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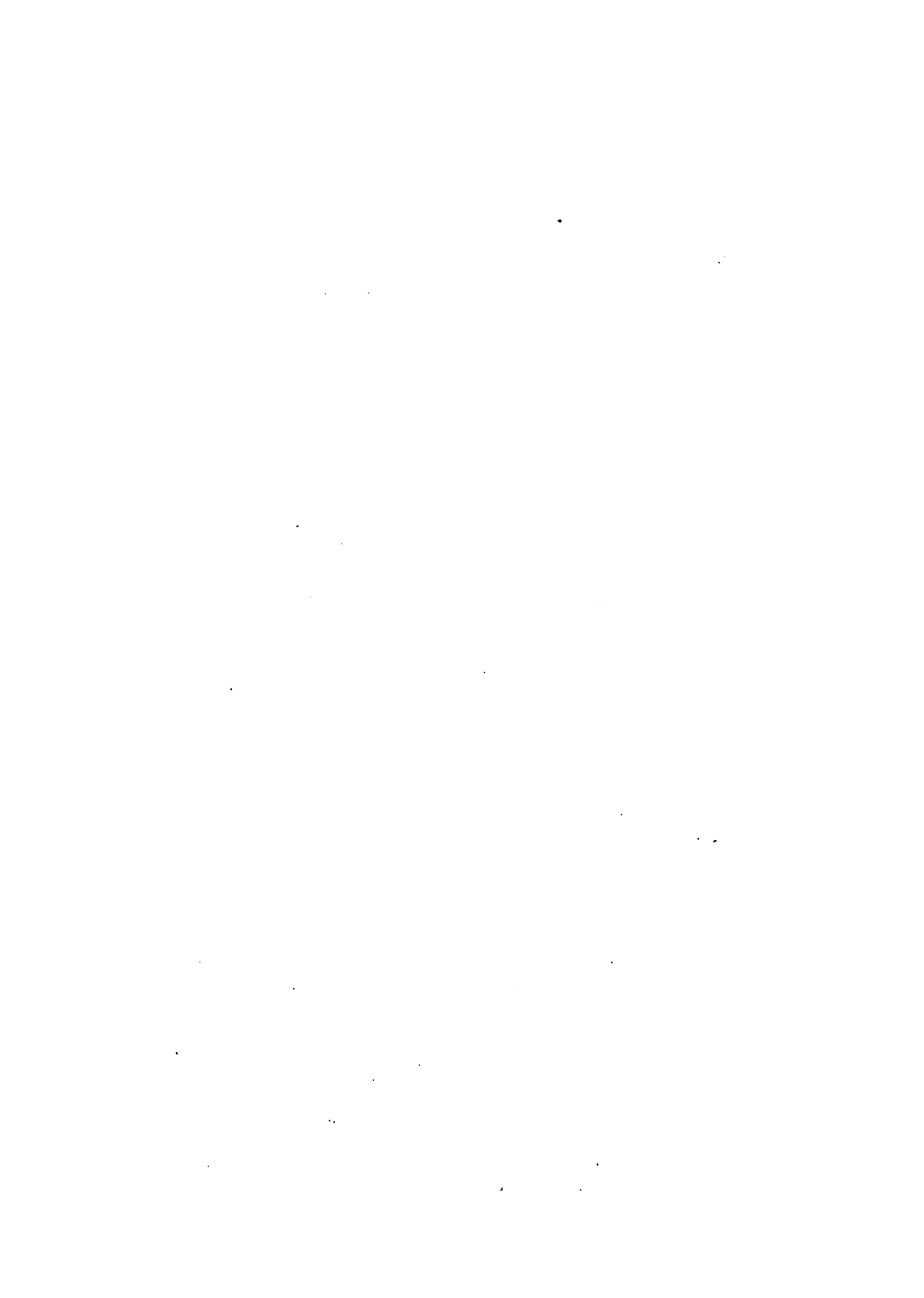
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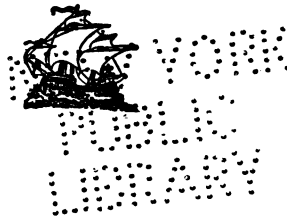
**"We can light the star when it's dark. Will you come?" (P. 29)**

