felt like a culprit.

Then the mother's clear, gentle voice. "My dear girls, she says she is quite alone in the world; perhaps we can make her Christmas happier. Shall we not try?"

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And Miss Stafford knew it was that, after all, instead of the additional money, that settled the question. She went back to her hotel to order her moving for the morrow; and to plan, as best she could, what to do with Mr. J. L. Manning, should he appear.

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THE fine old house was at its gayest, and the Dennison family could be very gay when they set about it.

Miss Stafford had seen happy Christmas days before, in the long ago; but never had she been with a family that gave themselves up so entirely to the merriments and happy secrets of the hour. Great preparations were making for the Christmas dinner. Although it was to be strictly a family gathering, Miss Stafford learned that this meant quite a large company. Besides the absent son and married daughter, with her family, there were uncles and aunts, and nieces and nephews, and cousins without number.

Following the dinner was to come the special "frolic" for which preparations had been long making. It was then that

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the gifts were to be distributed. The family sitting room had been set apart for this ceremony. A large table occupied the centre of the room, and was piled high with packages of all shapes and sizes. Not only the top of the table, but the space beneath, and the mantel near, even the wide, low window-seats, were utilized for delightfully mysterious-looking bundles. Mystery was evidently a central feature of the fun; wrapping-paper had been freely used, and no careless corner revealed even a glimpse of the hidden contents.

Miss Stafford entered into all the preparations with a zest that surprised herself. During the two days that intervened between her coming and Christmas, the family had not only become reconciled to her presence, but found themselves consulting her as to the best ways of disposing of this or that special gift.

There had evidently been no lavish expenditure of money, nearly all the gifts being noted for their simplicity. Care

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had been shown in selection, and exquisite taste, as well as exquisite workmanship, marked the manufactured articles; but for the most part the givers had contented themselves either with articles of genuine use or with the merest trifles; and with these last, fun was the predominant feature. How could they wrap or mark each article in a way to produce the greatest amount of surprise and merriment? Miss Stafford was invaluable here. It seemed to the girls that her expedients for adding to the interest of the occasion were simply inexhaustible. Besides, she had so many curious little things that she herself seemed to look upon as worthless, but which added infinitely to the fun.

For instance, the brother and sister had united their funds in the purchase of a gold pin of exquisite workmanship, with a modest pearl in the centre; this was to be for the family idol, bright-eyed, merry-voiced sister Effie, aged fifteen.

"It was rather expensive for us," Eunice said apologetically, as she exhibited it to

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Miss Stafford; "but Effie hasn't a nice pin, anything that she calls 'really,' you know; and so we thought we would venture on this expenditure. Effie was too little for jewelry when father was living."

She said no more, but Miss Stafford already understood that with "father's" death the fortune that they had thought ample for all possible needs was suddenly and mysteriously swept from them. The fine old house, their mother's early home, and a very few thousands were all that was left, and in order to justify themselves in living here they had been obliged to sacrifice two of their rooms to an interloper like herself.

After a moment spent in thinking of the things she did not choose to say, Eunice went on in lighter tone: "I wish we could think of some way of wrapping it that would create a bit of merriment. I saw a funny little mouse at Harper's made of wax. It was really quite natural. I thought at one time of buying it, and fas-

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tening the pin to its tail in some way; Effie is so absurdly afraid of a real mouse. But I decided not to; a breastpin on a mouse seemed too incongruous even for fun."

Then Miss Stafford thought of a trifle that she had picked up in Italy, a mouse so perfect in form and feature that she had had the fun of startling several of her friends with it. Yet, behold, it was a tiny box, velvet-lined, and made ready for some dainty bit of jewelry. It had held, when Miss Stafford first owned it, a costly diamond ring. It was empty now, and she cared nothing for it; even the associations connected with it were not pleasant. It required not a particle of sacrifice for her to offer it for the home of the pretty pin, and to press its acceptance with such heartiness and evident delight that they could not refuse.

How gleeful they were over it! They wrapped the tiny creature in innumerable sheets of paper, and finally, at Miss Stafford's suggestion, enclosed it in boxes, each

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one a trifle larger than the last, until it stood, a ponderous box of wood, filling all the space between the table and an end window.

Oh, never did acquaintance progress more rapidly than in the case of Miss Stafford and the Dennisons. Mother and daughters laughed together, that Christmas morning, over the conversation they had held but two days before.

"We must have her at dinner, of course," Eunice had said ruefully; "but do you think, mother, it will be necessary to ask her to stay to the after-dinner frolic?"

"Why, I don't know," the mother had answered, in her gentle, thoughtful tone. "She has no home friends left, she tells me; these holiday seasons must be hard for her. Perhaps the best way would be to ask her frankly whether she would like to join us in our foolishness, or would prefer being left quietly to herself."

Then Effie had burst forth.

"Oh, but, mother, can't we frankly ask ourselves whether we wouldn't prefer to

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have her go to her room after dinner, and stay there? She ought not to have come until after Christmas, anyway. It is so horrid not to be by ourselves on this one day."

"I know, dear; but, after all, if we can brighten other lives with our Christmas frolic, is not that part of the reason for having it?"

And Eunice, 'mother's thoughtful right hand,' as the mother delighted in calling her, had stifled a sigh as she said: "I suppose you are right. If ever in the world people should aim to be unselfish, it is surely on Christmas Day. Let us hope, Effie, that Miss Stafford will not like the idea of our frolic at all, and will choose the quiet of her own room."

It was not forty-eight hours afterward that Effie said: "I'm going to ask Miss Stafford to write some of my rhymes for me. Her eyes look so full of fun I am sure she can give us something rich. Isn't she lovely?"

Eunice laughed, and said, "You have

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changed your mind since day before yesterday, haven't you?"

"Oh, well," said Effie, tossing back her yellow curls, "we didn't know her then: of course we didn't want to have a *stranger* around."

Then they had all laughed. How suddenly and joyously they had opened their family circle and taken Miss Stafford in! That lady was as much amused as any of them. She found herself preparing her little gifts for the Dennison girls quite as though they had been girls of her acquaintance for years past. To be sure, it was a very easy matter for her to prepare gifts; she had only to open some half-forgotten boxes of foreign trifles, the collections of years of travel, and select therefrom trinkets that had lost all their value for her, and yet were so pretty and so quaint that she knew they would fill the hearts of these girls with delight.

On Christmas Day proper, what with the belated packages, and especially the belated rhymes, Miss Stafford was so busy

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and so excited that the dinner hour drew near before she had had time to bestow much thought on the possible arrival of the guest who she alone knew had been invited.

When she did think of him, she put him aside promptly. It was absurd to be afraid that any Dr. Manning would intrude upon them. Any man in his senses would be able to discover in some way whether an invitation was for him or for somebody else. If he did not know the family intimately enough to expect an invitation from them as a matter of course, equally of course he would know that there was some mistake.

Nevertheless, she could not get away from a feeling of curiosity about Dr. Manning, and a secret determination to discover as soon as she could whether he was a gray-haired man with children and grandchildren of his own, or a young physician, waiting, possibly, for his first case.

The large parlor was aglow with life, and the dinner hour was approaching, when

Missent

the door-bell pealed once more through the house, and this time arrested general attention.

“Who can be coming now?” asked Effie. “We are all here, and the postman has a holiday. It cannot be callers; people do not make calls on Christmas Day, do they? Oh, Keith, I am afraid it is somebody for you! Wouldn’t it be horrid if you should be called away just as the fun is to begin?”

“Don’t borrow trouble, Effie,” said her brother Richard, looking good-humoredly at his clergyman brother-in-law, the afore-said Keith. “If anything short of a twenty-dollar wedding comes after Keith, we will shoot the messenger on the spot; nothing trivial shall be allowed to interfere with your Christmas frolic.”

Then it had seemed to one of the company that for a moment her heart actually stood still, for the trim maid who had answered the bell appeared in the doorway, saying simply, “Dr. Manning.” The announcement, it must be admitted, caused a momentary sensation of bewilderment,

Accepted

from which Eunice, who stood nearest the door, was the first to rally.

“How do you do, Dr. Manning?” she said, moving forward. “Is it in order at this time of day to wish you a merry Christmas?”

“It certainly is,” said that gentleman, briskly. “Contrary to the expectations of a few days ago, I have hope of its being a very merry one.”

Eunice looked and felt bewildered. But her mother came to the rescue, holding out a cordial hand, like the kind, gracious lady that she was, greeting the newcomer precisely as if he were an expected guest, her entire thought being given to the desire to make him feel at ease.

“Mr. Merrivale, Dr. Manning,” she said, with a wave of her hand toward her son-in-law, “and my daughter, Mrs. Merrivale; the other members of my family I think you know. Richard?”

“Yes, mother,” said her son, coming briskly forward from a corner where he was delightfully engaged with young cous-

Missent

ins. "How are you to-day, doctor? Let me introduce you to my cousins from Shirley Heights;" and he carried him forthwith into the centre of merry life at the farther end of the room, giving Miss Stafford a chance to study the stranger at her leisure.

She decided that he was a "handsome fellow"; which verdict was entirely reasonable. A mere passing glance at the young, well-formed man, with his genial face and clear gray eyes, would have left a pleasant impression. Closer observation only confirmed the first thought. He was more than a handsome man; he held his own at once in the gay ripple of talk that was going on, yet kept an alert sense for the older members of the circle, and was the first to spring for a chair for Mrs. Dennison when she moved toward the group.

"I don't believe I am sorry that I invited him," was Miss Stafford's conclusion, as she watched and listened. "I shouldn't wonder if he would prove a real addition to the company. Besides, poor fellow! I

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suppose he was lonesome and homesick. Why shouldn't people who have homes and joys open their doors to us outsiders? I do hope, however, that he will maintain a discreet silence in regard to his invitation. I wonder what they would say if he should mention it!"

The situation was so unique, and Miss Stafford's vivid imagination was able so instantly to conceive of ludicrous complications, that she laughed, sitting quite by herself in a corner. Her face was so full of sparkle that one of the boy cousins, also by himself for the moment, could not resist the temptation to cross over to her.

"What's the fun, Miss Stafford? It isn't fair to keep fun to one's self, is it?"

"It's a secret," she said gayly, making room for him on her sofa, "a Christmas secret; the air is full of them at this time of year, you know; and there's fun in it, too, the nicest bit, perhaps, that I ever had in my life, unless something comes in to spoil it. There is always the unforeseen, that may spoil fun. If things behave

Missent

themselves, Mr. Frederick, I may tell you all about it some day."

"What day? This year? This week? When?"

"Oh, I don't know; years hence, perhaps; some secrets take long to grow."

Then the maid whispered something in Mrs. Dennison's ear, and that lady gave a general invitation to her family to follow her to the dining room.

IV

Puzzled Over

MR. RICHARD DENNISON sprung up at the summons, and looked about him for the supposed caller, his heart taken up with the desire to make the man feel at home.

“Dr. Manning,” he said cordially, “come out and take dinner with us; we are just a family party, nothing formal about it, and we shall be delighted to have you.”

To Miss Stafford's eyes Dr. Manning looked as if he would have liked to say: “Why, of course I will! What else would you expect me to do?” But, if this was his thought, he wisely said nothing of the kind; he simply dropped back beside the young cousin with whom he had been talking when the interruption came, and continued his sentence, while

Missent

he moved by her side to the dining room.

Before the dinner was concluded Miss Stafford settled it with herself that her particular guest was undoubtedly an acquisition; she could afford to be proud of him. Evidently he was the life of the little clique of young people who were seated near him; and it spoke well for him in Miss Stafford's eyes that these people were the quite young ones who are often overlooked in social gatherings. That Dr. Manning exerted himself to entertain them, and succeeded, told several things in his favor.

Directly after dinner there was a hurried conference in the dining room, several members of the immediate family lingering for the purpose.

Miss Stafford, who had dropped her handkerchief, whether accidentally or by design only she knew, came back in search of it, and was in time to hear Eunice Denison's distressing question: "What in the world are we to do with Dr. Manning?"

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We cannot have the frolic while he is here; and who knows when he will see fit to go?"

Then Richard Dennison: "What on earth is the fellow doing here, anyway? Did anybody know he was coming to call to-day?"

"Of course not," said his sister Effie. "Who ever heard of formal calls on Christmas Day? I was startled when I saw him walk in. The only thing I could think of was that some dreadful accident had occurred to one of our friends, and he had been sent to tell us."

"I supposed of course that he had come to see Keith or some of us on important business," said Richard. "It is a most unheard-of proceeding, I must say. I was compelled to invite him to dinner, but I had not the remotest idea that he would stay. Still, I might as well have supposed he would do that as to have come in the first place. I believe, Eunice, our best way to do is to go right on with the programme as though he were not here."

Missent

"Oh, Richard! we *can't*; think of those ridiculous rhymes! We shall have to omit those, anyway; and a large part of the fun lies in them."

"Then let us have them; we have a right to be ridiculous in rhyme, if we choose. Miss Stafford, what do you think of the state of things? Do they manage the courtesies of life in this way abroad?"

"In what way?" asked Miss Stafford, rising from under the table where she had been for her handkerchief; either that or something else had flushed her face.

