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Author: Norman Duncan

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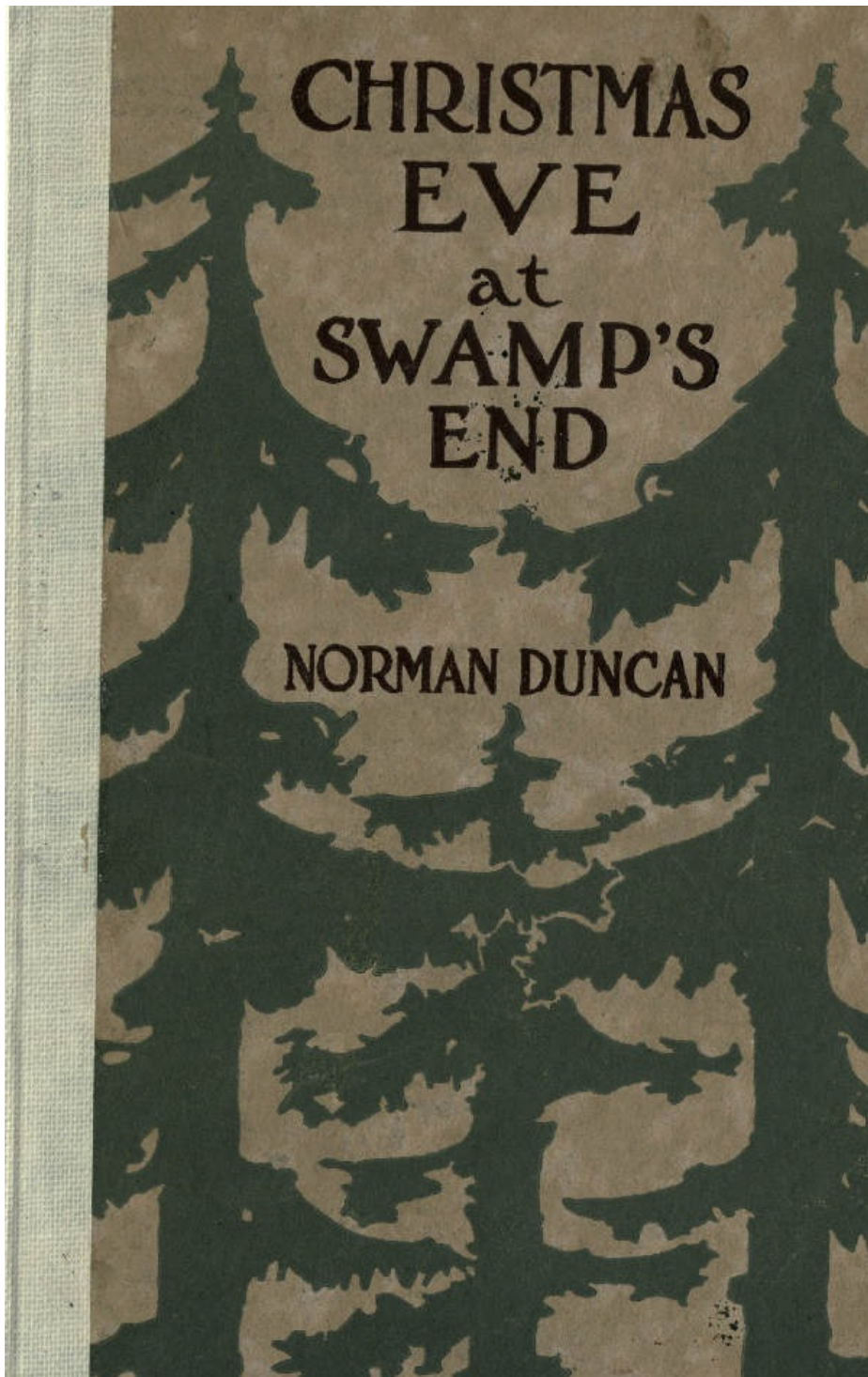
*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK CHRISTMAS EVE AT SWAMP'S END ***

Transcriber's Note

The punctuation and spelling from the original text have been faithfully preserved. Only obvious typographical errors have been corrected.

CHRISTMAS
EVE
at
SWAMP'S
END

NORMAN DUNCAN

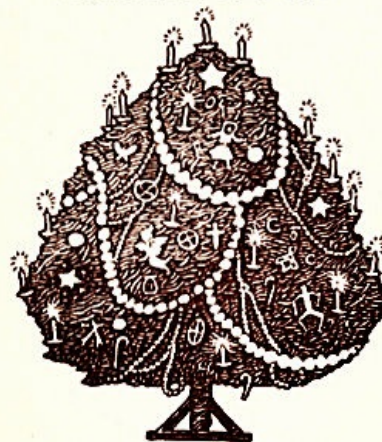




"Make of this child, a Man"