Feb. 1 - 16  
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# THE COSTLY STAR

BY  
MARGARET SLATTERY

ILLUSTRATED BY FRANK T. MERRILL



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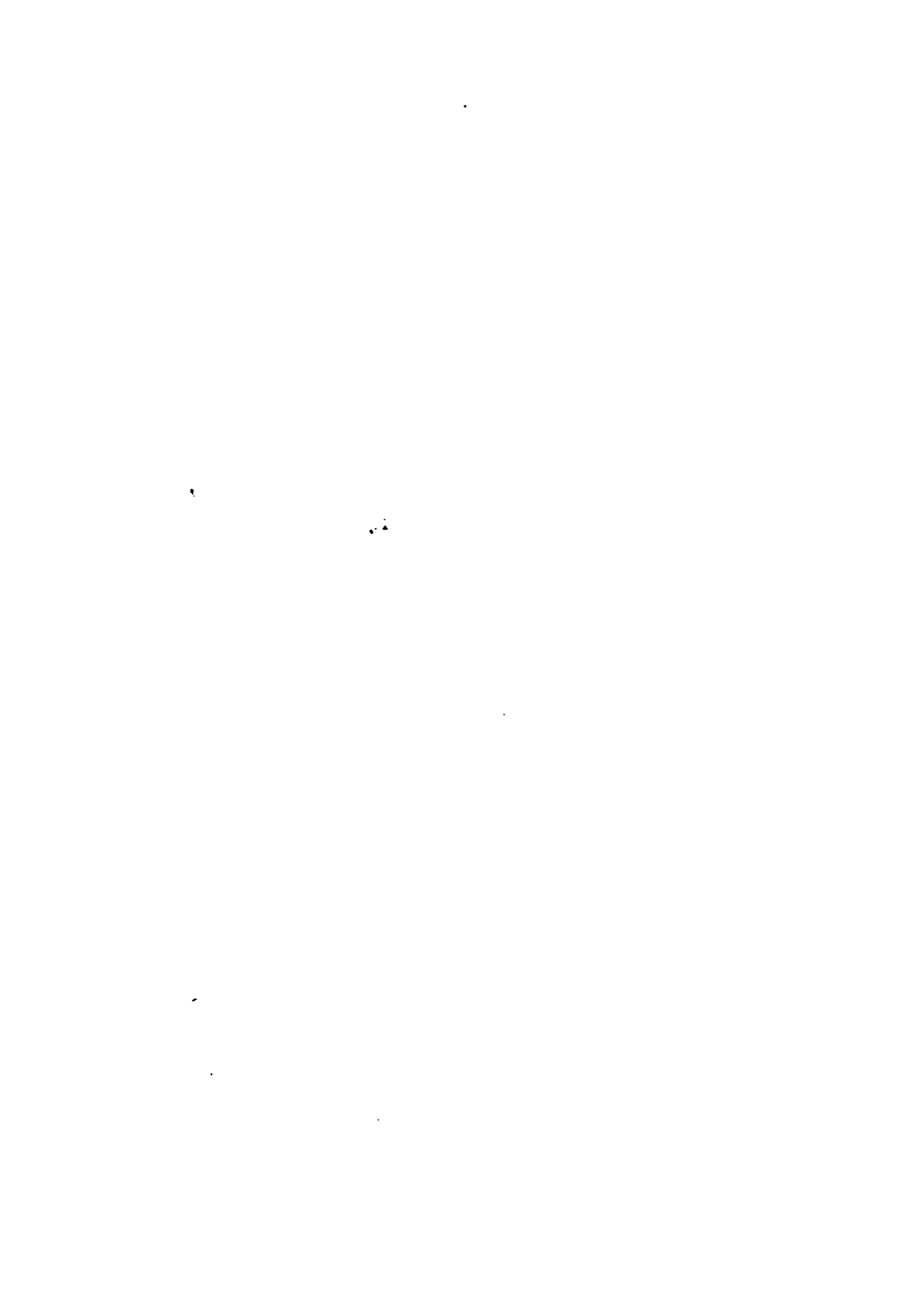
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**THE COSTLY STAR**