"Invite themselves to a family Christmas frolic—I beg your pardon, Miss Stafford, I did not see your handkerchief. Here has Dr. Manning appeared to us, nobody knows for what reason, and we don't know what to do with him."

"Wasn't he invited?" asked Miss Stafford. She realized how absurd a remark it was for her to make, but to save her life she could think of nothing else at the moment.

"Invited!" exclaimed Eunice. "I

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should think not! Why we none of us know him; mother and I were introduced to him less than a week ago. We met him by chance in Dr. Brainard's office; we did not exchange half a dozen words with him, and that is the extent of our acquaintance. Nobody knows him; he has just established himself in Kirkland Row, where all the doctors congregate. Dr. Brainard remarked to mother after he had gone out that he was a brilliant young man, and would make his mark in the world and that is all we know about him."

"I think he is beginning to make it! He will succeed if assurance has anything to do with it," said Richard, laughing. Then he added: "my acquaintance with him is not much more extensive than yours, Eunice. Dr. Hanford introduced me to him at the library two or three weeks ago, and I have exchanged a few words with him several times since. Well, never mind; we mustn't waste time here; some of the kids will grow sleepy before we get through with the frolic. I think

Missent

we would better go right on. Don't you think so, Miss Stafford? Where is the mother, by the way? What does she say?"

While Miss Stafford affirmed that she thought as Mr. Richard did, Effie went in search of her mother.

"Of course, dear," Mrs. Dennison said, when the dilemma was explained to her, "we must go right on, quite as though he were not present. There is really no harm in letting him enjoy the frolic with us. He tells me that he is many miles away from any of his home friends, and I presume he has felt lonely and sad to-day."

"Well, but, mother," interposed Eunice, distress still in her voice, "only think of those ridiculous jingles, made up in haste for our ears alone. Can't we at least omit them?"

"The idea!" said Effie, her bright eyes flashing indignation. "Do you think I have sat up nights, and taxed my brain to the very verge of insanity, to write poems

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for every member of my family, only to have them drop into oblivion now? Mother, I am sure you will never permit such cruelty."

"Oh, we must have the rhymes," said Mrs. Dennison, laughing; "I am not sure but Dr. Manning will enjoy them as much as we shall; he looks bright enough for any sort of fun."

"But, mother," said Eunice once more, "we have no gift for him; think how disagreeable it will be to him to be made conspicuous in that way, the only one whose name is not called for a Christmas gift."

This phase of the subject troubled Mrs. Dennison for the moment, until her son came to the rescue.

"It would serve him right," he said. "He has had his dinner, and I think that must be what he came for; still, we can arrange that matter, if we wish. There are boxes of nuts, and bonbons and flowers, that are to be given out promiscuously; we could mark some of them with his name."

Mrs. Dennison caught at the idea.

Missent

“That will do beautifully, Richard; I am glad you thought of it. Of course it is only some trifle of the kind that good taste would permit us to give him, even though he had been invited. I do not know but it is providential that he has dropped in among us; it gives him an evening of home cheer, and one cannot tell what it may do for him. I wonder that we have not thought of widening our home circle enough to take in some lonely outsider.”

“Look out for mother in Christmases to come!” said Richard, gayly; “she has a new idea, and outsiders will be in the ascendant hereafter.”

“Oh, mother!” said Effie with a serio-comic sigh, “we can’t any of us be as good as you want us to be; there is no use in our trying. I think myself that Dr. Manning is an awful nuisance; but now that he is here, we can’t shoot him, nor pitch him from the third-story window, so I say let’s endure him and go on with our fun. I am just dying to know what is in that great big box; it is big enough for

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a packing-box, and I almost know that it has my name on it. Won't you come, Eunice, right away, and let's begin?"

And Eunice, laughing, yet annoyed, but willing to admit that she did not know what else could be done, allowed herself to be coaxed and dragged toward the closed sitting room, where none were allowed to enter until invited by her.

Miss Stafford went guiltily back toward the parlor. Whatever happened after this, she must keep her own counsel. At the door she paused, and turned back to Eunice, speaking low. "I have a little foreign trifle suitable for a physician; if you don't mind, I will get it and write the doctor's name on it. Perhaps it will help to make him feel as though he 'belonged.'"

"He doesn't deserve to feel as though he 'belonged,'" said Eunice, laughing; "but it is very kind in you, nevertheless. You and mother are able to rise above annoyances, and think of others all the time; I wish I were."

"It helps, to remember what your mother

Missent

said," Miss Stafford murmured, "about his being separated from all his home friends, and feeling alone. I am an outsider, too, you know."

"Oh, no, indeed!" said Eunice, earnestly, laying her hand on that small woman's arm; "it is *very* different with you; why, we wouldn't have you away for anything; we feel as though you had belonged to us always."

And then Miss Stafford, with a tender light in her eyes born of those last words, ran upstairs, ostensibly in search of the "foreign trifle" which the precious little hypocrite had in her pocket at that moment, carefully wrapped, ready for possible emergencies. There was no name written on it, but she had known when she wrapped it what she might write, under certain circumstances; so she lingered to write it in clear, bold characters, — "Dr. Manning."

Fifteen minutes afterward, while Mrs. Dennison was explaining to Dr. Manning the peculiarities of their Christmas frolic, the folding-doors which divided the sitting

Puzzled Over

room from the hall were rolled back, and the family were invited in.

“We have so many young people in our family connection,” Mrs. Dennison was saying, “that we have fallen into the habit of getting up a special entertainment for their benefit. As we haven’t much money to spend in these ways, we make up for it in fun. Our packages are formidable to look at, but wrapping-paper is cheap, and has a great deal to do with the size of the bundles. Of late years the young people have adopted the fashion of writing rhymes to accompany their packages; some of these are in the form of conundrums, and the first successful guesser wins a prize. Who knows, Dr. Manning, but you may take one this evening? My son Richard is appointed the reader, and some of the rhymes are really very comical. At least, they have been in the past; I do not know what the children may have perpetrated this time. My daughter Eunice is afraid that you will take us for a party of lunatics, doctor, or

Missent

possibly idiots; but we beg that you will excuse the folly. We are all children on Christmas Day."

"I am in search of a prize," said Dr. Manning, eagerly. "Nothing would give me greater delight than to win one here to-night. I cannot tell you how much I thank you for the opportunity."

Mrs. Dennison thought that he spoke more earnestly than the occasion demanded; but there was no chance for further words, for they were in the centre of the wizard's room, and the fun had already commenced.

Mr. Richard Dennison had a trim parcel in his hand, and was glancing over its inscription before reading aloud:—

"A package for May,
Though 'tis Christmas Day!
And Christmas is winter, and May is spring;
Welladay! that's a curious thing!
Their use? Well, I hope they are not for tears,
Nor to smother sighs that are born of fears.
They're to toy with, and play with, and perfume
with roses;
To put it in prose, I suppose they're for noses."

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The pretty cousin May, who came gayly forward to claim the box of handkerchiefs, raised a laugh by turning aside to give Eunice a kiss as she said, "I know they are from you : it sounds like your kind of poetry."

"Never mind, Eunice," said her brother. "May meant it for a compliment! Listen to this :—

"Here are the angels, but you must give them wings ;
Then they'll fly across the land like birds or — other things !

"You must scratch them and lick them,
If you would have them go ;
And spread a plaster on their face,
So all the world may know."

Some of the wildest guessing followed ; then, as they were not willing to give up, there was a moment of puzzled silence, broken by Miss Stafford.

" 'Scratch them and lick them' — why, it must be envelopes. "

"Of course it is!" shouted a boy cousin. "Why couldn't we have guessed that the first thing? 'Spread a plaster on the face' — that's a postage-stamp."

Missent

“Give the basket of roses to Miss Stafford,” said Richard; “she has won the prize. Ah! listen to this:—

“Not for an age, but for all time
He wrote his prose and made his rhyme,
Played his part and said his say,
Lived his life, and passed away.
‘To be, or not to be?’ he questioned once,
And the question answered for every dunce.
That the soul is immortal he doubted never,
He wrote for all time, and to live forever.”

“Shakespeare!” shouted half a dozen voices, and they were right. Richard himself was the proud owner of a “vest-pocket edition” done in blue and gold.

He set the box aside with a bow and a smile of grateful appreciation for the one whom he guessed was the giver, and read on.

“‘Should the clergy wear gowns?’ is a solemn inquiry
Which has sometimes provoked a discussion quite
fiery.
We will leave it, however, for the Scribes and
Pharisees,
Who are busy in noting all dangerous heresies.
These gowns are untainted by any such questions,
And will never disturb a polemic’s digestion.

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You may wear them in peace; and if e'er a committee

Of the ancient divines of this orthodox city
Should bring in a charge that with evil intention
You were wearing a stole of some Popish invention,

You may face with composure their dread accusation,

And reply to each several classification :

“ POINT THE FIRST : the gown-fashions are very elastic,

And these are not those of an ecclesiastic.

For the stripes run around them at top and at mizzen,

And remind one less of a priest, than a prison!

“ POINT THE SECOND : they're made by an orthodox woman

Who could ne'er have intended a sin so inhuman.

“ POINT THE THIRD : you will never employ them in preaching,

Nor in any conspicuous manner of teaching,

Unless you were called in some sudden emergency,—

(The most rigorous rules must give way to an urgency).

“ POINT THE FOURTH : you should ask the inquiring committee

If they wore them themselves. If not — 'twere a pity!”

Missent

Effie was surreptitiously untying, while her brother read, the package that belonged to this effusion, and revealed at its close a couple of very long night-shirts made of the favorite striped outing cloth, which when they were handed to the Rev. Keith Merrivale provoked the most uproarious outbursts of laughter that had yet been heard. Some of them knew that certain members of the reverend gentleman's flock were being exercised at that hour on the subject of the clerical gown.

The rhyme that followed had also its distinctly personal flavor.

“ My dear Aunt Hannah : I enclose
A few backgrounds which I suppose
You will fill out in leisure way,
On many a peaceful winter day.
What is a tail without a cat?
What is an ear without a rat?
What is a rooster without fighting?
What is this then, without your writing?
On it please scribble, scratch, erase, —
With firelight shining on your face, —
At your Round Table, like King Arthur,
More real, and no less good. From ‘Martha.’”

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The package contained half a ream of blank paper suited to pencil work. In the midst of the bubble of fun that accompanied its presentation, Effie Dennison explained to the eager doctor, that Eunice and Richard both "wrote a little for print," and had once written a story together in which they figured before the public as "Hannah" and "Martha."

The next gift was a darning bag for Eunice well supplied with cottons and wools, and the verses accompanying were:

"Here's a place for your 'yarns'
Not spun with the pen,
For the 'runs' and the 'darns'
So much needed when
The 'climaxes' come
Which are known as 'The Holes,'
Ground out by the sand
'Twixt stockings and 'soles.'"

Occasionally there was a touch of dignity; as for instance with the next package.

"Three hundred and sixty-five days, —
Golden days!
Opportunity? privilege? praise?
Grateful praise;

Missent

Shall this be the story of the year?
Happy year!

“Only One, the future knows,
Fully knows ;
All its hopes, its aims, its woes ;
But — He knows.
Trust Him, dear, then the story
Waiting here,
Shall be shining with the glory
Of His cheer.”

Effie guessed it at once with quiet voice :
“That must be a diary,” and received it
for herself from the mother, whose heart
was full, just then, of the thought of what
the year’s story might be for her youngest
child. Young Robbie, the youngest of the
cousins, broke the spell of seriousness by
suddenly exclaiming :—

“I say, I think that last was real poetry !”
and Richard began the next reading in the
midst of a general shout. It was a pack-
age for the boy cousin, Frederick, and
made no attempt to disguise itself, but be-
gan boldly :—

“A pair of undressed gloves
To fit your undressed hands ;

Puzzled Over

From skin of beast that roves
In foreign lands.

“And now I may say, like Isaac,
When in these your hands are hid —
‘The voice is the voice of Frederick,
But the hands are the hands of a kid.’”

“These are from Richard,” said the
blushing Frederick, as he received the
handsome gloves, “I know his style.”

But Richard was reading again:—

“Solid and solemn and substantial —
(The evidence for this is circumstantial)
‘No room for mirth or trifling here,’
(Though ‘Jamie’s son’ (Jaimison) sounds like a
bit of cheer.)
Turn on the faucet (Fausset), quench the pleasant
word!
‘Brown’ is the color of the next one heard.
A solemn trio, come to dull your brains
And wrap your mind in fog, your thoughts in
chains.
I would do better by you were I able,
But these, though ‘common taters,’ ask to share
your table.”

“I claim them!” exclaimed the minister.
“If I mistake not, they are the very ‘com-

Missent

mon taters' for which my soul has been longing."

Not yet did some of the audience understand; but when three substantial commentaries bound in calf, and bearing in gilt letters the names of the authors, "Jaimison, Fausset, and Brown," were displayed, there was a general appreciation of the rhyme.

The younger cousins had fully their share of the good-natured hits in which the rhymes abounded, many significant glances being levelled at the boy Rossie while this one was being read:—

"Woe to us for the fate that doth betide us!
Will not some kind hand take us quick and hide us?"