CHRISTMAS EVE
at SWAMP'S END

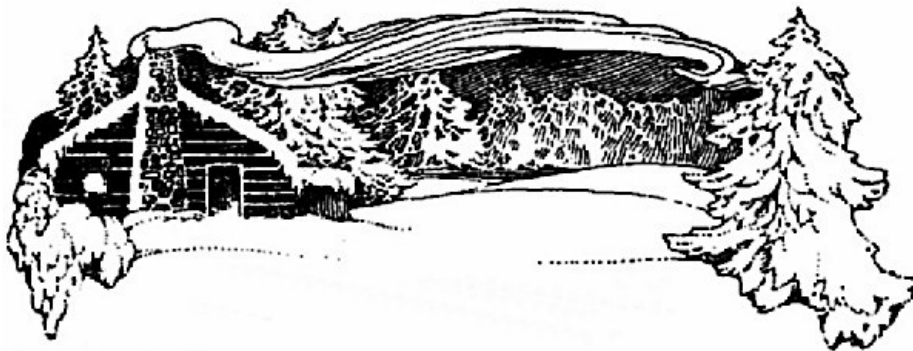
NORMAN DUNCAN
author of
THE MEASURE OF A MAN
DOCTOR LUKE OF THE
LABRADOR ETC



FLEMING H REVELL COMPANY



*A Selection from
THE MEASURE OF A MAN
A Tale of the Big Woods*



THE WISTFUL HEART

IT was long after noon in the far, big, white Northwest. Day was on the wing. Christmas Eve splendidly impended—thank God for unspoiled childish faith and joys of children everywhere! Christmas Eve was fairly within view and welcoming hail, at last, in the thickening eastern shadows. Long Day at its close. Day in a perturbation of blessed unselfishness. Day with its tasks of love not half accomplished. And Day near done! Bedtime coming round the world on the jump. Nine o'clock leaping from longitude to longitude. Night, impatient and determined, chasing all the children of the world in drowsy expectation to sleep—making a clean sweep of 'em, every one, with her soft, wide broom of dusk. "Nine o'clock? Shoo! Off you go! To-morrow's on the way. Soon—oh, soon! To-morrow's here when you fall asleep. Said 'em already, have you? Not another word from either of you. Not a whisper, ye grinning rascals! Cuddle down, little people of Christ's heart and leading. Snuggle close—closer yet, my children—that your arms may grow used to this loving. Another kiss from mother? Blessed Ones! A billion more, for nights and mornings, for all day long of all the years, waiting here on mother's lips. And now to sleep. Christmas *is* to-morrow. Hush! To-morrow. Yes; to-morrow. Go t' sleep! Go t' sleep!" And upon the flying heels of

Night—but still far over seas from the blustering white Northwest where Pattie Batch was waiting at Swamp's End in the woods—the new Day, with jolly countenance, broad, rosy and delighted, was somewhere approaching, in a gale of childish laughter, blithely calling in its westward sweep to all Christian children to awaken to their peculiar and eternal joy.

It was Christmas weather in the big woods: a Christmas temperature like frozen steel—thirty below in the clearing of Swamp's End—and a rollicking wind, careering over the pines, and the swirling dust of snow in the metallic air. A cold, crisp crackling world! A Christmas land, too: a vast expanse of Christmas colour, from the Canadian line to the Big River—great, grave, green pines, white earth and a blood-red sunset! The low log-cabins of the lumber camps were smothered in snow; they were fringed with pendant ice at the eaves, and banked high with drifts, and all window-frosted. The trails were thigh deep and drifting. The pines—their great fall imminent, now—flaunted long, black arms in the gale; they creaked, they swished, they droned, they crackled with frost. It was coming on dusk. The deeper reaches of the forest were already dark. Horses and teamsters, sawyers, road-monkeys, axemen, swampers, punk-hunters and all, floundered from the bush, white with dry snow, icicled and frosted like a Christmas cake, to the roaring bunk-house fires, to a voracious employment at the cooks' long tables, and to an expanding festival jollity. Town? Sure! Swamp's End for Christmas—the lights and companionship of the bedraggled shanty lumber-town in the clearing of Swamp's End! Swamp's End for Gingerbread Jenkins! Swamp's End for Billy the Beast! Swamp's End—and the roaring hilarity thereof—for man and boy, straw-boss and cookee, of the lumber-jacks! Presently the dim trails from the Cant-hook cutting, from the Bottle River camps, from Snook's landing and the Yellow Tail works, poured the boys into town—a lusty, hilarious crew, like loosed school-boys on a lark, giving over, now, to the only distractions, it seemed—and John Fairmeadow maintained it—which the great world provided in the forests.

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Pattie Batch might have been aware of this—the log shack was on the edge of town—had not the window-panes been coated thick with Christmas frost. She might have heard rough laughter passing by—the Bottle River trail ran right past the door—had not the big Christmas wind snored in the stove, and fearsomely rattled the door, and shaken the cabin, and swept howling on. But she never in the world would have attended. Not in that emergency! She would not, for anything, have peeped out of the windows, in perfectly proper curiosity, to watch the Bottle River jacks flounder into town. Not she! Pattie Batch was busy. Pattie Batch was so desperately employed that her swift little fingers demanded all the attention that the most alert, the brightest, the very most bewitching gray eyes in the whole wide world could bestow upon anything whatsoever. Christmas Eve, you see: Day done. Something of soft fawn-skin engaged her, it seemed, with white patches matched and arranged with marvellous exactitude: something made for warmth in the wind—something of small fashion, but long and indubitably capacious—something with a hood. A little cloak, possibly: I don't know. But I am sure that it could envelop, that it could boil or roast, that it could fairly smother—a baby! It was lined with golden-brown, crackling silk, which Pattie Batch's mother had left in her trunk, upon her last departure, poor woman! from the sordid world of Swamp's End to regions which were now become in Pattie Batch's loving vision Places of Light. And it was upon this treasured cloth that Pattie Batch's flashing needle was working like mad in the lamplight. A Christmas sacrifice: it was labour of love and the gift of treasure.