# THE COSTLY STAR

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## CHAPTER I

Three years now since — Three! He was five last month. “Fourth floor, please.” She did not need to say it, for practically every passenger left the car there. She walked down the broad aisle between toy motor cars, rocking-horses, dolls and games, and stopped where most of the others did — beside the rail enclosing the great square which the management had set apart for the children. Attendants guided the little ones up the steps, watched over them as with glee they shot down the long slides, helped them into marvelous swings, lifted them to the backs of camels, elephants and horses on the merry-go-round, or let them sail tiny gunboats in a miniature sea. The young woman stood fascinated. All the way down town she told herself that she ought not to do it, but the temptation of the memory of that joyous laughter and those happy faces was too much for her. This would be the third year that she had spent a morning before that rail, and it was harder

now than even in the bitterness of the first days. It seemed cruel, she told herself, that *he* should have the boy at Christmas, and yet she could not even think of the long summer days by the lake without him. She let herself enjoy for a moment the thrill of the memories of those days each summer, when the boy was hers, then a wave of anger and resentment overwhelmed her. It always swept her into a mad turmoil of mind and heart when she remembered that this child to whom she had given life was now hers by the cold words of a stranger sitting at the bench in a court-room, who had said that its father and mother might live apart and share him for equal periods of six months. Now he had the boy, and it was only a few days before Christmas.

A gate in the enclosure opposite opened and Santa Claus entered. There were shouts of laughter as the children rushed to him. Some more timid than the rest hid their little hands behind them and could not be persuaded to shake the big hand of their half-feared friend.

She knew her boy would not be there in a public play-room, but she liked to find the boys who resembled him — there were often some who did, but the comparisons were to his advantage.

As she watched them she was suddenly conscious that she was crying — she could not stop — she, who hated the exhibition of emotion, who was proud of her self-control and poise, was holding weakly to the rail sobbing, while strangers, people whom she termed “ordinary,” watched with curiosity or sympathy. She half sensed that she was laughing as a woman in white put her arm around her and led her away. She even read in puzzled fashion Emergency Room as they entered. She drank the contents of the glass they gave her, and when they told her to lie down she obeyed, still bewildered, and knowing only that she was laughing and crying and could not stop. After what seemed a long time the nurse asked if she had lost a little child. Then she came to herself — they must not know, they had no right — she said she felt better and asked for a taxi-cab to take her home.

The maid who let her in said nothing. For more than twenty years she had felt proprietary rights in this woman, who would be always a girl to her although her thirtieth birthday was three months past. When she had taken off her wraps and thrown herself upon the couch in her own room she told her faithful maid that she had become

exhausted while in one of the stores, would have a light lunch served there in her room and then would try to sleep. She only half heard the words of sympathy, the reprimand for "doing too much," but the caress and the careful arrangement of pillows were a comfort. After the luncheon which she compelled herself to eat, she tried in vain to sleep. Wandering about the room, her eyes fell on a little red book which she had thrown on the table a week before. A friend had persuaded her to attend a tabernacle service to which everybody was going, and when at the close she had persistently refused to go up and shake the preacher's hand, a young woman with a most attractive face had given her the little book, saying, "Will you not read it sometimes, please?" It had seemed so vitally important to the young woman that she had smiled and said, "Yes." But she had not done it. Several times during the week sharp, stinging sentences, words of challenge from the tabernacle sermon or snatches of song had come back to her. Now she opened the little book and lying down again began to read verses marked in red. Utterly spent by the strain of the morning, she did not read long, but closing her eyes thought over the words. The rain which had threatened

all day began in earnest and the gray mist darkened the apartment. Turning her face toward the wall she finally fell asleep.