One moment, perfume-scented, smooth and white,
The next, bedaubed with orange and thrust out of sight.

One moment, waved in graceful salutation—
The next, covered with paste, and ink, and indignation!

Left at street corners, stores, and shops,
Flourished for dusters or turned into mops!
Thrust into pockets with half-eaten dates,
Or figs or other sticky things one hates!

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Initialed, hemstitched, bordered, things of beauty —
White with foreboding, — yet we'll do our duty !”

“Poor handkerchiefs !” laughed Dr. Manning.

“And poor Rossie !” said Eunice. “It isn't fair, Rossie ; you've reformed, haven't you ? You haven't mopped up ink with your handkerchief in ever so long.”

But Mr. Dennison was already reading, and this time the quiet was only broken by Effie's murmured explanation to Dr. Manning and Miss Stafford that Mrs. Merri-vale's name was Belle.

“Tick, tock ! tick, tock !
This, my dear, is a Christmas clock.
Its wheels unseen within its case,
Its hands before its modest face,
Are types of things much better.
The *spring* is like that one of thine
Which doth the heart so oft incline
To loving deed or letter.
The bell — though sweet as it can be —
Is not so sweet one-half to me
As mine own Belle forever.

“Now, as the hours are born and die
This bell shall ring for joy their birth,

Missent

Or toll their farewell from the earth
As fast the moments fly.
So, while this ticks and tolls the time
In measure smoother than my rhyme
As on our way we go,
Just please accept this modest token
Of love much deeper than is spoken,
As you must surely know."

"Where's Robbie?" said Richard, as he finished the reading, "he ought to pronounce some of that 'real poetry.' Ah! listen to this:—

"If you've never had the grip before
You've got it *sure* to-day.
And not so very light a touch
That you will think it play.
Though wishing you no harm, my son,
Upon this Christmas day,
I hope with all my heart, my son,
It's really come to stay!
Think it a blessing in disguise
(Until unstrapped) I pray—
And never try to check it, please,
Wherever you may stray.
Put in it, then, the best you have
Nor think it overgrown.
And grasp this grip and hold it fast
With a grip that's all your own."

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“Oh, mother, mother!” he exclaimed almost in the same breath, “two puns, three, indeed, and *what* a grip!”

He held up to view a handsome leather gripsack of the latest pattern. Eunice broke in upon his delight by reminding him that there were ever so many more rhymes and gifts as good as his last, and that they would not get through until New Year’s, if he did not go faster. He revenged himself at once by passing over the next package to her, with a low bow and a tragic recitation of the rhyme:—

“She’s a wise and worthy woman
You may always safely trust her;
But she knows, as well as I do,
That she *cannot* keep her duster!”

It contained a dusting-bag filled with neatly hemmed dusters. Across the top of the bag was a row of tinkling bells, and embroidered on the front were the words often on Eunice’s lips:—

“WHERE IS MY DUSTER?”

V

Complimented

LATER in the evening, while most of the company were still busy with their packages and rhymes, Miss Stafford found herself sitting near Dr. Manning, and, remembering that she was in a sense responsible for him, decided that she would better try to cultivate his acquaintance.

"There has been a great deal of fun here to-night, has there not?" she said genially.

He turned toward her a beaming face, and spoke eagerly. "More fun to the square inch than I ever saw packed into an evening before. They have an original way of doing things. What a charming family it is! I suppose you are an old friend."

"Yes," she said gleefully, "a very old friend; I have known them intimately for three days! It is now nearly three days

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since I came here to board; and, the day before, I met Mrs. Dennison and her daughters for the first time in my life. Yet I assure you I feel as though I had known them for years in some previous state of existence."

"I understand," he said quickly. "I have something of the same feeling. It is because they are unlike others, so unconventionally thoughtful and cordial. No other family that I ever knew would have thought, for instance, of admitting a stranger like myself to their home frolic, and letting me share the fun exactly as though I belonged. I think it was simply a beautiful kindness."

"Then you are not an old acquaintance?"

"Indeed not! I have almost no acquaintance with any of the family. Two or three weeks ago I was introduced to the son who acts as host, and I met the ladies accidentally a few days ago. I did not suppose that they remembered my existence. Yet the other day I received a friendly card from the oldest daughter,

Missent

written as though I was really a friend, sending her mother's informal invitation to the Christmas dinner. I call that extraordinary."

"I do not wonder!" thought Miss Stafford. "It is much more extraordinary than you evidently realize."

The doctor continued his explanation. "I suppose Mrs. Dennison's sons have been away from home, among strangers, and it has made her thoughtful for other mothers' sons. I know one mother who will bless her when she hears of it. To come in contact with such people, Miss Stafford, is an education. If ever I have a home of my own, I shall know better how to use it because of this glimpse into a real home to-night."

His eyes were glistening as he spoke, and there was a suspicious quiver to his voice. Miss Stafford found her heart going out to him.

"Are you quite among strangers?" she asked sympathetically.

"Entirely. I know absolutely nobody

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save a few medical men. I expected to have a very dreary Christmas; special days are much harder than ordinary ones, you know. It isn't as though I had something to do to fill the time. I sit in my office day after day, waiting for the patient who never comes. There is a very slippery place just opposite my office door that I watch with the deepest interest, ready to dash out the moment somebody falls, and so get ahead of a dozen other doctors in the same row. But as yet no one has had the grace to fall. Of course I read and study; I'm not exactly an idler, but one cannot study all the time, when he has been at it for ten or a dozen years, and hopes that the day for action has arrived. I confess to touches of the blues. I am yet to have my first professional call, Miss Stafford, and I have been here since September."

"What an age!" she said, smiling. "You are not far from us; if I fall on that slippery place before spring, I shall send for you."

Missent

"Oh, thank you. You couldn't promise positively, could you? Just by way of encouragement. It is so awfully hard to wait."

Effie Dennison interrupted them to show her mouse.

"She is a very pretty girl," said Miss Stafford as Effie moved away.

Dr. Manning looked after her thoughtfully.

"Is she?" he asked, "I had not thought of it. She is winning and graceful, but I should not call her beautiful. Her sister, now, would make a model for an artist. *She* is beautiful. Look at her head; it is absolutely faultless as to shape and pose."

They both turned and looked at Eunice, who was already trying to bring order out of the confusion on the great table.

"She is good," said Miss Stafford, gravely; "as true and unselfish a girl as I ever met. And after an acquaintance of three days I ought to be able to judge!"

The sentence ended with a laugh, in which the doctor joined. Evidently he

Complimented

recognized in Miss Stafford a kindred spirit.

“And well he may,” said that lady nodding her head in recognition of the state of things, as she sat in the privacy of her own room late that evening. “I’ve done him a good—or an evil—deed with this day’s work; time will tell which. Evidently he admires Miss Eunice excessively; well, I do myself. I believe I will approve of the whole thing. But O dear! what if it should be a dreadful blunder! I don’t think I like playing at Providence. One realizes what a blessed thing it is to have a Pilot who understands all the shoals and rocks and treacherous places. If any ill should come to that dear Eunice through my interference, I should never forgive myself. After all, though, it was her own postal card, not mine. I wonder who ‘Mr. J. L. Manning’ is, to whom it was sent? Not this one, evidently. Eunice must have been a pretty girl of fifteen or sixteen then. She is pretty now; only I don’t think I should ever have selected her

Missent

as a model for an artist!" And then this maiden lady laughed, a good-humored, rippling little laugh that need not have hurt the feelings of either Eunice or Dr. Manning.

Below stairs they were still discussing the doctor in a way that ought to have caused his face to burn. Effie had exclaimed almost before the door had closed after him: "I want to know whether anybody ever saw anything like that! Didn't he act for all the world as though he had received a written invitation to spend the day with us? Thanking mother for the pleasure she had given him! I wanted to say, 'Why in the world do you consider it necessary to thank her? You gave yourself the pleasure.'"

The mother's voice had tried to interrupt. "Hush, daughter, hush! it sounds almost like a breach of hospitality to make such remarks about a departing guest."

Then Richard, — "Well, I believe in hospitality, and I don't begrudge Manning

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his good time; the poor fellow probably needs cheering up; but then, mother, you will admit that it was rather queer."

"It seems as though there must have been some misunderstanding," Eunice had said meditatively; "if we had invited anybody, I should have thought a mistake had been made and an invitation been put into his hands. He seemed so thoroughly at home, and made his adieus, as Effie says, in the most approved way."

Then the mother had interfered again. "I don't know that it was so very strange, children; he probably comes from a portion of the world where they do not set apart Christmas Day as sacred to the home, or to invited guests; and, feeling lonely, he came to make a friendly call; then, when Richard invited him so cordially to remain to dinner, he took him for an honest gentleman who meant exactly what he said, and stayed. I like him for it, and am glad he stayed."

"Oh, he is nice," said Effie; "I don't object to his having shared in the fun; he

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helped it on, in fact. How quick-witted he is! All the same, motherie, I think it funny; and I shouldn't wonder if down in the bottom of your dear, charitable heart you thought so too."

To all this Miss Stafford had listened in silence. She was helping Eunice and Richard gather and fold wrapping-paper, and wind up pieces of twine, carrying on, meantime, a mental argument.

Should she tell them what she knew? Why should she? It was over now, anyway, or else it had just begun! But, even if it had, what good to explain now? It would embarrass the Dennisons, and it would get to Dr. Manning in some way; things always did get to the people from whom they must be kept. Then he would feel dreadfully mortified. She would not do it. *She* was not to blame, in a sense. She had not planned this thing; and, if she was careless in leaving the card on her bureau, what was that, compared with Eunice's carelessness in shutting it away in a book? She would just keep her own coun-

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sel. Then she went upstairs, and thought it all over again, as has been seen, and laughed.

The Dennisons were making a great mystery of Dr. Manning's advent among them, but from his standpoint it was an extremely simple affair. He had been standing on his office steps one afternoon, looking always for that hoped-for "case," when the postman halted.

"I think this must be for you, sir," he had said, studying the address of a card. "It isn't quite your initials, and the number is turned about; but there is no other Manning in the row."

"Yes," said the doctor, reaching for the card and scrutinizing it carefully, "I suppose it is intended for me; the writer hasn't honored me with my title, but perhaps it is some one who thinks I haven't graduated yet."

"And as for the number," volunteered the postman, "nothing is more common than to mix that; they've got the right figures, you see; only they've transposed

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them. It is astonishing how careless people are with addresses; they think any letters of the alphabet will do for initials; and if the figures come within a hundred or two of the correct ones, why, the postman can find out what they mean."

"Hollo! if it isn't an invitation to a Christmas dinner!" The postman had moved on, and Dr. Manning was talking to himself. He read the magic words a second, even a third, time, his face growing brighter as he read. "I call that kind now!" he exclaimed, "just as friendly as it can be. They think I am a student, away from home, and lonesome; and they are in the habit of looking out for students, I suppose. Mr. Dennison has been very friendly whenever I have met him. I must say this is unique, no stiffness about it to make a fellow feel embarrassed. I didn't know there were any people who did patronizing things in so kind and friendly a way. Very well, they will find that I am exactly the sort of person who can meet them half-way, and be glad of

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the chance. I suppose the 'Eunice Denison' who signs the card is that merry-eyed school-girl who passes occasionally with her brother. As for the other one, I would give up all my Christmas dinners for a hundred years to get acquainted with *her.*"

What he thought when he found that "the other one" was named "Eunice," he kept to himself.

VI

At Work

BY the calendar it was April, but the weather had not discovered it. Effie Dennison, disconsolately watching the clouds, declared that there had been every kind of weather since eight o'clock that morning. The appearance of the street at eight o'clock that evening justified the statement. When Miss Stafford went out at three, the sun was shining brightly, and she had called back to Eunice in a confident tone that she really believed it had cleared off at last "for good." In less than ten minutes it was raining hard. Toward evening another unexpected change appeared; the rain had actually turned to sleet, and was apparently freezing as it fell.

"April, indeed!" said Miss Stafford, savagely, as she stepped from a street-car

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at the corner and raised her umbrella. "It might be January. Slippery, I declare! I thought we had done our last slipping for this year. Wouldn't it be a joke if I should fall and hurt myself on the fifth of April, after escaping all winter?"

But she was a sure-footed woman, and had really no thought of falling, as she made her swift way down Morton Place, toward "home." She delighted in the use of that word. At last, after her many years of unrest and wandering, she seemed to have found a home. Without hesitation, without intention, it might almost be said, she had adopted not Eunice only, but the entire Dennison family.

Nor had there been any difficulty in extending her adoption to Dr. Manning likewise. That sensible young man had made full use of his opportunities. Having been received into the innermost circle of hospitality at Christmas time, surely he had a right to be as friendly as he chose. Before the new year opened he had "run in to see

Missent

whether Christmas poetry had been too much for any of them"; and from that time on, the "running in" had been so frequent that before April every member of the Dennison family had come to regard him as a special and ever welcome friend.

Miss Stafford, looking on with shrewd eyes, was able to discover long before it had been made apparent to any other, that, while Dr. Manning might enjoy scientific and political talks with Richard Dennison, the young lawyer, and gay frolics with Effie, and delight in being "mothered" by Mrs. Dennison, for whom in return he was ever on the alert to perform kind and thoughtful offices, it was, after all, Miss Eunice who held the first place in his thoughts.