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Pattie Batch was lovely. Everybody knew it; and there's no denying it. Grief had not left her wan and apathetic. She had been "a little man." She had been so much of a little man that she was now much more of a little woman than ever she had been before. In respect to her bewitching endearments, there's no mincing matters, at all. It would shame a man to 'hem and haw and qualify. She was adorable. Beauty of youth and heart of tenderness: a quaint little womanly child of seventeen—gowned, now, in a black dress, long-skirted, to be sure! of her mother's old-fashioned wearing. Gray eyes, wide, dark-lashed, sun-sparkling and shadowy, and willful dark hair, a sweetly tilted little nose, a boyish, masterful way, coquettish twinkles, dimples in most perilous places, rosy cheeks, a tender little figure, an aristocratic toss to her head: why, indeed—the catalogue of her charms has no end to it! Courage to boot, too—as though youth and loveliness were not sufficient endowment—and uncompromising honesty with herself and all the world. She took in washing from the camps: there was nothing else to do, with Gray Billy Batch lost in Rattle Water, and now decently stowed away by the Reverend John Fairmeadow. It was lonely in Gray Billy Batch's cabin, now, of course; it was sometimes almost intolerably so—and ghostly, too, with echoes of long-past footsteps and memories of soft motherly words. Pattie Batch, however, a practical little person, knew in her own mind, you must be informed, exactly how to still the haunting echoes and transform the memories into blessed companions of her busy, gentle solitude; but she had not as yet managed the solution.

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Pattie Batch wanted a baby. Companionship, of course, would be a mere by-product of a baby's presence in the cabin; the real wealth and advantage would be a glowing satisfaction in the baby. At any rate, Pattie Batch wanted one: she always had—and she simply couldn't help it. Babies, however, were not numerous at Swamp's End; in point of fact, there was only one—a perfectly adorable infant, it must be understood, a suitable child, and worthy, in every respect, of being

heartily desired by any woman—which unhappily belonged to the bartender who lived with Pale Peter of the Red Elephant saloon. No use asking for *that* baby! Not outright. It could be borrowed, however. Pattie Batch *had* borrowed it; she had borrowed it frequently, of late, and had mysteriously measured it with a calculating eye, and had estimated, and scowled in doubt, and scratched her head, and pursed her sweet red lips, and had secretly spanned the baby, from chin to toe and across the back, with an industriously inquiring thumb and little finger. But a borrowed baby, it seems, is of no use whatsoever; the satisfaction is said to be temporary—nothing more—and to leave a sense of vacant arms and a stinging aggravation of envy. So what Pattie Batch wanted was a baby to *keep*—a baby she could call her own and cherish against meddling—a baby that should be so rosy and fat and curly, so neat and white, so scrubbed and highly polished from crown to toe-nails, that every mother in the land, beholding, would promptly expire on the spot of amazement, incredulity and sheer jealousy.

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There were babies at Elegant Corners—a frowzy, listless mud-hole of the woods, near by. They were all possessed by one mother, too. The last comer had appeared in the fall of the year; and Pattie Batch—when the great news came down to Swamp's End—had instantly taken the trail for Elegant Corners.

"Got another, eh?" says she, flatly, to the wretched Mrs. Limp.

"Uh-huh!" Mrs. Limp sighed and rolled her eyes, as though, God save us! the ultimate misfortune had fallen upon her. "Number eight," she groaned.

"Don't you *like* it?" Pattie demanded, hopefully.

Mrs. Limp was so deeply submerged in tears that she failed to commit herself.

"You *don't* like it, eh?" Pattie pursued, hope immediately abounding.

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Mrs. Limp sniffed.

"Well," said Pattie, her little heart all in a flutter—she was afflicted, too, with an adorable lisp in excitement—"I th'pothe I *ought* t' be *thorry*."

Mrs. Limp seemed dolefully to agree.

Pattie Batch came then straight to the point. "I been thavin' up," said she. "I been hard at it for more 'n theven monthth."

Mrs. Limp lifted her blue eyelids.

"Yep," said Pattie, briskly; "an' I got thirty-four twenty-three right here in my thkirt. *Where'th that baby?*"

The baby was fetched and deposited in her arms.

"Boy or girl?" Pattie inquired, with business-like precision.

"Boy," Mrs. Limp sighed, "thank God!"