Soon she was conscious of long lines of people of every sort hurrying along a great highway at the end of which there hung a soft gray curtain of cloud that hid the sky. Where it touched the earth a man stood — a man with a long robe and a wonderful face. As the people came near they spoke to him one by one, and he answered. Most hesitated at his answer, spoke again and turned to make their way down over the hill. Now and then one nodded and for an instant the curtain parted, as a look of great joy passed over the face of the man. Curious, she joined the group at the end of the long line. “Where are you all going?” she asked. “To see the star,” answered a gray-haired woman by her side. “It is the Bethlehem star, you know. They say that if you can see it, your mind and heart will be at peace and you will be *happy* the rest of your life. I wish I’d known about it long ago.” The younger woman looked at the discontented, unhappy faces about her, then said, “I will walk along with you; we all look as though we needed something to make us happy!”

It seemed as if they would never reach the soft

gray curtain that grew darker as they neared it. The older woman who had been her companion had nodded her head, then added, "Yes, oh, yes, anything," in answer to the low spoken words of the man with the wonderful face, and now she found herself before him. "Would *you* see the star?" The keen eyes looked her through. "Yes," she heard herself answering. "I want peace of mind and heart, I need it." "Will you pay? It is a costly star." "What must I pay?" she asked, for something in his tone made her fear. He hesitated, a look of pity and understanding coming over his face. "Will you try to forgive him?" he asked so softly that no one else could hear. "Oh, not that," she cried, "anything but that!" "It is the price you must pay to see the star and know its peace," he said. But she shook her head and slowly joined the company going down over the hill.

As she walked she was conscious of a Presence. Tears of disappointment filled her eyes and she stumbled along. Looking down on the great plain below she saw just as she had read it in the morning paper, men lying dead in the snow, hundreds of them, the smoke of burning cities mingling with the blaze of bursting shells. "If only those who

have brought men to this could see the Star, peace would come to earth. But it is a costly star and they will not pay." She turned, seeking the voice, but only strange companions, silent as herself, were near. She wondered if they felt the Presence, or heard the voice; if they were conscious, as was she, of a longing to pay, a desire to go back and see the star. But she walked on. After a long time she sat down to rest, and there at the foot of the hill was a brightly lighted home. Before the great fire-place a man and a woman stood facing each other. Their gestures and the expression upon their faces made evident the words of anger and hatred she could not hear. A moment and the man flung himself furiously into his coat and left the house. "They need to see the Star," said the same even voice, "but they will not pay. *Neither can put himself in the other's place. See,*" the voice continued, and she felt its pain, "see the scores of wrecked homes — little children in them suffering the penalty. *Selfishness has made both man and woman deaf and blind.*" The words scorched her and the Presence seemed to search her inmost soul. "I must go back," she cried. "Lead me back; I must see the star."

"You called. Did you want anything? It



sounded as if you were in pain," the maid stood at the door, anxious and troubled. "No," she answered, "I must have dreamed. I am glad you wakened me. Frank and Louise are coming for dinner and I'll have to dress at once."

The scenes through which she had passed in her dream were so vivid, so compelling, that all through dinner she was obliged to rouse herself to take part in the conversation. She could still feel the Presence.

Contrary to her usual dread of spending an evening alone, she longed to have her friends go that she might think. The talk drifted to the tabernacle and they told her of mutual friends who had "hit the trail," of the large numbers who would be added to their church, of Peter D — who had given up the importing of liquor and was looking about for a new business. She made few comments, but there was no sarcasm this time in her words.

When at last the good-nights had been said she hurried to her room, undressed quickly and turning on the light over her bed read from the Testament again. How many times she had read all night seeking to drown memories that would not let her sleep — but never words like these. She had never

taken religion very seriously. It had seemed to her a thing for the old, the sick, the poor, and she had not turned to it even in the last three years of suffering. The life of the one who began in that manger to which the thought of millions would turn on Christmas morning and ended in the day's agony on a cross, and the glory of an open tomb, had never before deeply impressed her. But now she closed the book and turned out the light, conscious of the Presence.