She was a good deal troubled, this small, middle-aged schemer, over it all. In the first place, lest Dr. Manning was losing his heart in a direction whence could come no return, and so perhaps spoiling his life; in which case assuredly she would be to blame; and in the second place, as the

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weeks went by, and she began to be settled in regard to this, whether a physician who had only a few scattering patients among the poor and uninfluential was the best that she could have planned for her beautiful Eunice. Would the mother think so, and the brother Richard, when they awakened from their dream of family hospitality to realize that selection had been made from out the family? She could not tell. They were unworldly to an astonishing degree; even the young lawyer seemed to have put many things ahead of money and position; but Eunice was their idol, and she was beautiful and sweet and pure beyond most women. Long ago Miss Stafford had decided that Dr. Manning was right, and that Eunice would have served as a perfect model of all womanly graces, fit for any artist in the world.

Nevertheless, since she was assuredly the providence, humanly speaking, who had brought them together, she occasionally worried over her work. Would Dr. Manning succeed? But then, if he did

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not, what matter? She could claim him outright as her own in such a case; and, so far as mere money was concerned, could she not make it right? Yes, Miss Stafford had reached such a stage of infatuation as that!

Ah, but she wanted for her Eunice a man who *could* succeed. Dr. Manning was good, and in earnest, and thoroughly in love with his profession; but this weary waiting was enough to put the strongest out of heart. Occasionally he confided to her that he was tempted to throw it all up, and go back to the farm and make hay with his father. Would she like such a fate for Eunice? No, assuredly she would not; if Dr. Manning had chosen the farm in the first place, and loved it, and given his energies and his skill to its best development, no one would have said Amen to such a course sooner than Miss Stafford; but to "go back" to it; to acknowledge defeat and take it up as a last resort—ah! that was another matter.

If only somebody would fall ill, or have

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an accident of some sort!—somebody who had not one of those trying creatures, the family physician, within beck and call! Such was apt to be the conclusion of Miss Stafford's mental arguments; after which she would laugh, and call herself an idiot, and remind herself that, if even a member of the Dennison family should fall ill, she would feel, as she was sure the others would, that they must send for Dr. Brainard immediately. Of what use to blame others, after that? The conclusion was apt to be that it wasn't any of her business, and she did wish she could let the whole matter alone. Why couldn't she trust in Providence? If Dr. Manning was to succeed in his profession, there were patients preparing for him somewhere. Couldn't they all afford to wait?

Yet there were times when she felt so sorry for Eunice that it seemed to her waiting was out of the question. She understood Eunice, she believed, almost better than any of them did. The girl was always sweet and bright in the family

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circle, self-poised, thoughtful of the comforts of others, unmindful of her own; ready to laugh with Effie, or read with and copy for Richard, or charm the pain from her mother when she had one of her weary headaches; yet Miss Stafford had had glimpses of her when she thought herself quite alone.

One of these views in particular lingered with her; she had caught it but a day or two before. It had been one of those hypocritical days, when April smiled and wooed one with her sweetest airs, and made believe that spring was coming, on swift, sure feet; and Eunice had pushed up the casement and dropped herself in the "cosy corner" in the south window, and was watching the buds getting ready to burst. Her door had been ajar, and Miss Stafford, pausing in the intention of speaking to her, had lingered for a moment, thinking of Dr. Manning and his opinion about a "model for an artist," and had wished that the artist were there that moment, and then had gone softly away. Something in the

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position of the maiden, in the very poise of her head and the listless dropping of her hands in her lap, as well as something in the sweet, strong eyes, had gone to the maiden lady's heart. Eunice was sad. She was thinking about the future, hers, theirs.

Richard was one day to be married; he would bring home a lovely wife, one that was dear to them all; her mother had loved Marian as a daughter for years. She, Eunice, would not be needed in the home after that. Richard's wife was to take her place at the head of the house; mother wished it to be so; she herself wished it, because it was right; it was due to Richard's wife. But — Miss Stafford, watching her, knew that she did not finish any of her sentences.

She herself did not love that Marian as dearly as the rest of them. True, she had never seen her, but it stood to reason that, when she took charge of the house, they would not be likely longer to take boarders, and she, Miss Stafford, would have to march. There were times when she felt

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herself being glum over the fact that a flattering opening had come to Richard, making all these plans possible. Why should not flattering openings come to other young men?

Was Eunice indulging in any such thoughts? No, indeed! Eunice was never glum, never jealous of others: she was heartily glad for Richard and proud of him; yet she was undeniably sad as she sat there alone, and let her eyes grow soft and humid, and her gaze pass far beyond those fat, brown buds that thought that spring had come.

“Silly buds!” said Miss Stafford, grimly, as she thought of the picture by that open casement, while the sleet was driving in her face. “I wonder what they think of themselves now!” She did not like Eunice to be sad, no matter how beautiful a picture she would have made in that attitude.

Miss Stafford, when she reached her own door, found another picture. She stopped on the steps, latch-key in hand, to gaze at it. Eunice at the piano had whirled

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herself to one side, and, while she looked with apparent care at the sheet of music in her hand, was yet undeniably conscious of another person in the room. Dr. Manning stood over by the mantel, looking down upon her. His face was too much in shadow to be distinctly seen by the watcher; yet there was something in the bright yet tender light on Eunice's face that made her sure the conversation they had just been having had not to do with that piece of music.

"If the curtains were drawn," murmured Miss Stafford, "he would be beside her instead of standing over by the mantel. How much he would like to draw them! I wonder what he has said to bring that look to Eunice's face?"

Memory flitted back with her over the intervening years, and brought to view another picture. It was later in the season than this; in fact, the apple trees were in blossom. He had stood fairly embowered with them, and had gently shaken the tree once or twice, bringing thus a snow

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of blossoms about her head. They, too, had been mindful that the "shades were up," or at least that they were in the garden, and that the house was just back of her, and that her Aunt Lydia's eyes were very sharp.

She was sewing, mending a sack for Aunt Lydia, she remembered ; she knew the exact pattern of the little flower that was stamped all over the cloth. Her face had not been sunny, like Eunice's, albeit there was that undertone of sadness distinctly visible in Eunice's eyes that had reminded her of it, but she had been undeniably sad, for he was to leave her that very evening, and be gone almost a year. It was their first parting since they had been promised to each other. But then, when he came back, it would be to claim her as his bride, and after that there would be no more partings.

Poor Miss Stafford! No wonder the picture was vivid. He had gone away that evening, and had never come back any more. That visit under the apple

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blossoms had been their last. Three weeks before the date of his promised coming to claim her as his bride, she had responded to an imperative telegram, and had taken a hurried, frightened journey, only to see him lying still, with apple blossoms strewn about his coffin.

Yes, it was more than twenty years ago ; but she saw it all plainly, and sighed, and said within herself : " I cannot have my sweet Eunice's eyes grow sad. And I cannot have him go elsewhere in search of practice. Why isn't this city as good as any other ? Still, I don't know how he is to bear life much longer. What a queer world it is, when the poor fellow is building all his hopes of a bright future on the sorrows and miseries of others ! You precious old idiot, if you stand here much longer in this dampness, you will be able to furnish the doctor with a patient !

Then she turned toward the door with resolute hand.

At that moment came swift footsteps down the street, then a sudden thud, ac-

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accompanied by a groan, as of pain; somebody had fallen in that treacherous sleet. It took but a second for men to gather from that mysterious quarter whence they come so soon as there is the slightest excitement. Before Miss Stafford with quick step could reach the spot, half a dozen persons were bending over the fallen one.

“He has hit his head,” she heard one man say, “and is unconscious; or perhaps he has only fainted from the pain. Some one ought to run for a doctor. Where can we carry him?”

Then Miss Stafford’s wits came to her. “There is a doctor right in there,” she said nodding toward the brightly lighted parlor where the curtains were not drawn. “Carry him over there; I will let you in.”

Then Eunice at the piano heard a confusion of voices in the hall, and looked with startled, wondering eyes at Dr. Manning, who responded to the look by striding to the door and throwing it open.

“Here’s the doctor,” said Miss Stafford.

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“Shall we carry him into the parlor, or ought he to be taken upstairs?”

It pleased Miss Stafford, when she had leisure to think it all over, to remember how promptly the young lover transformed himself into the alert professional man. A single instant sufficed for taking in the situation; then he came forward and took command. In less than fifteen minutes from the time when Miss Stafford applied her latch-key it was known that the victim to a late and ill-behaved spring was a middle-aged man of powerful physique; that he had sprained not only his ankle, but his shoulder, and had given his head a bump sufficiently severe to cause faintness; and that he would probably have to spend some time in the very pleasant room to which he had been promptly carried.

Dr. Manning, who had asked no more questions than were necessary, and had issued his orders quite as if he owned the house and its occupants, waited until all that could be done for the immediate relief of his patient had been accom-

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plished : then he said with a businesslike air, "Now, sir, what physician can I call for you?"

The large man, with his foot in a tub of hot water, and a blanket wrung out of hot water wrapped about his shoulder, gave his questioner a quick, keen glance from under heavy eyebrows, and said : "Am I in perishing need of another physician? What do you call yourself? I imagined that you belonged to the craft."

"I'm a doctor, certainly," said Dr. Manning, quietly, "and in the emergency I have done for you the best I could; but I thought it quite possible, if you are a resident here, that you had a family physician whom you would like to have called."

"Young man, I haven't had occasion to consult a physician for years. I fancy I don't look even now like one who is in a decline! There are half a dozen doctors that I suppose I might call, but I don't seem to feel anxious to see them. You act to me like a man who knows what he

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is about. I guess if you say so we will let well enough alone. What is the prospect for me?"

"Well, sir, several weeks of as absolute quiet as you can be compelled to endure. That is the best outlook I can give you."

The injured man laughed. "Compelled to endure!" he repeated. "You think I'll fight for freedom, do you? Well you are about right; I'm not fond of enforced quiet. However, when a thing has to be done, I've discovered that it nearly always can be. Have you lived long enough in the world to learn that lesson? What is the first thing? I live six miles from here, on Crescent Avenue. Can I get home to-night?"

"No, sir, nor to-morrow, nor for several to-morrows. That is, you could, of course; but it would be to your injury. So long as I am retained as your physician, I shall not allow a removal until I consider it safe."

"You won't! Suppose the people who

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live in this house will not allow me stay?"

"They will," said Dr. Manning, with a confident smile. Then he turned and motioned Mrs. Dennison forward.

VII

Discoveries

BEFORE Mr. David Durand was through with sprains, he was wiser than he had been on that April night. He had smiled significantly when Dr. Manning talked to him about several weeks of quiet, and had told himself that he would surprise his young friend by taking a walk in a day or two. Instead, it was Mr. Durand who was surprised. The weeks were actually lengthening into months, and he was still a prisoner.

Not that he might not have been, long before this, safely conveyed to his home. That matter was carefully canvassed one evening after he had been for nearly two weeks an inmate of Mrs. Dennison's home. Mr. Durand spoke of it himself with utmost frankness.

"The doctor tells me," he began one

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evening, just after Dr. Manning had gone downstairs, and Mrs. Dennison was waiting to see what further, if anything, she could do for his patient's comfort— "The doctor tells me that there is no reason why I should not hobble downstairs in a few days, and be driven to my home. There are, however, obstacles in the way. The most serious one is that I don't want to go.

"You see, it is just this way with me. My home is a good deal of a bore. There are rooms enough and plenty of furniture, but perhaps you are aware that it takes more than these things to constitute a home. I got so tired of it that I was only too happy to agree to my housekeeper's petition to make a three months' visit to her daughter; I started off the other servants the next day, and decided to take my meals at a hotel. I believe I had been living after that fashion for about four days when I landed at full length on your pavement, and I don't mind telling you that I was heartily tired of the whole

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thing. I discovered that a housekeeper and some well-behaved domestics are a good deal of company. My house was so lonesome during those four nights that I declare to you I sat up half the night to keep myself company! Now I have learned from Miss Stafford that you do sometimes befriend homeless people, and I want to know if you cannot open your heart and let me stay where I am until I get well. Think what an undertaking it would be just now to get a man of my size safely down your stairs! It took a dozen men to carry me up, didn't it? I was rather faint at the time, but it seems to me there were at least a dozen about me. And I noticed, faint as I was, that none of them knew anything, except my young doctor. That is another point. I have taken an uncommon fancy to the young fellow, and should like to have his attendance; but it wouldn't be reasonable to expect a busy doctor to desert his patients in this quarter and come five or six miles every day to see me."

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There was a twinkle in the gentleman's genial eyes as he said this, and Mrs. Dennison suspected that he had already learned that Dr. Manning's patients were few. However, if Mrs. Dennison needed an argument to help her decide in the gentleman's favor, this was a potent one. She was very willing to do what she could to hold him as a patient for Dr. Manning.