Pattie Batch was vastly disappointed. She had fancied a girl. It was a shock, indeed, to her ardour. It was so much of a shocking disappointment that Pattie Batch might easily have wept. A boy—a *boy!* Oh, shoot! But still, she reflected, considering the scarcity, a boy—this boy, in fact, cleaned up—Pattie Batch was all the time running the mottled infant over with sharply appraising eyes—yes, the child had possibilities, unquestionably so, which soap and water might astonishingly improve—and, in fine, this little boy might—

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"Mithuth Limp," said Pattie, looking that lady straight in the eye, "I'll give you twenty-five dollarth for thith here baby. By George, I will!"

The astonished mother jumped out of her chair and her lassitude at the same instant.

"Not another thent!" Pattie craftily declared. "Here—take your baby."

Mrs. Limp did not quite *take* the baby. That would be but a pale indication of the speed, directness and outraged determination with which she acted. She snatched the baby away, with the precision of a brisk woodpecker after an escaping worm; and she hugged it until it howled for mercy—and she hushed it—and she crooned endearment—and she kissed the baby with such fervour and persistency that she saved its puckered face a washing. And then she turned—in a rage of indignation—in a storm of scorn—in a whirlwind of execration—upon poor little Pattie Batch. But Pattie Batch was gone. Discreet little Pattie Batch didn't need to be *told!* Her little feet were already pattering over the trail to Swamp's End; and she was crying as she ran.

But Pattie Batch's wish for a baby went back to the very beginnings of things. Ask Gingerbread Jenkins. Gingerbread Jenkins knows. It was Gingerbread Jenkins who had found her, long ago—Pattie was little more than a baby herself, then—on the Bottle River Trail; and to Gingerbread Jenkins' astonishment the child was lugging a gun into the woods.

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"Where *you* goin'?" says Gingerbread Jenkins.

"Gunnin'."

"Gunnin', eh? What for?"

"Jutht gunnin'."

"But what you gunnin' *for*?"

"None o' your bithneth," says saucy little Pattie Batch.

"It *is* my business," Gingerbread Jenkins declared; "an' if you don't tell me what you're gunnin' for I'll have you home in a jiffy."

"Well," says Pattie, "I'm—gunnin'."

"What for?"

"Storks," says Pattie.

"Goin' t' *kill* 'em?" Gingerbread inquired.

"No," says Pattie.

"What's your gun for?"

"I'm goin' t' wing a couple," says Pattie, "an' tame 'em."

That was Pattie Batch.



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A GIFT NEGLECTED

WELL, well! there was only one baby at Swamp's End; and that baby Pattie Batch had adopted. In her mind, of course: *quite* on the sly. Nobody could adopt Pale Peter's bartender's baby in any other way. And here was Christmas come again! Day gone beyond the last waving pines in a cold flush of red and gold: Christmas Eve here at last. Pattie Batch's soft arms were still wanting; there were a thousand kisses waiting on her tender lips for giving; her voice was all attuned to crooning sweetest lullabys; but her heart was empty—save for a child of mist and wishes. It was dark, now; but though the wind was still rollicking down there was no snow blowing, and the shy stars were winking wide-eyed upon the busy world and all the myriad mysteries it exhibited out-of-doors. The gift of silk and fawn-skin was finished. A perfect gift: fashioned and accomplished with all the dexterity Pattie Batch could employ. "Just as if," she had determined, "it was for my *own* baby." And Pattie Batch—after an agitated glance at the clock—quickly shoed and cloaked and hooded her sweet and blooming little self; and she listened to the lusty wind, and she put a most adorable little nose out-of-doors to sense the frosty weather, and she fluttered about the warm room in search of her mittens, and then she turned down the lamp, chucked a log in the stove, put on the dampers like a prudent householder, and, having made quite sure that the door was latched, scampered off to town in vast and twittering delight with the nipping frost, with the roistering wind, the fluffy snow, the stars, the whole of God's clean world, and with herself, too, and with the blessed Night of the year.

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She was exceedingly cautious; and she was not observed—not for the smallest flash. The thing was accomplished in mystery. Before she was aware of it—before her heart had eased its agitation—she was safely out again; and there, in plain view, on the table, in Pale Peter's living-room behind the saloon, lay the gift of silk and fawn-skin for Pale Peter's bartender's baby—a Christmas mystery for them all to solve as best they could.

Pattie Batch peeked in at the window.

"I wonder," she mused, "if they'll *ever*—if they'll *ever in the world*—find out I done it!"