In the dark she began to think of the days when James Carston had told her he loved her. She had not let herself think of that for a long time. Then her wedding, the first year in his father's home, the many misunderstandings — then the baby. Crowding upon each other came the memories of the things which she had said to him the day the child was a year old, of the words of cold disdain with which he had met her storms of anger. "He was older than I, more than ten years. I had always had my own way. He should have been patient," she told herself as she had numberless times before, but now the words of the dream came hauntingly. "Neither can put himself in the other's place. Selfishness has made both man and woman deaf and blind." Memories of the

child came rushing over her — the last awful scene when the man had begged her to try again, to make one more attempt to understand him. He had said that he would do anything to save them for the child's sake from the publicity of separation, and she had answered haughtily that she would never forgive him, that she would relieve him of the burden of both herself and the child. She had meant then to take her little two-year-old son and go back to her home, but the court had said no. All their quarrels had started with such petty things, but how the memories hurt! Forgive him? It was the price of the star! Then she would never see it.

The loneliness and longing would not be banished. She could not fight it off with hard and bitter thoughts as before. An hour or more of feverish thinking penetrated by the words of the book and the memory of the dream, and it was early morning. In the gray light she rose and knelt by the bed. After a long time she said slowly and aloud to the Presence: "Show me the star—I will pay—I will try to forgive him. I *will* forgive. Help me!" It was her first prayer. Into her heart, healing, cooling, quieting, came the sense of peace. She was feeling the mystery—she had touched

the Infinite. Comforted and conscious of sustaining strength, she went back to bed. The stars were fading. One seemed brighter than the others, and watching it she fell asleep.



## CHAPTER TWO

While Alma Carston had been dressing for dinner and trying in vain to shake herself free of her dream, the man who had been her partner in what he often sarcastically called the disillusionment sat in his living-room with his little son upon his knee. The child had been "saying a piece" which he was to repeat with the other children at a Christmas service. His aunt, conscientious and painstaking in everything, had taught him carefully. With expression and accuracy that would have done credit to a person much older than "just five," he said the words of the first Christmas story. Although his aunt taught him with care, she refused to answer questions about the thing that she taught, and a whole volley of them followed the recital of the "piece." Angels and wise men, shepherds and camels, mangers, gold, frankincense and myrrh, all came in for their share, and the questionnaire ended with three important interrogations — "Did *you* ever see the star, Daddy? Have you looked for it? Wouldn't you like to see it?" Negative monosyllables or silence being the only answer of

the man whose thoughts flew back over the years to the day when he had himself stumbled through "We have seen his star in the East and are come to worship him," the child changed the subject, and shaking his father by the shoulders demanded, "Tell me, Daddy, *am* I going to have a Christmas tree? Am I?" "Sure," said his father, and now he seemed interested, "Sure you are, a tree that will touch the ceiling this year, you are such a big boy." "What will be on it?" a question accompanied by the smile that made a friend of everyone who ever saw it. "What do you *want* on it?" The boy did not hesitate for a moment; he had evidently thought it all out. "One tree!" cried his father, when, breathless, the boy had finished. "You will need a forest of Christmas trees!" "Fine!" said the boy, in the tone so like his father's. "Who is going to come to my tree, Daddy? The big cousins who came last year — will they all come?" "Yes," answered the father, "we'll ask anybody you want." "*Truly?*" cried the boy. "Will we, Daddy?" He snuggled down into his father's arms, and played with the fingers of the hand that held him tightly. He was silent so long that his father said, "Well, have you decided whom you want?" "Yes," the child



**“Tell me, Daddy, am I going to have a Christmas Tree?”**



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answered, slowly and seriously. "I want Mother. Last Christmas she didn't have any tree. I asked her in the summer. She had only presents — she liked mine the best — but she didn't have any candy — nobody gave her any. Daddy, I wish you and Mother lived in the same house. Helen's Daddy and her Mother live in the very same home, and so do Allen's." He sighed. "I asked her all summer to come and see me and she has never come. She's got lovely sunshine hair and she can swim fine. She teached me, only I can't do it yet." He was still a moment or two, then added, "I guess I'll ask Carl. He's a scout. That'll be enough. She can tell stories lots better than Auntie and better than you, Daddy. Maybe she'll tell one and" — His aunt interrupted by saying that it was past time for bed and Daddy's dinner was ready. The child seldom spoke of his mother, for he found that no one answered, and a strange, uncomfortable feeling always followed the mention of her name, but having started talking about her he found it very hard to stop, and protested vigorously though to no avail as his aunt led him away.