Without more ado the matter was settled. Mr. Durand asked no question as to terms; but, having learned from Miss Stafford what she was paying for her two rooms and board, he quietly added considerable to that amount at the end of another week, and placed it in Mrs. Dennison's hands. When she demurred, he assured her that of course a helpless man who not only had his meals served in his room, but almost had to have them fed to him, ought to pay more than people who had such convenient articles as feet and hands to depend upon.

When she tried to argue the case with him, he waved her aside with an emphatic

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"Madam, if you had ever called a hotel *home*, you would realize what you are doing for me. Since I am sure you haven't, you must allow me to be the judge."

So it came to pass that the Dennisons had another boarder.

Mr. Durand speedily settled himself as if into a niche that had been waiting for him, and showed the keenest interest in that part of the family life of which he could get glimpses; and more and more, as the days passed, they opened their circle and let him in. Of course it began by their being sorry for him, but it continued because they enjoyed him.

One day Effie came in from school with eyes larger than usual.

"Mother," she began, "do you know who our Mr. Durand is? Why, he is president of the Granite Bank, on Court Street, you know; and he lives in one of those grand brownstone houses on Crescent Avenue, and they say he is very rich indeed!"

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"Very well, dear," said Mrs. Dennison, smiling at the young girl's eager tone. "I am glad to hear it, I am sure, if he makes good use of his money. The chief thing that interests us is that he has some serious bruises, and that we have a chance to make him comfortable. Do you know, dear, I discover from your tone that you have been in company with some one who attaches very great importance to this matter of wealth?"

Effie laughed and blushed. "She does think a good deal of wealthy people; that is a fact," she said. "It was Lena Westervelt. Mommie dear, you are a wizard! If poor Lena had such a mother as you, she would be a better girl than I am, I presume; at least, she is a perfect echo of her mother, and I am not of mine. But I do like money, mommie, all of myself, without copying anybody. If I had a few hundred thousand, I would establish Dr. Manning in an elegant house of his own with a handsome office. Then he would get a big practice right away. People

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always patronize those who do not appear to need any patronage."

The importance of this bit of worldly wisdom lies in the fact that Miss Stafford overheard it, she being about to enter the room just as Effie spoke the words. It took root at once in her mind, because it found soil exactly fitted to its growth; Miss Stafford had been doing some earnest thinking along that very line. She nodded her head sagely at the mother, and said: "That daughter of yours carries a sagacious head on her young shoulders, Mother Dennison. She will make her way in the world." Then she went back to her room to think how far Effie's wisdom could be made practical.

Meantime, she was making herself useful in this new home of hers as a nurse and general attendant upon the invalid. This state of things came about most naturally. Mrs. Dennison had, of course, her household and family cares; and Eunice was her recognized attendant and helper. Why should not Miss Stafford,

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who was, much more than she cared to be, a woman of leisure, take it upon herself to see whether Mr. Durand had his books and papers within reach, or wanted a letter written at his dictation, his right arm being the disabled one?

In process of time this grew to be a very steady employment; for it came to pass that Mr. Durand, being a man connected with large business interests, had many letters that must needs be written. He proposed, it is true, to engage a secretary, but admitted that it was a bore to him to think of it; these professional letter-writers never understood their business. Moreover, he did not exactly like making so free with Mrs. Dennison's house, having a young man dodging in and out at all hours.

Miss Stafford on her part frankly confessed that she had more time than she knew what to do with, and declared that, although she did not pretend to understand business, if he could consent to be bored with her, she would just as soon write his letters as not.

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By degrees she discovered that, while his eyes were not in the least affected, yet he considered it a bore to be always reading to himself, or at least a privilege to be read to ; and, as she had served a long apprenticeship at reading aloud to both father and mother, and was one of those rare persons, a natural reader, it was not surprising that in process of time it grew to be a part of the day's programme to spend an hour, or two hours, sometimes, indeed, three hours, of the day in Mr. Durand's room, reading to him from the daily papers and current magazines ; gradually, as she grew better acquainted with his tastes, from books of her own selection.

Just here, perhaps, is as good a place as any in which to chronicle one of Miss Stafford's anxieties. For days together she studied the question whether she should offer to read to their prisoner from the Bible.

The little woman was herself a sincere and earnest Christian. She rejoiced be-

Missent

yond measure over the fact that the lines had at last fallen to her in a Christian home. Morning and evening the son Richard, with the family gathered about him, read a few verses from the Bible and led in a heartfelt prayer for guidance and safekeeping. These daily gatherings were like fresh springs of comfort to Miss Stafford's thirsty soul; she had so long been tossed about the world from hotel to boarding-house that to have dropped by what the world would call an accident, but what she hugged to her heart as a blessed providence, into the very centre of this sweet Christian home, was to her a daily cause for thanksgiving. She looked forward, only her own heart knew how sorrowfully, to the time, steadily approaching, when she must go out from it and find a new resting-place.

But the good little lady, though an earnest Christian, was a very timid one. It took much thinking and an enormous draft upon her reserve courage to make up her mind to speak a word of invitation

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upon this subject to any other human being.

Not that she had not often done so. As a Sabbath-school teacher she had been faithful and successful; she counted among her friends many a young girl who because of her influence had gone out into the world a humble, consistent Christian. But to Miss Stafford it seemed very different to speak of these matters to her class in Sabbath school, or even to individual members of that class, from what it did to broach the subject of her own accord in common conversation.

It was not that she shrunk from religious conversation. On the contrary, with those who were known to be in sympathy with her she delighted to exchange thought on such themes. Mrs. Dennison and she held long talks together, the central delight of each being drawn from their oneness of feeling in these matters. It was so with Eunice and herself, and even Effie spoke to her almost as frankly as she did to her mother. But to approach one on a

Missent

level with one's self as regarded age and social position, not knowing whether he was a believer or a scoffer, and to try to speak about this matter of everyday religion, was to Miss Stafford the trial of trials. She often told herself with a sigh that she could have been a missionary to the Hottentots, and could even fancy herself liking the work, if her duty had lain in that direction ; but to try to become one to a banker was quite another thing.

Yet here was manifestly an opportunity, a man stranded on their very shores. As he was held of necessity from all worldly influences that might have been pulling him downward all these years, and brought into daily contact with those who professed to believe that Christianity was the first interest in life, what could excuse them from trying to influence him ?

Sometimes she made an effort to shirk her own share in this effort by remembering that it was preëminently a Christian household. Mr. Richard had a way of making everybody with whom he came in

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contact feel that religion was the pivot upon which all his actions turned; poor Miss Stafford thought that she would give all her fortune if she could buy with it such an atmosphere as this to carry about with her. But Mr. Richard was a busy man; he went each morning with a kindly greeting to the guest whose room was across the hall from his, and looked in upon him at night with a few cheery words; but his visits were of necessity brief. It was the same with Mrs. Dennison; she saw the invalid daily, but was compelled to give the visit chiefly to arrangements for his comfort or convenience.

Turn it which way she would, Miss Stafford felt compelled to own to herself that it was she who had the opportunity. Every day, on one pretext or another, she gave Mr. Durand more and more of her time; yet not once had she even dared, with all her reading, to propose to read to him a few verses from the Bible, or to bring with her a distinctively religious

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book. He might not like it; and, as he was in a sense shut up to her ministrations, she shrank from almost forcing upon a gentleman that which might be distasteful. This was her line of argument; but she was too honest not to tell herself at times that it was a very flimsy argument indeed, and would not be worth the time that she took to make it, were she brought before any reasonable jury and questioned as to her beliefs and her opportunities.

There were times when she thought that she might have more courage if she were Mr. Durand's Sunday attendant. But on Sundays Mr. Richard was more at liberty, and gave much of his time to their guest; and, what with her church and her Sabbath-school class, and the missionary prayer meeting, Sunday was her busy day.

Therefore it was that Miss Stafford reached the third week of her daily readings without having even so much as hinted to her new friend that she believed in other interests than those which are of the earth.

Discoveries

One evening, after having written half a dozen business letters for him, and read the items that he called for in the evening paper, she handed him a glass of water and was about to say good night. He laid his well hand on her arm with a detaining movement, and there was the half-whimsical look in his eyes which she was learning to know, as he said: "Are you a heathen, Miss Stafford, or am I the heathen? Which is it?"

The little woman flushed under his gaze, as she answered: "Neither of us, I hope. What do you mean?"

"Why, here have I been subject to your tender mercies for—how many days?—and you have read to me the accumulated wisdom of the ages, always excepting one book. Am I right in guessing that you read it to yourself? Tell me why you are so sure that I wouldn't like a chapter of it now and then?"

"It has been very silly in me to be afraid to ask you if you would like it," Miss Stafford said honestly, her face very

Missent

red. "I am ashamed of myself, and have been this good while. Shall I read a few verses now?"

"If you will. It is a long time since any one has read the Bible to me. My mother used to do it when I was a lad."

Miss Stafford turned to the little table such as was to be found in every room in Mrs. Dennison's house, with a Bible in good print on it, and read at random one of the Psalms in a somewhat shaky voice. This was different from any of the many readings she had tried to plan. When her voice ceased, there came another question more startling than the last.

"Do you ever pray for people, Miss Stafford? And do you mind praying a few words for me?"

There was absolute silence in the room for a moment; then came the timid woman's voice.

"I do pray for people, Mr. Durand, but I never prayed before anybody in my life. If I knew how to do it—but Mr. Richard

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would be very glad indeed to come, Mr. Durand. May I call him?"

Mr. Durand was smiling. Was there still that quizzical expression in his gray eyes?

"Never mind Mr. Richard," he said. "He has been very kind; but for him I might have imagined it to be a heathen household; but I do not want him now. I may pray for you, may I not?"

Without more words he bowed his head, and there followed a wonderfully simple prayer, undoubtedly the words of one accustomed to pray. Like most persons who are alone in the world, Miss Stafford had rarely, of late years, heard herself prayed for; and it brought the tears, albeit she was a woman not given to tears.

VIII

A Hint of the Truth

THERE had been no opportunity for words. At the close of the prayer Mr. Richard Dennison had come to help his guest to bed, and Miss Stafford had said good night, and gone away hurriedly.

But the next day at the close of her duties as secretary she lingered to say:—

“Mr. Durand, I want to tell you a little story that I read when I was a girl. It was about some men on board a sailing vessel who had lost their bearings. Their supply of water failed, and they were for days all but dying of thirst. At last they sighted a vessel and with great difficulty made known their distress. ‘We are dying for want of water!’ And the captain shouted through his trumpet: ‘Dip it up! It is all around you! You are in the Amazon!’ They thought, you see, that they were on

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the ocean, where there was no water to drink. Last night that story came back to me forcefully."

"So you have been thirsty all this time!" he said, smiling. "I don't wonder; I have been myself. That is the way with the Lord's foolish sheep; they go blundering and stumbling through the world, lonesome half the time, when they might have companionship. I am more to blame than you are, however; for I guessed some time ago that you were one of the sheep, and that you kept pretty close to the Shepherd; the only trouble was, you were determined to have me a goat."

After that their acquaintance ripened suddenly into friendship. It was wonderful what a difference it made to Miss Stafford to discover that here was a kindred spirit in regard to a subject that was to her the most important one in life. The character of their reading changed at once. Miss Stafford had her favorite authors, and behold, some of them were Mr. Durand's. She had been holding them back for fear

Missent

of annoying him, and he had hesitated to call for them for fear of boring her! The daily readings increased in length, and the daily newspapers were given less attention than before. The evening Bible-reading and prayer together grew to be an established custom.

The day came when Mr. Durand said with a sigh: "When I get well enough to go back to my lonesome house, I shall be lonelier than ever. You do not know what it is, Miss Stafford, to have tumbled into a home, and been surrounded by all its comforts and delights for a few weeks, and feel that you must walk out again and belong no more."

Did she not? Every week brought the day nearer when she knew that she must walk out of this home and seek to take root once more among strangers. Would she do it? Every week convinced Miss Stafford that there was another and better way, and that she would do that.

Meantime, outside that pleasant room where Miss Stafford read and wrote for

A Hint of the Truth

Mr. Durand, the world was not standing still. Mr. Richard Dennison's wedding-day was set; and, though it was still quite in the future, it was something to have the very day settled. Evidently Mr. Richard considered this a long, bright step in advance. Miss Stafford was relieved to learn that the day was to be Christmas; she had feared that it would be some weeks earlier.

There were unique features connected with the event; this unconventional family evidently meant to be unconventional to the last. The girl, Marian, Richard's choice, had no home, and no near relatives to claim her because of love. She was a teacher in a distant college, and had accepted her position for another year, before the fortunate opening for Richard had made it seem feasible to be married earlier than they had first planned. But the college authorities had been lenient and sympathetic, and agreed to fill her place for the half-year. And, because the place which had been nearest home

Missent

to Marian for a dozen years had been the Dennison homestead, she was coming there to be married. She could not reach them until the day before Christmas, and so by common consent it had been decided that Christmas Day itself should be the wedding-day. Mr. Richard could not spare a long holiday from business; so Miss Stafford knew that by New Year's Day she must have a new home waiting for her.

"I wish we had room to keep you with us," one and another member of the Dennison family had said to her with lingering regret in their voices. She knew that it was honest regret, and that, but for the fact that her own two rooms were just the ones for Richard and his bride, every one of them would have urged her stay. It made her heart warm to feel sure of this, and at the same time it made deeper the sense of desolation at leaving them.