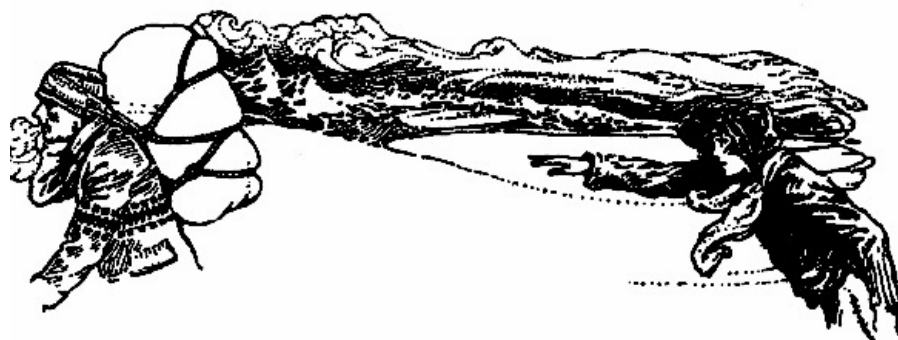
Presently Pale Peter's bartender came in. This was Charlie the Infidel. Pattie Batch rose on her cold little toes the better to observe. The frost exploded like pistol shots under her feet. She started. Really, the little mite began to feel—and rather exquisitely—like a thief in the night. There was another explosion of frost as she crept nearer her peek-hole in the glowing window. Whew! How deliciously mysterious it was! Nothing much, however, happened in Pale Peter's living-room to continue the thrill. Charlie the Infidel, in haste, chanced to brush the fawn-skin cloak off the table. He paused impatiently to pick it up, and to fling it back in a heap: whereupon he pressed on to the bar. *That* wasn't very thrilling, you may be sure; but Charlie the Infidel, after all, was only a father, and Pattie Batch, her courage not at all diminished, still waited in the frosty shadow, quite absorbed in expectation. Entered, then, Mrs. Bartender—a blonde, bored, novel-reading little lady in splendid array. First of all, as Pattie Batch observed, she yawned; secondly, she yawned again. And she was about to attempt the extraordinary feat of yawning a third time—and doubtless would have achieved it—when her washed blue eyes chanced to fall on the fawn-skin coat, with its lining of golden-brown silk shimmering in the lamplight. She picked it up, of course, in a bored sort of way; and she was positively on the very verge of being interested in it when—would you believe it?—she attacked the third yawn—or the third yawn attacked her—and however it was, the yawn was accomplished with such dexterity, such certainty, and with such satisfaction to the lady, that she quite forgot to look at the fawn-skin cloak again.

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"By George, she's tired!" Pattie Batch exclaimed to herself.

Pattie Batch sighed: she sighed twice, in point of fact—the second sigh, a great, long one, discovering itself somewhere very deep within—and then she went home disconsolate.



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THE MAKING OF A MAN

SOON after dark, John Fairmeadow, with a pack on his broad back, swung from the Jumping Jimmy trail into the clearing of Swamp's End, ceasing only then his high, vibrant song, and came striding down the huddled street, a big man in rare humour with life, labour and the night. A shadow—not John Fairmeadow's shadow—was in cautious pursuit; but of this dark, secret follower John Fairmeadow was not aware. Near the Café of Egyptian Delights he stumbled. The

pursuing Shadow gasped; and John Fairmeadow was so mightily exercised for his pack that he ejaculated in a fashion most unministerial, but recovered his footing with a jerk, and doubtless near turned pale with apprehension. But the pack was safe—the delicate contents, whatever they were, quite undisturbed. John Fairmeadow gently adjusted the pack, stamped the snow from his soles, as a precautionary measure, wiped the frost from his brows and eyelids, in the same cautious wisdom, and, still followed by the Shadow, strode on, but with infinitely more care. At the Red Elephant—Pale Peter's glowing saloon—he turned in. The bar, as always, in these days, gave the young apostle to those unrighteous parts a roaring welcome. It was become the fashion: big, bubbling, rosy John Fairmeadow, with the square jaw, the frank, admonitory tongue, the tender and persuasive heart, the competent, not unwilling fists, was welcome everywhere, from the Bottle River camps and the Cant-hook cutting to the bunk-houses of the Yellow Tail, from beyond the Divide to the lower waters of the Big River, in every saloon, bunk-house, superintendent's office and cook's quarters of his wide green parish—welcome to preach and to pray, to bury, marry, gossip and scold, and, upon goodly provocation, to fight, all to the same righteous end. A clean man: a big, broad-shouldered, deep-chested, long-legged body, with a soul to match it—a glowing heart and a purpose lifted high. There was no mistaking the man by men.

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John Fairmeadow, clad like a lumber-jack, upright, now, in the full stature of a man, body and soul, grinned like a delighted schoolboy. His fine head was thrown back, in the pride of clean, sure strength; his broad face was in a rosy glow; his great chest still heaved with the labour of a stormy trail; his gray eyes flashed and twinkled in the soft light of Pale Peter's many lamps. Twinkled?—and with merriment?—in that long, stifling, roaring, smoky, fume-laden room? For a moment: then closed, a bit worn, and melancholy, too; but presently, with reviving faith to urge them, opened wide and heartily, and began to twinkle again. The bar was in festive array: Christmas greens, red berries, ribbons, tissue-paper and gleaming tinfoil—flash of mirrors, bright colour, branches of pine, cedar and spruce from the big balsamic woods. It was crowded with lumber-jacks—great fellows from the forest, big of body and passion, here gathered in celebration of the festival. John Fairmeadow, getting all at once and vigorously under way, shouted "Merry Christmas, boys!" and "Hello, Charlie!" to the bartender; and he shook hands with Pale Peter, slapped Billy the Beast on the back, roared a greeting to Gingerbread Jenkins, exclaimed "Merry Christmas!" with the speed and detonation of a Gatling gun, inquired after Butcher Long's brood of kids in the East, and cried "Hello, old man!" and "What's the good word from Yellow Tail?" and "How d'ye do?" and "Glad t' see you!" and everywhere shook hands and clapped backs—carefully preserving, however, his own back from being slapped—and devoutly ejaculated "God bless you, men! A Merry Christmas to you all and every one!" and eventually disappeared in the direction of Pale Peter's living-quarters, leaving an uproar of genial delight behind him.