Neither was Dr. Manning's world standing still. Life was certainly growing brighter to him. It was not alone the

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very generous check that Mr. Durand pressed upon him when the day arrived when he could not in conscience press upon his physician the need for further professional attendance; it was the fact that at last people whose patronage meant something were beginning to find him out.

He understood very well that he was indebted to Mr. Durand for this state of things. That gentleman, some time before he was released from his room, found opportunity to further the interests of the young doctor. He had many business callers as well as many simply friendly calls from business men. It seemed to be natural for him to say: "Let me introduce my good friend, Dr. Manning, whose professional skill has brought me safely through my numerous bruises. I was fortunate to fall into such good hands." Or he would break off in the midst of a business talk to say: "By the way, Mr. Sherman, how is your son getting on? I tell you what it is, Sherman; you ought to call my physician, Dr. Manning, to see

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him. That young man is a medical genius, I believe. His very manner is inspiring; and for a young fellow nervously broken down like your boy, I think he would be a real providence."

Not a day passed but Dr. Manning had occasion to realize what a power there was in Mr. Durand's commendations. Even Mr. Sherman, the merchant prince whose family physician old Dr. Bowman Steele had been for half a century, heeded the hint, and one day sent for Dr. Manning to give an opinion of that nervous wreck, his son.

It was well for Dr. Manning that he had not only a thorough preparation, but a genuine enthusiasm for his profession; his success with young Wilbur Sherman was so great that to his own utter astonishment he found himself regularly engaged as the attending physician, expected to call at least once a day.

"You are in luck, my friend," said a physician who lived on Kirkland Row, and who had by dint of several years of effort

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worked up a small practice. "To be seen going out of the Sherman mansion every day is enough to make a doctor's fortune. Moreover, I know something almost better than that; I heard Mr. David Durand recommending you to the president of the Third National Bank this morning. He has an invalid daughter, and what Mr. Durand says on almost any subject is apt to carry weight. How does he happen to know you?"

"We have mutual friends," said Dr. Manning; and he repeated portions of this conversation at Mrs. Dennison's dinner-table, adding: "I tell you what, Miss Stafford, that bit of work you did for me on that sleety April evening was a stroke of genius. Don't you remember that on our first acquaintance you promised to tumble down for me if you could manage it? Something of that sort, anyhow. You did even better for me than that; because, you see, Mr. Durand is so much larger than there was a great deal more of him to tumble. It looks to me as though I had

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you to thank for every bit of my good fortune. Professional good fortune, I mean."

Was there a sudden glance at Eunice Dennison as he qualified the statement? Miss Stafford knew that there was, and with difficulty suppressed a laugh. The young man did not know that he was in the least indebted to her for what he considered the great good fortune of his life.

One bit of the mystery connected with the plot which the good lady had unwittingly woven had been made plain to her. They were turning over old photographs one evening, Dr. Manning and Eunice, Miss Stafford looking on and listening occasionally as bright bits of bright talk reached her. There had been a discussion concerning certain resemblances between two ladies of their acquaintance, and they were going through the photographs to confirm each his view.

"Hold on!" said Dr. Manning; "here is a person I used to know. How do you happen to have his photograph in your collection?"

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“Whose? Oh, that; why that is Stephen Manning. Why, he has the same name as yourself; hasn't he? I never thought of it. I haven't thought of him in years. I wonder what has become of him. Did you say you knew him? Why, perhaps he is a relative!”

“Second cousin,” said Dr. Manning, gravely. “You called him Stephen, did you? ‘John S.,’ he was known in the family connection, to distinguish him from other Johns and Stephens. Did you know him well?”

“Yes; that is, we supposed we did; as school girls and boys know each other. He was a friend of my brother Edward; and mother felt sorry for him, of course, as she does for every one who is away from home, and made it as pleasant for him as she could. Edward used to bring him to dinner frequently, and after Edward went away to college we continued to invite him quite often.

“I remember the last invitation I ever wrote him. Mother wanted him to come

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to a Christmas dinner. We had forgotten to say anything to him about it when he was in, and mother knew he would be so lonely she wanted me to send him a note asking him to come; and I wrote it on a postal card. I was only a schoolgirl, you see, and an ignorant one at that; but my brother Richard saw it lying on the table, and teased me so unmercifully for writing an invitation to dinner on a postal card that I didn't send it. I was at the sensitive age, and Richard used to be a dreadful tease. Poor Stephen did not get his invitation. We sent around to his room on Christmas morning, but he could not be found. He left town very suddenly, and we never saw him again. What became of him? How strange that you are his cousin!"

That or something else evidently struck Dr. Manning as strange. He was regarding Eunice with a curious, puzzled look, so intent that he did not even hear her question. Miss Stafford's face, meantime, was ablaze. How well she could read Dr.

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Manning's thoughts! He might almost have said: "So you did not send my cousin the invitation because it was on a postal card; and yet only last Christmas you sent *my* invitation on a card! What does all this mean?"

Eunice repeated her question.

"What became of John?" he asked, recalling himself to the present with an effort. "That's a sad story. He went to the bad; became dissipated, and broke his mother's heart; and finally disappeared, no one knows where."

Eunice's face was shadowed.

"I am so sorry to hear that!" she said. "He was such a merry, genial boy. I knew he was gay; and my mother used to be glad that Edward had such an influence over him; but we never imagined anything wrong. I wonder if his sudden going away from here was connected with his troubles? I remember we thought it strange that he should go without saying anything to us. Doesn't such a story as that increase one's sense of responsibility in life?"

Missent

Suppose I had sent my postal card to him that night instead of being laughed out of it like a silly girl, as I was, would his life-story possibly have been different?"

"Suppose you had?" said Miss Stafford to herself. "In that case, where should I have been to-night, and Dr. Manning, and, for that matter, Mr. Durand? What an inextricable and hopeless mix life would be if we had to manage it! How do the people who do not believe in an overruling Providence contrive to live at all? Dear me? How surely that prying physician will return to his subject and give it no peace until he unravels the mystery of that postal card! Well, puzzle away. What do I care? I defy even his talent for guessing conundrums to mix me up in it; unless, indeed, I choose to be mixed. When everything is settled, perhaps I shall tell the second chapter myself. But I am sorry that poor young cousin is connected with it in such a sad way. There's another reason why one should never attempt to play at Providence."

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The above scene had occurred some weeks after Mr. Durand had felt compelled by his conscience to admit that he was well enough to go back to his lonely home on Crescent Avenue. His housekeeper had finished her visit, and had returned; and there was not even this excuse for delay.

“In short,” he said one evening when, having been absent three days, he returned to the Dennisons’ on a visit, and was easily persuaded to remain to dinner, “my hotel is in running order again, and I ought to be contented with it; but I’m not. It is nothing but a hotel,” he added, answering the look in Miss Stafford’s eyes. “I have suspected it for several years, although from force of habit I called it home; but since I tumbled into a home and took lessons, I know better. I don’t believe in hotels, nor boarding-houses. If I were a young man and had life to begin over again, I would have a home if it was made of but two rooms each eight feet square. Would not you, Miss Stafford?”

Missent

“Yes,” she said emphatically. “I believe in homes.”

These few words confirmed her in the resolution which she had reached some time before. She told herself that she would immediately set about carrying it into effect. But she did not: unforeseen circumstances prevented. Foremost among these was the fact that Mrs. Dennison fell ill. Not seriously, but yet ill enough to serve as an excuse for Dr. Manning to call several times each day; and at last his conscience took up its cross and made known to them that they ought to take his patient to the country.

Consultations followed which resulted in the migration of the entire family to a quiet cottage by the sea, where Miss Stafford had been before.

The other notable event of the summer was that business matters called Mr. Durand abroad, and that he was much missed by the entire Dennison household.

It was on an October afternoon, the first one after the return of the family to their

A Hint of the Truth

city home, that Miss Stafford turned promptly from a trunk that she was unpacking in response to the following message: "Miss Stafford, Mr. Durand is here, and Mrs. Dennison says will you kindly go down to him in the back parlor; she and Miss Eunice are both at some work that they cannot leave just yet."

"Yes," said Miss Stafford, "I'll go at once. Tell them they need not hurry; I want to consult Mr. Durand about some business matters."

IX

A Home in View

“ I HAVE made up my mind to set up a home of my own.”

Such was the surprising sentence that fell on Mr. Durand's ears, when the first greetings were over.

“ The truth is, I have had it in mind for some time ; but I have only lately decided that I am in haste about it. I wonder how good your eyes are. Have you seen what has been going on in this house ? ”

“ I have seen some things,” he said meekly.

“ Very well ; then perhaps you know that our Eunice and the doctor were made for each other. They have been engaged for some months, but the way to getting settled hasn't been clear. I have had a dozen plans for furthering their interests, but nothing seemed entirely satisfactory, or at

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least easy of accomplishment, until this last one came to me. They don't like the idea of boarding, or I don't like it for them. Eunice has never been accustomed to it; she has always had a home and a lovely one. Still, I think they are about ready to agree that to board even away down on Seventh Street, *together*, is preferable to a palace apart; so in the spring they propose to make a start,—not on Seventh Street, you understand, but in a little more desirable quarter. Now when folks are ready for a thing, what is the use of waiting? Do you know anything about the other proposed changes in this family?"

Mr. Durand bowed. "Oh, yes," he said briskly. "Mr. Richard has honored me with his confidence. More than that, I have met the lady, and am prepared to witness that she is a charming young woman."

"I hope she is!" said Miss Stafford a trifle grimly. "I know it takes all the grace I have to like her a little. She has

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robbed me of the first home I have had in a good many years. Of course they cannot be expected to make room for me after Mrs. Richard comes. Well, that helped me to decide. I'm going to buy a house and furnish it with a view to their tastes as well as my own; and, when everything is ready, I am going to ask Eunice and the doctor to step in and run it, and let me board with them. It won't be quite so pleasant as to be by themselves; but I think I can manage it so that they won't mind, and anyway it will be better than boarding in some stuffy place. I could think of a better arrangement for them; I'd like to give them the house out and out, but the doctor's insufferable pride would step in and spoil that. You see he doesn't know that I am responsible for the whole thing."

"What thing?" asked Mr. Durand, mystified at last.

"You don't know, either, do you? I've a mind to tell you a secret."

She glanced toward the front parlor as she spoke, and drew the sliding doors be-

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tween the back parlor and the music-room, although she was sure that none of the family were downstairs; then, taking a seat a little nearer her guest, she began in low tones to give him the history of the belated postal card and the beginning of her acquaintance with the Dennison family.

Mr. Durand listened, and nodded his head appreciatively, and laughed over the Christmas scene, and was as amused and as sympathetic as it was possible to be.

“And you came to my rescue on the night of the tumble, merely to secure a patient for him!” he said. “Not an atom of interest in the poor victim! Well, never mind; a fellow who thereby tumbled into such a home and such friendships as I did can afford to be forgiving. And so, having got them into this scrape, you feel bound to see it through, eh? You have a royal way of doing it! It isn’t necessary, I’m bound to remind you. Dr. Manning is sure to make his way in the world; in fact, he is doing it now. Do you know that young Sherman is getting well? I

Missent

met him on the street the other day, a sight I never expected to see again. And the Austins sent for your protégé to-day, to attend Miss Caroline. What more does an ambitious young physician want? However, it will undoubtedly give them a lift, and I have had a thought somewhat similar in mind, myself. I want you to remember that I have some share in this matter. I owe the doctor several debts of gratitude; and, as for the Dennison family, you know as well as I do that there are not many families who would have done for me as they did."

Miss Stafford ignored all this personal reference, and went on with her plans.

"You see, Mr. Durand, what I intend, eventually, is to give them the house outright as a wedding present. I don't intend to force myself upon them for any length of time, of course. But I know that just at first it can't be managed in that way; they are both too proud, and I shall have to tread carefully. I not only want to make things easier for them, but I want

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to hurry things. They are planning for spring; and they might just as well plan for Christmas. It is the anniversary of their meeting, you know, and the anniversary of several other things that they don't know; and there might just as well be two weddings as one; it will save a great deal of trouble. When I get the house all ready, I think I can so represent my case that they will listen to reason. And now to come to the reason why I am troubling you with all this. I want your help. I never bought a house; never had occasion to in my early days when I was taken care of, and have never since been able to make myself believe that a bare *house* with nobody but myself to put into it would make a home."

There was a little tremble to the usually resolute voice, and the slightest possible quiver of the lips; but she quickly controlled both, and went on.

"I thought you would be able to advise me as to prices and locations and all that sort of thing. The location must be chosen

Missent

with a view to the doctor's practice, of course. It is getting so late now that I shall have to rush matters as fast as I can."

"I am just the one to assist you," Mr. Durand said heartily. "I have a friend who has been building a number of houses this season, several of which, I fancy, might suit you. I shall have great pleasure in taking you to see them, and in negotiating with the owner for you, in case one of them chances to please. That will save you from falling into the hands of an agent. I like your plan immensely; the more I think about it, the better it pleases me, and I shall like nothing better than to help you carry it to completion."

Thus began busy days, not only for Miss Stafford, but for her indefatigable friend, Mr. Durand. He made an appointment with her for the very next morning, and she rode away with him, explaining to the Dennisons that he was to assist her in making an investment of some money that she had on hand.

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The new houses were delightful, and two or three of them chanced to be in the very location of all others that Miss Stafford was sure Dr. Manning ought to select. But the inevitable discomfort that shadows nearly all buying attended her. One house above all others she desired. It was on a corner, the very corner that a physician should most desire; it was convenient to several important street-car lines. It stood a little apart from others, and rejoiced in the luxury of a lawn and a side garden. But alas! it was higher priced by several thousands than she had expected to pay. She consulted again and again the printed slip that Mr. Durand had brought her, which advertised these and certain other desirable houses and gave the prices, and shook her head.

“One of the others will do,” she said mournfully; “but I cannot help wishing I had not seen this. It is so exactly what we need. That bay-windowed room at the side, with an entrance all to itself, looks as though it had been planned for a hand-

Missent

some office, and then the grounds are so beautiful; but I don't suppose I ought to pay so much; still, it is for a lifetime probably."

"Well, now see here," said Mr. Durand, briskly; "if you are sure this corner suits you, I will see the owner this very evening and get his lowest figures. Printed prices are not always unalterable, you know. It is possible that he may make quite a reduction."

"The property isn't high-priced," said honest Miss Stafford; "not as these other houses go; and, indeed, I have been looking at houses a good deal as opportunity offered. I shouldn't want him to think that I was trying to get property for less than it was worth. One of those two on Larch Street would have delighted me if I hadn't seen this."

But Mr. Durand was not to be deterred from seeking the owner in her behalf. He knew just what price she had mentally set, and offered to do his best for her, keeping honesty in view, and report.

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She was astonished, almost conscience-smitten, when on the next day but one he reported that the owner had dropped to nearly her original figure. Five minutes afterward the house had verbally changed owners, and Mr. Durand was instructed to have the necessary papers made out without delay.

Then began the delightful task of furnishing. In this, as in the matter of selecting and buying, Mr. Durand was an invaluable assistant.

Miss Stafford declined to be taken to carpet and furniture stores in his carriage, as he at first proposed. She assured him that the Dennisons would naturally be curious as to how they could have so much business in common, whereas she went out alone on her missionary or church errands nearly every day, and would excite no surprise by continuing to go in that way. Not only much of her pleasure would be spoiled if the Dennisons, and, above all, Dr. Manning, suspected her plan; but its success might even be perilled. At the

Missent

same time, she should certainly like Mr. Durand's introductions and advice. Therefore they made engagements to meet at Sherman and Arnold's furniture rooms, or at Waterford's carpet store, or at some other of the great dealers' houses.

Day by day the work went on, to the intense delight of the homeless woman who seemed to be now plunging recklessly into the work of making a home. Mr. Durand showed himself wise in regard to curtains and cornices, and not at all devoid of taste in the selection of wall-papers and carpets.

Yet they well-nigh came to grief over the furnishing. Early in the campaign, the gentleman had petitioned to be allowed to furnish the house as his share of the enterprise, and had been peremptorily refused. If she were going to make a gift of it at once, Miss Stafford assured him, that would be quite right; but she might be obliged to retain it in her own name for one or two, perhaps for half a dozen, years, for all she knew. She must wait and see how matters could be arranged, and go

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through the farce of receiving rent from them, perhaps. Such being the case, what propriety would there be in allowing Mr. Durand to furnish any part of her house?

After much conflict, however, they compromised. Mr. Durand was given permission to furnish Dr. Manning's office in any way that he chose, and to present the same to the gentleman as a wedding gift. He made haste to avail himself of this opportunity, and chose to furnish it so luxuriously that Miss Stafford assured him it would cause the other furniture to blush. But her eyes sparkled with delight while she said it. Evidently Miss Stafford had taken Dr. Manning as well as Eunice, to her heart. Neither did she interfere with Mr. Durand's selection of as fine a piano as money could buy, as his gift to the prospective bride.

It was one afternoon early in November that a discussion arose in regard to the disposition of a certain bookcase, Mr. Durand contending that the southwest corner was the place for it, and Miss Stafford

Missent

assuring him that the afternoon sun would injure the books, and that the niche on the north side was better.

“Well, now,” said Mr. Durand, “when we get through here, let me drive you around to my house; I will show you a room there which is the exact counterpart of this as to position, and you see if the place that the bookcase occupies isn’t the one of all others for a room of this shape. We shall be in time, too, to see how skilfully the afternoon sun avoids the books, just coming near enough to glance at one or two volumes, and then slipping away.”

Miss Stafford laughed at his persistence. This was the second or third time that she had been challenged to let him drive her to his house in proof of superior wisdom on his part. Having a curiosity to see the inside of the fine old house, she had resolved at the next invitation to avail herself of the opportunity; so, while she by no means gave up her point, she only said: “We shall have to make haste if we see what the sun is going to do to-day; it is

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dropping very low. These November days are discouragingly short."

"Very well," he said briskly; "let us make haste. We cannot finish here to-day, anyway. We shall have to come again and put the last touches on. There are a dozen small things that need to be seen to yet, in the office. Besides, there is ample time; it is six weeks to Christmas. Let us drop everything, and go around and settle about that bookcase; we cannot work to advantage until it is in place."

She laughed at his folly, but was quite willing to leave the house where she had spent so much of her time of late. It was nearing completion, and was as nearly perfect as taste and skill and care could make it; but it was growing daily more lonely to her. She liked to think of Eunice and the doctor as settled there at home; but, the more thought she gave to the room that she called hers, the less she felt like settling down in it and saying, "This is home." She had done her utmost for it, and Mr. Durand had been most kind and

Missent

patient, and had hunted through many shops in search of certain old-fashioned things for which she had expressed a wish ; yet, as often as she thought of herself there, a sense of loneliness and dreariness stole over her.

She was oppressed with this feeling as they drove rapidly toward Crescent Avenue. It made her ask a question that she had been revolving in her own mind.

“Can you recommend any nice, quiet place to which I can hie for a few weeks after my wedding is over? I should like to leave the young couple quite to themselves until they get a bit used to each other. I thought I would go away for a month or six weeks; but I don't feel like visiting, and I don't happen to know of any very pleasant winter resort. Can you help me in this?”

“Yes,” Mr. Durand said promptly; he knew just the place of all others where he would like to have her go. He went there himself a great deal, and he hoped she would like it. Was she willing to leave

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the selection and all the arrangements to him? Could she trust him?

Why, of course she could trust him, Miss Stafford said: "trust him with anything," she added, with a genial smile; but she did not like to trouble him with such small matters when she had hindered him now so constantly.

"You forget," he said gayly, "that, if Miss Eunice is your girl, the doctor is my boy. You discovered him, but you can't deny that I started him in business!"

And then they were at No. 200 Crescent Avenue.

X

A Ready-made Home

ONCE inside the door, the little woman was struck dumb. That pretty home on which her work and heart had been centred for the past few weeks was charming in every detail, but Mr. Durand's house was palatial. From room to room she followed him in almost speechless admiration. She had been in fine houses many a time, but the march of improvement had been such during these later years, in which she had shut herself out from the world, that many comforts and adornments of modern times were almost unknown to her, and gave her a delightful sense of being in a new world.

"What an unreasonable man," she said suddenly, "to be surrounded by such creations of beauty, and yet to grumble, as you know you do!"

"Have a care, my friend," he answered.

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"Do not forget your own admissions. Didn't you hint to me that you had discovered that rooms and furniture did not make a home? Come with me to this eastern alcove; I want to show you something special."

He led her to a lovely corner withdrawn from the library proper by heavy curtains; the space was hung with paintings in oil, many of them evidently portraits. He paused before one, a full-size view of a beautiful girl. Miss Stafford, gazing at it, felt that she had never looked upon a sweeter face. Mr. Durand did not wait for questions, but said with quiet gravity: "This is my young wife. It is twenty-three years since we were married and almost twenty-two years since I buried her. I have lived a lonely man without a home for a long while, Miss Stafford."

She did not know how to answer this grave man standing before the beautiful shadow of his vanished home. She felt in her heart a great throb of sympathy for his loneliness; how like it was to her own!

Missent

For a moment she was back again in the afternoon sunshine of her girlhood home, and the apple trees were in blossom. Twenty-one years ago.

Mr. Durand looked down at her, and saw that her usually bright eyes were dim with tears. He waited in silence for a moment, then began to speak quietly, even cheerfully, of his wife. She was younger than he, he said, by several years, and singularly sweet and childlike in her manner; and it had been so many years since she went from him that he found himself looking at her picture now almost as if she had been a sweet child of his, from whom he had parted long ago. Then he said what brought a sudden flush of surprise to Miss Stafford's face. "Do you know that I think there must have been some relationship, away back, perhaps, between her family and yours? The first time I saw you I remember setting to work at once to trace the subtle likeness between your face and Elsie's."

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They went on to the other portraits after that; then wandered from room to room, and were in full tide of cheery talk again, when the host suddenly threw open a door and revealed a room that made Miss Stafford once more speechless, this time with amazement. It was the almost perfect counterpart of the one she had chosen and named hers in the new house.

The bewildering part, however, had to do with the furnishings; these, to the veriest trifle, were the exact counterparts of those she had chosen for herself. There were the old-fashioned lounge in what she had named her "cosy corner"; the little sewing-chair by the south window; even the quaint, old-fashioned secretary full of unexpected little drawers and secret corners with sliding covers. She had spent hours in hunting through furniture-shops for that particular pattern, with Mr. Durand for her patient attendant. Behold, here stood its mate in the same southeast corner.

The carpet suggested the only differ-

Missent

ence between the two rooms, and the lady's cheeks became rosy red as she recognized that. They had held a somewhat excited argument over carpets, Mr. Durand in favor of one which Miss Stafford admitted was much the prettier, but too fine for her needs, and too high-priced for her purse. The discussion had been earnest and prolonged, to the amusement of the carpet-clerks who knew Mr. Durand. It had ended in Miss Stafford's sturdily adhering to her resolution and buying the cheaper and, as Mr. Durand said, much the homelier carpet. Lo, here was the lovelier one of his choice, glowing with just the sunset colors that he had pointed out.

He watched her with a keenly interested face while she made her discoveries.

"You see I was bound to have my way," he said at last. "I wanted to prove to you how exactly those colors matched the other furnishings. Sit down, please; I brought you to this room on

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purpose to have a talk with you," and he pushed toward her the little sewing-chair, and drew for himself a great armchair, the image of one that she had merrily told him she bought for him to use if he should ever take the trouble to call upon her.

"Look here," he said; "don't you know you agreed to trust me to select a place for you to spend your time until you chose to go to the little new house? I said at once that I knew the exact place for you, and I determined then and there to show it to you before this day was done, and urge you to fill it. I am certain there is no house on earth that needs you so much and desires so earnestly to have you as this one. Will you come to it?"

The flush that had been called to Miss Stafford's cheeks more than once since she entered this house now deepened and spread until she felt that her face must be burning; she was painfully embarrassed, and vexed with herself for being embarrassed. She could not raise her

Missent

eyes to Mr. Durand's, yet knew that he was waiting for her to reply.

"I—I do not know what you mean," she stammered at last. "How could I—why should I—I mean, how would it be possible for me to make a visit at your house? I did not mean a *visit*, of course; I was speaking of a place to board."

"There is only one way in which you could come, my friend; at least, there is only one way in which I want you to come; and I frankly own that I want that, and have wanted it for a long time, more than I do anything else in life. I have planned for it, and hoped for it, and prayed for it, until there are times when it does seem to me that the Lord means me to have it. Am I too hopeful? I want you to come here to make this desolate house into a home, and to remain in it until death do us part. Will you come?"

There was a great deal more said in that pretty sitting-room during the next hour; but it ought not to be given to the public. Perhaps the trend of it can be

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imagined by reporting two remarks at the end of the hour.

“I ought to go home!” exclaimed Miss Stafford, starting up at the sound of a cathedral clock tolling a late hour; “our folks will be worried about me.”

“My friend, you *are* at home,” said Mr. Durand, also rising and looking down on the little woman with a happy light in his eyes. “Please don’t overlook that important fact, even for a moment; but I am willing to return you to your boarding-house for a short time, since that seems to be necessary.”

During the drive home a characteristic conversation was held. The lady began it suddenly with a prefatory word, — “Mr. Durand —”

He promptly interrupted her. “*Miss Stafford*, I am at your service; but I want to give you fair warning that I shall tolerate neither name after to-day. My name is the good old-fashioned one of David, and yours, I happen to know, is Sarah. Will it interest you, I wonder, to learn

Missent

that it was my dear mother's name? Well, now for your orders. Your voice had authority in it."

The voice was shaken a little that said, "Do you realize that we shall have to keep this — this matter quiet?"

"For how long?"

"Why, for always! until—" she stopped, blushing like a young girl, and laughed.

"Until it is proclaimed on the housetop, do you mean? In other words, in the daily papers? I stand ready to have it announced in this evening's editions. What is the point?"