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John Fairmeadow's Shadow, however, unable to enter the bar of the Red Elephant, waited in seclusion across the windy street.

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Mrs. Bartender was still yawning as John Fairmeadow entered upon her *ennui*; but when the big minister, exercising the softest sort of caution, slipped off his gigantic pack, and deposited it with exquisitely delicate care, and a face of deep concern, on the table, she opened her faded eyes with interested curiosity. And as for the contents of the pack, there's no more concealing them! The article must now be declared and produced. It was a baby. Of course, it was a baby! The thing has been obvious all along. John Fairmeadow's foundling: left in a basket at the threshold of his temporary lodging-room at Big Rapids that very morning—first to John Fairmeadow's consternation, and then to his gleeful delight. As for the baby itself—it was presently unswathed—it is quite beyond me to describe its excellencies of appearance and conduct. John Fairmeadow himself couldn't make the attempt and escape annihilation. It was a real and regular baby, however. One might suggest, in inadequate description, that it was a plump baby; one might add that it was a lusty baby. It had hair; it had a pucker of amazement; its eyes, two of them, were properly disposed in its head; its hands were of what are called rose-leaf dimensions; it had, apparently, a fixed habit of squirming; it had no teeth. Evidently a healthy baby—a baby that any mother might be proud of—doubtless a marvel of infantile perfection in every respect. I should not venture to dispute such an assertion; nor would John Fairmeadow—nor any other bold gentleman of Swamp's End and Elegant Corners—*not in these later days!*

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Mrs. Bartender, of course, lifted her languid white hands in uttermost astonishment.

"There!" John Fairmeadow exploded, looking round like a showman. "What d'ye think o' *that?* Eh?"

"But, Mr. Fairmeadow," the poor lady stammered, "what have you brought it *here* for?"

"Why not?" John Fairmeadow demanded. "Why not, indeed? It's perfectly polite."

"What am I to *do* with it?"

"It isn't intoxicated, my good woman," John Fairmeadow ran on, in great wrath; "and it's never been in jail."

"But my *dear* Mr. Fairmeadow, do be sensible; what am I to *do* with it?"

"Why, ah—I should think," John Fairmeadow ventured—the baby was still sleeping like a brick—"that you might first of all—ah—resuscitate it. Would a—a slight poke in the ribs—provoke animation?"

But the baby didn't need a poke in the ribs. It didn't need any other sort of resuscitation. Not *that* baby! The self-dependent, courageous, perfectly competent and winning little rascal resuscitated itself. Instantly, too—and positively—and apparently without the least effort in the world. Moreover—and with remarkable directness—it demanded what it wanted—and got it. And having been nourished to its satisfaction from young Master Bartender's silver-mounted bottle (which John Fairmeadow then secretly slipped into his pocket)—and having yawned in a fashion so tremendous that Mrs. Bartender herself could never hope to equal that infinite expression of boredom—and having smiled, and having wriggled, and having giggled, and cooed, and attempted—actually attempted—to get its great toe in its mouth without extraneous assistance of any sort whatsoever—even without the slightest suggestion that such a thing would be an amazingly engaging trick in a baby of its age and degree—it burst into a gurgle of glee so wondrously genuine and infectious that poor, bored Mrs. Bartender herself was quite unable to resist it, and promptly, and publicly, and finally committed herself to the assertion that the baby was a dear, wherever it came from.

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John Fairmeadow snatched it from the table, and was about to make off with it, when Mrs. Bartender interposed.

"My *dear* Mr. Fairmeadow," said she, "that child will simply catch its *death* of cold!"

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There was something handy, however—something of silk and fawn-skin—and with this enveloping the baby John Fairmeadow swung in a roar with it to the bar—and held it aloft in all that seething wickedness—pure symbol of the blessed Christmas festival. And there was a sensation, of course—a sensation beginning in vociferous ejaculations, but presently failing to a buzz of conjecture. There were questions to follow: to which John Fairmeadow answered that he had found the baby—that the baby was nobody's baby—that the baby was his baby by right of finders keepers—that the baby was everybody's baby—and that the baby would presently be somebody's much-loved baby, *that* he'd vouch for! The baby, now resting content in John Fairmeadow's arms, was diffidently approached and examined. Gingerbread Jenkins poked a finger at it, and said, in a voice of the most inimical description, "Get out!" without disturbing the baby's serene equanimity in the slightest. Young Billy Lush, charging his soft, boyish voice with all the horrifying intent he could muster, threatened to "catch" the baby, as though bent upon devouring it on the spot; but the baby only chuckled with delight. Billy the Beast incautiously approached a finger near the baby's stout abdomen; and the baby—with a perfectly fearless glance into the very depths of the Beast's frowzy beard—clutched the finger and smiled like an angel. Long Butcher Long attempted to tweak the baby's nose; but the effort was a ridiculous failure, practiced so clumsily on an object so small, and the only effect was to cause the baby to achieve a tremendous wriggle and a loud scream of laughter. These experiments were variously repeated, but all with the same cherubic result; the baby conducted itself with admirable self-possession and courage, as though, indeed, it had been used, every hour of its life, to the company of riotous lumber-jacks in town.

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The inevitable happened, of course: Billy the Beast, whose pocket was smoking with his wages, proposed the baby's health, and there was an uproarious rush for the bar.

"Just a minute, boys!" John Fairmeadow drawled.

It was an awkward moment: but the jacks were by this time used to being bidden by this man who was a man, and the rush was forthwith halted.

"Just a minute, boys," John Fairmeadow repeated, "for your minister!"

The baby was then held aloft in John Fairmeadow's big, kind, sensitive hands, and from this safe perch softly smiled upon the crowd of flushed and bearded faces all roundabout.

"Boys," John Fairmeadow drawled, significantly, "this is the only sort of church we have in these woods."

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There was a laughing stir and shuffling; but presently a tolerant silence fell, in obedience to the custom John Fairmeadow had established; and caps came off, and pipes were smothered.

"A little away from the bar, please," the big preacher suggested.

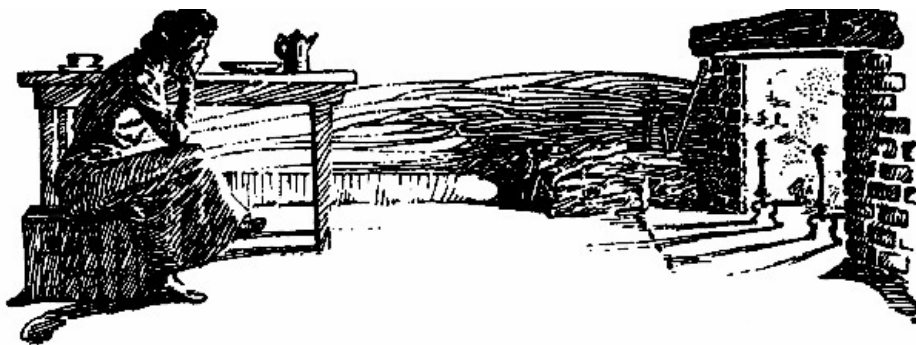
Pale Peter nodded to Charlie the Infidel; and the clink of glasses ceased—and the bottles were left in peace—and the hands of the bartender rested.

"Now, boys," said John Fairmeadow, letting the foundling fall softly into his arms, "I'm not going to preach to you to-night, though God knows you need it! I'm just going to pray for the baby. *Dear Father of us wilful Children of the Vale*," he began, at once, lifting a placid, believing face above the smiling child in his arms, "*we ask Thy guardianship of this child. In us is no perfect counsel for him nor any help whatsoever that he may surely apprehend. In Thine*

acceptable wisdom Thou settest Thy little ones in a world where presently only Thou canst teach them: teach Thou then this little one. Thou alone knowest the right path for a little boy's inquiring feet: lead then this little boy. Thou alone art saving helper to an adventuring lad: help then this lad. Thou alone art all-perceiving and persuasive, alone art Truth Teller to a bewildered youth and Good Example in his wondering sight: be then Good Example and Teller of Truth to this youth. Thou alone art in the fashioning ways of Thine own world a Maker of Men: make then of this little child a Man. We ask no easy path for him—no unmanly way—no indulgent tempering of the winds. We pray for no riches—for no great deeds of his doing—for no ease at all nor any satisfaction. We ask of Thee in his behalf good Manhood. Lead him where true men must go: lead him where they learn the all of life; lead him where they level down and build again; lead him where in righteous strength his hands may lift the fallen; lead him where in anger he may strike; lead him where his tears may fall; lead him where his heart may find a pure desire. O Almighty God, Lover of children, Father of us all alike, make of this child, in the measure of his service and in the stature of his soul, a Man. Amen."

[Pg 26]

Amen, indeed!



[Pg 27]

CHRISTMAS EVE AT SWAMP'S END

AS for poor little Pattie Batch, all this while, she sat alone, a doleful heart, in the shack at the edge of the big, black woods, quite unaware of the momentous advent of a Christmas baby at Swamp's End. The Christmas wind was still high, still shaking the cabin, still rattling the door, still howling like a wild beast in the night, still roaring in the red stove; and snow was falling again—a dry dust of snow which veiled the wondering stars. It was no longer a jolly, rollicking Christmas wind. The gale, now, it seemed, was become inimical to the lonely child: wild, vaunting, merciless, terrible with cold. Pattie Batch, disconsolate, sighed more often than a tender heart could bear to sanction in a child, and found swift visions in the glowing coals, though no enlivening tableaux; but—dear brave and human little one!—she presently ejaculated "Shoot it, anyhow!" and began at once to cheer up. And she was comfortably toasting her shins, in a placid delusion of stormy, mile-wide privacy, her mother's old-fashioned long black skirt drawn up from her dainty toes (of which, of course, the imminent John Fairmeadow was never permitted to be aware), when, all at once, and clamouring above the old wind's howling, there was a tremendous knocking at the door—a knocking so loud, and commanding, and prolonged, that Pattie Batch jumped like a fawn in alarm, and stood for a moment with palpitating heart and a mighty inclination to fly to the bedroom and lock herself in. Presently, however, she mustered courage to call "Come in!" in a sufficient tone: whereupon, the door was immediately flung wide, and big John Fairmeadow, with a wild, dusty blast of the gale, strode in with a gigantic basket, and slammed the door behind him, leaving the shivering, tenacious Shadow, which had secretly followed from Swamp's End, to keep cold vigil outside.