"Don't you see? What will Dr. Manning and Eunice think, or do? About the house, I mean. They will feel that their plans must be changed. I am afraid that we couldn't convince them to the contrary."

"Ah!" he said, "I see. Very well, we will for the present keep it a profound secret. When the right time comes, how would it do to hand over the deed of the

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property as a wedding-gift from Mr. and Mrs. Durand?"

Miss Stafford's face was aflame; but she was determined to be businesslike.

"Mr. Durand, you have never yet given me a chance to pay for that house. Who is the owner, and why isn't he in a hurry for his money?"

"The owner is a very good friend of mine, and has no fear of being cheated out of his money."

A sudden conviction flashed over Miss Stafford; there was consternation in her tone.

"Mr. Durand, I believe you own that house yourself!"

"Mrs. Durand—to be, that house belongs to you; but, since you were kind enough to let me furnish the office, and add a trifle or two elsewhere, I thought perhaps, under existing circumstances, you would allow our names to be coupled in the gift."

Then they were at the Dennison home, and Effie was waiting for them on the door-steps.

Missent

“Oh, Auntie Stafford!” she exclaimed, “we were dreadfully worried about you; we did not know Mr. Durand was with you.”

“She has been looking over an old house of hers that she never saw before, and there were so many odd corners in it that the time slipped away.” This was Mr. Durand’s explanation.

Effie was charmed. “An old, *old* house, and one that she has never seen, although she owns it? How delightful! I love old houses. Mr. Durand, couldn’t you sometime take me to see it? If it is *real* old, and has odd corners, I should like it so much!”

“I will show you every nook and corner in it with all the pleasure in life,” answered that gentleman, “with this stipulation: there must be no ‘Miss Stafford’ along.”

“Why not?” looking curiously from one to the other. “Does she want to make changes that will spoil its quaintness? That can’t be, though; she likes

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old things and old people better than new ones; don't you, Miss Stafford?"

"Put it 'middle-aged people,' Effie; it sounds better," said Mr. Durand, with one of his bursts of laughter; and then, to Miss Stafford's relief, he went away.

The little woman was glad to get to the privacy of her own room that night. Her brain was in a whirl. Nothing that had ever happened in her changeful life had come to her more unexpectedly. It was almost dizzying to think that within the space of a single hour all her plans and purposes for the future had been changed.

For a while she could not think. She could only sit in her favorite easy chair in her favorite corner, and try to be still. Even in this she failed. There came, from time to time, ejaculations.

"The idea! That room exactly like mine, even to the old-fashioned work-basket. Where *did* he find that?"

"And he bought that carpet! It is ever so much prettier than mine. Dear me! *that* is mine!" Then she laughed

Missent

softly, and the glow of the firelight deepened that of her cheeks.

“‘David!’ I never can say it in the world!”

“Mr. and Mrs. David Durand! the idea! What will they all say?”

“And to think that was his house all the time! Sarah Stafford, you prided yourself on being quite a woman of business, but you are simply an idiot! I am glad his mother’s name was Sarah.”

By degrees she grew quiet, grew intensely quiet, and a tear or two was brushed away from the flushed cheeks. Then she slipped softly to her knees, and, though there is no spot on earth more sacred to privacy, for the sake of the better understanding of the situation the first words she spoke shall be chronicled.

“My Father in heaven, how can I thank thee for thy great gift?”

XI

Out of "Trivialities"

LIFE went forward on swift wings that autumn in the Dennison homestead. A double wedding was being prepared for, with one of the brides so far away from the scene of action that, as Effie Dennison explained to Miss Stafford, they had to guess at her taste in some matters, and do as they pleased generally. But she added loyally that they had no fears concerning Marian; she was sure to like anything that mamma and Richard planned.

"Especially Richard," she said gayly. "It must be fun to think as much of anybody as she does of Richard. Or else it would be a kind of bore; I don't think I could ever do it with a person who did not belong to the family, at all. Could you, Auntie Stafford?"

Miss Stafford laughed hysterically, gave

Missent

some wildly irrelevant reply, and changed the subject abruptly. In truth, that little woman had her hands and heart full during these days. For one thing, her momentous secret weighed on her mind. The more she thought about it, the more fully was she convinced that secrecy was necessary. Great effort had already been expended in convincing Dr. Manning and Eunice that sympathy for her homeless condition compelled them to sacrifice pride to her comfort. Since she must be ejected from the dear home nest, what more reasonable than to make a new home for her? To make known to them at this late hour that a ready-made home was waiting for her, from which, when she went to it, she was to go out no more until earthly homes ceased to lure her, would be fatal.

There were, however, great difficulties connected with keeping the secret. Mr. Durand seemed to recognize its importance; yet he had to be closely watched lest, after the manner of men, he should

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in an unguarded moment create a situation that, to say the least, would be embarrassing.

On one pretext or another he came almost daily to the Dennison home, but this in itself excited no surprise; it had been a habit of his from the first; and Effie Dennison remarked that he took as much interest in the coming weddings as if he were one of the family. His side remarks to Miss Stafford, however, were often difficult for her to manage, and she had a constant feeling that they were subjects of suspicion. If she could have overheard Dr. Manning's words to Eunice, she would have been sure of it.

"Those two," he said, inclining his head toward Miss Stafford and Mr. Durand, who were standing together in the music-room engaged in earnest conversation, "those two have some scheme that they are concocting. I hope it is not in the form of a practical joke for our benefit, on Christmas."

"Oh, no, indeed!" said Eunice; "they

Missent

are both too refined and too truly kind and thoughtful of others for practical jokes, unless they have something in mind that would give us all a delightful surprise. Perhaps they have. I think I should be willing to trust myself unhesitatingly to jokes of their planning."

"Well, I think you will have a chance to test it. I am sure there is some choice bit of fun ahead. Mr. Durand has a whispered conference with Miss Stafford nearly every time he comes, and some of them are accompanied with bursts of laughter. Listen to that."

As if to prove the truth of his words, Mr. Durand at that moment indulged in one of his heartiest outbursts.

Could the two have heard his words, they would not have been enlightened.

"Do you know," Mr. Durand was saying, "that we actually forgot to look at the secretary that day, to make sure that it is in the right place?"

Miss Stafford's cheeks flamed as they often did of late, but she answered stur-

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dily, "I had no need to look at it; I know that my corner is the best."

Then he: "Oh, very well; you shall put this one into the same corner, or into the middle of the room, if you please. All inanimate as well as animate subjects in that house shall own your sway."

Then he had laughed his joyous rollicking laugh, so full of cheer that Effie Denison, who appeared on the scene at the moment, said: "I wish you would tell me what the fun is, Mr. Durand. When I hear you laugh, it seems as though I ought to laugh, too."

It came to pass that he did, in the course of time, divulge one of the secrets. "For all the world like a man!" Miss Stafford said. They were discussing, one evening, the matter of wedding invitations. There was to be no large party, so they said, only a few old and tried friends besides the family connections; but their kinship was so far-reaching and their friendships so strong that there bade fair to be a goodly company gathered.

Missent

Effie and her cousin Frederick had been making out the list of invitations, and it was they who started an animated discussion as to the size and style of the cards.

“What a bother it all is!” said Eunice at last. “So many unimportant details to plan, and so much formality. I wish we could just use postal cards.”

“Well, why not?” called out Mr. Durand. “Why wouldn’t they do just as well for weddings as for Christmas?”

“Christmas!” repeated Eunice, wondering. “What do you know about Christmas postal cards?”

All she thought was that somebody had told him about her girlish mistake in writing a Christmas invitation to her boy friend, Stephen Manning, on a postal card. But Mr. Durand’s look of dismay and his immediate turning to Miss Stafford with a serio-comic, “Bless me! now I’ve put my foot into it, haven’t I?” aroused such curiosity and questioning, coupled with Miss Stafford’s undeniable embarrassment, that explanations became absolutely necessary.

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"What an uproar about nothing!" said Miss Stafford at last. "Mr. Durand, I told you that a man couldn't keep a secret! Why, Eunice, it is nothing in the world but a tardy mailing of your postal. I did it by accident, and was properly dismayed; but I must say I don't think it has turned out badly."

Of course the entire story had to follow. Questions and cross-questions, exclamations and laughter, resulted, until the entire company became hilarious over the long past. In the midst of it, Dr. Manning took the historic postal card from the pocket of his diary, and gravely exhibited it.

"It is one of my treasures," he said. "I have never shown it, even to Eunice; and to think that you did not mean it for me!"

"I meant it," said Miss Stafford, quickly. "When I found I had been instrumental in inviting you to a Christmas dinner, I not only decided that you would come, but I took steps to be there myself."

Missent

"Oh, Auntie Stafford!" exclaimed Effie, "wouldn't you have come to board with us if you hadn't found this card?"

"No, my dear; I shouldn't have known of your existence but for that card."

"And, if you hadn't come here, where would my tumble have landed me?" asked Mr. Durand, adding, with a look at Miss Stafford that made her face flame: "It is a complicated bit of work, I must say. Who can tell how far it will reach!"

"Auntie Stafford," put in the nephew, Frederick, "don't you remember that last Christmas you told me you were laughing at a secret that might grow; and if it did, and wasn't spoiled, you would tell it to me? Is this the secret? It hasn't spoiled, has it?"

"By no means!" declared Mr. Durand; "it has blossomed!"

The fun was extreme. It seemed that they could never get done enjoying the complications growing out of Eunice's long-ago bit of work; but at least two of the company thought, before the even-

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ing was over, of the graver side of the story.

"Eunice," said Dr. Manning, when they were alone together for a moment, "I do not suppose I could tell you what that postal card has become to me. Without this curious history it was a treasure. I recognized in it the link that by God's goodness opened the door for me, not only to professional opportunity, but to home and friends, and then to the dearest treasure that earth can give. Now with this revelation, there comes to me a new sense of the divine overruling Power that shapes our lives. Do you not think, dearest, that our Father in heaven must have meant us for each other all the years, and so shaped these common matters as to bring us together? Who but He could have arranged such a network of life out of seeming trivialities? My dearest, we will give our lives anew to Him, shall we not? And we will account nothing trivial, and no smallest act or thought of ours as beneath His guidance and direction."

Missent

In the hall, at that moment, Mr. Durand was bidding Miss Stafford good night; as he kissed each flushed cheek lingeringly, he said, "If I could find the girl who mailed that postal card for you, I'd pension her for life." Then in a changed tone, "As it is, dear one, I shall go down on my knees this night and thank God again for its story, and for the part that linked me to it forever."

It was a pretty wedding; everybody said so. The bride, Marian, would have been hard to please had not the arrangements charmed her. The ceremony was to take place early in the evening, and the Christmas gifts and rhymes were to follow. This entirely suited Mr. Durand, as well as the younger portion of the family. He had spent an entire forenoon perpetrating a rhyme that suited him, to attach to a certain official-looking document. In all the Christmas preparations Effie Dennison found him a most efficient ally.

"If it had not been for you," she had remarked cordially, "I should have had to

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get the Christmas affairs ready all alone; everybody else is so taken up with weddings. Even Auntie Stafford can't spare the time to make as many rhymes as she did last year. It seems queer to think that last Christmas she was almost a stranger, and now she is just the same as a real auntie."

"I think I ought to be a real uncle by this time," complained Mr. Durand. "Why don't you call her Aunt Sarah? I don't like the name 'Stafford,' do you? I'm not going to use it any more. If I were you, I should say 'Aunt Sarah.' Then, while you were about it, you might practise on saying 'Uncle David.' I used to have a niece who said it a hundred times in a day; I should like another."

Whereupon Effie Dennison promised hereafter to say "Uncle David."

Eunice and Dr. Manning were the first to be made husband and wife. Then there was a quick and quiet change of places, and Richard and Marian were with solemn word and prayer made one.

"A double wedding is really very im-

Missent

pressive, is it not?" whispered a guest to Mr. Durand the moment that a whisper could have been allowed, but that gentleman was too much engaged to reply to her. "Auntie Stafford," in a silk dress of silvery gray, and with the oldest of white lace at throat and wrists, had been looking uncommonly lovely in more than one pair of eyes; at that moment she was pale, and all eyes were fixed upon her, for Mr. Durand had taken her hand and was leading her forward, even before the mother, apparently, to offer congratulations! No, it was not for that; the minister moved towards them, and they took exactly the position that Dr. and Mrs. Manning had occupied, and the minister began again, "In token of your mutual and decided choice of each other as partners for life, you will now join your right hands."

"I *can* keep a secret, after all," explained Mr. Durand several hours afterwards, when the Christmas frolic had begun, "despite Mrs. Durand's malicious charge to the contrary. Confess that you

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were never so much astonished in your life."

"I never was!" said Richard Dennison, laughing. "But it was the time chosen, Mr. Durand, not the event itself. Honesty compels me to own that I foresaw that distinctly, but I supposed that it would be consummated in the distant future. This is really some more of that postal card, isn't it?"

"Indeed it is! Dr. Manning ought to cut that card in two and give me half. What do you say, doctor?"

But Dr. Manning and his wife were speechless over an official-looking roll that transferred the rights of "Sarah and David Durand" in a certain piece of property located on Chester Square to "John Lewis Manning and Eunice his wife, their heirs and assigns forever."

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