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"Hello, there, Pattie Batch!" John Fairmeadow roared. "Merry Christmas!"

Pattie Batch stared.

"Hello, I say!" John Fairmeadow cried, again. "Merry Christmas, ye rascal!"

Pattie Batch, gulping her delight, and quite incapable of uttering a word, because of it, flew to the kitchen, instead of to the bedroom, and returned with a broom, with which, while the Shadow peered in at the window, she brushed, and scraped, and slapped John Fairmeadow so vigorously that John Fairmeadow scampered into a corner and stood at bay.

"Look out, there, Polly Pry!" he shouted, in a rage; "don't you *dare* look at my basket."

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Pattie Batch had been doing nothing of the sort.

"Don't you so much as *squint* at my basket," John Fairmeadow growled.

Pattie Batch instantly *did*, of course—and with her eyes wide and sparkling, too. It was really something more than a squint.

"Keep your eyes off that basket, Miss Pry!" John Fairmeadow commanded, again. "Huh!" he complained, emerging from his refuge and throwing his mackinaw and cap on the floor; "anybody'd think there was something in that basket for *you*."

"There ith," Pattie Batch gasped, in ecstasy.

"Is!" John Fairmeadow scornfully mocked. "Huh!"

Pattie Batch caught John Fairmeadow by the two lapels of his coat—and she stood on tiptoe—and she wouldn't let John Fairmeadow turn his head away—(as if John Fairmeadow cared to evade those round, glowing eyes!)—and she looked into his gray eyes with a bewitching conglomeration of hope, amusement, curiosity and adoring childish affection. "There ith, too," she chuckled, her lisp getting the better of her. "Yeth, there ith. I know *you*, Mithter Fairmeadow."

John Fairmeadow ridiculously failed to smother a chuckle in a growl.

"Doth it bite?" Pattie Batch inquired, maliciously feigning a terrific fright.

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"Nonsense!" John Fairmeadow declared; "it hasn't a tooth in its head." He added, with one eye closed, and palms lifted: "But—aha!—just you wait and *see*."

"Well," Pattie Batch drawled, "I th'pose it'th a turkey. It'th thertainly *thomethin'* t' eat," she declared.

"Good *enough* to eat, I bet you!" John Fairmeadow agreed, with the air of having concealed in that veritable big basket the sweetest morsel in all the world.

"Ith it a chicken?"

"Nonsense!" said John Fairmeadow; "it's fa-a-a-ar more delicious than chicken. Hi, there, Polly Pry!" he roared, and just in time; "keep your hands off."

"Is it anything for the house?"

"No, indeed; the house is for *it*."

Pattie Batch scowled in perplexity.

"The back yard, too," John Fairmeadow added; "and don't you forget that this whole place—and all the world—belongs to just what's in that basket."

"I'm sure," poor Pattie Batch mused, scratching her curls in bewilderment, "I can't guess what it *could* be."

Both were now staring at the basket; and at that very moment the blanket covering—*stirred!*

"Ith a dog!" Pattie Batch exclaimed.

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"Dog!" the outraged John Fairmeadow roared. "Nothing of the sort! No *ma'am!*"

Pattie Batch clasped her hands. "It ith, too!" she cried. "I thaw it move."

"It is *not!*"

"Ith a kitten, then."

"It is *not* a kitten!"

Thereupon—while the Shadow, by whom John Fairmeadow had been dogged that night, now peered with acute attention through a break in the frost on the window-pane—thereupon, without any warning save a second slight movement of the blanket, a sound—and not by any means a growl—the thing was certainly not a dog—a sound proceeded from the depths of the basket.

Pattie Batch jumped away.

"Well, well!" cried John Fairmeadow; "what's the row?"

Row, indeed! Pattie Batch was gone white; and she swayed a little, and shivered, too, and

clenched her little hands to restrain her amazing hope. "Oh," she moaned, at last, far short of breath enough, "tell me quick: ith it—ith it a—a—"

John Fairmeadow threw back the blanket in a most dramatic fashion; and there, wrapped in the neglected fawn-skin cloak, all dimpled and smiling, lay—

THE BABY!

"By George!" screamed Pattie Batch; "it *ith* a baby!"

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"Your baby," John Fairmeadow whispered. "God's Christmas gift—to you."

Pattie Batch—adorable, young mother!—reverently approached, and, bending with parted lips, eyes shining, and hands laid upon her trembling heart, for the first time gazed content upon the little face. She lifted, then—and with what awe and tenderness!—the tiny mortal from the warm basket, and pressed it, with knowing arms, against her warmer, softer young breast. "My baby!" she crooned, her lips close to its ear; "my little baby—my own little baby!"



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