James Carston did not eat very heartily and he was not in a communicative mood. "Sunshine hair!" He had told her that very thing himself.

He remembered the day on the lake and the look with which she answered him. And he had taught her to swim. She was so vigorous she had soon surpassed her teacher.

He left immediately after dinner for the mid-week service of the church in which he was an officer. When his father died the whole congregation had mourned the loss of their most prominent member and their real friend, and they had persuaded him to take his father's place. He had tried often of late to give it up, but they would not listen to it. Usually he did not attend the weekly service, but tonight his presence had been requested, for over a hundred people were to seek membership in the church, the largest number that had ever come before it. The impression it made could be felt as soon as one stepped into the room. The young leader of the singing was inspired by it and the minister showed its influence in his fine sensitive face. James Carston paid little attention to the singing, none whatever to the prayer, though his head was bowed. He was lost in his own thoughts during the opening paragraph of the minister's talk and was brought back by the words "Have you seen the star, you men and women of this great city?"—his boy's question, "Have *you*

seen the star, Daddy?" The minister seemed certain that not many had seen it. He said only those who sought to see it could be guided to the place of victory and peace — that men today found it hard to seek stars; they loved their own will and way, were filled with pride, steeped in greed and selfishness. But some, he declared *were* seeing it at that moment, and as he gave one instance after another of men and women who had found the peace and joy rewarding those who courageously push aside all that is unworthy in order that they may see, and impressed upon them that yielding self-interest to the Divine will for the good of *all* is the only path to peace, there was hunger of heart revealed upon more than one face.

He walked home alone. Ever since the day when the court, at the bidding of his influence, his money and his demand, had given the boy into his keeping for the half year, the holidays had been a source of dread. As the child grew older, the strange arrangement of a mother in the summer and a father in the winter, and never both, puzzled him, and of late his questions were hard to answer. Some day the boy would have to be told. What should he tell him? What would *she* tell him?

What poor reinforcement their example would be when it was his turn to meet life's temptations.

On the way to his own room the father stopped to look at the boy. He often stood gazing down at the child so like himself and wishing that he might always keep him a boy of five. Tonight he stood longer than usual, then went to bed to lie staring into the darkness, thinking of things that even his strong will could not banish. He did not know that within a half-hour's walk she was struggling to forgive him that she might see the star. He was what men call a practical man, but the training of his home had deepened his religious sense and the effort to silence the Voice that called him back to his ideals had cost him much.

In spite of all effort now he remembered his taunting words when the court had given him his son, remembered the intolerant fashion in which in the first years he had dismissed her "unreasonableness" or laughed at her judgments. She was young, she had been the only daughter, unrestrained and petted, and he had not given her long to learn new ways. He felt a deep sense of shame for the first time. He gave up the fight against the memories and let them come — the night the boy was born — how courageous she had been — he

felt for a moment that he would like to go to her and say that he had been unfair, but he had never said that to anyone. Then his pride came back with a rush, self-pity followed, his heart hardened and after a time he slept restlessly.

He did not see the child the next morning. It was raining, and as he stepped out into the chill air he hated the world. Business was dull for him at the holidays, and that afternoon his work was done at three o'clock. He sat looking out over the roofs of the city, thinking in spite of himself of the boy's wish that his mother come to the Christmas tree, of the sunshine hair and the stories. She would not come of course, but what should he say to the child by way of explanation? "Why not send the boy to her for Christmas?" The words darted into his consciousness as if they had been spoken aloud. That, he told himself, as he stood for a moment looking at the mass of moving umbrellas far below, he would never do. The words of the minister the night before, with their condemnation of those who unfailingly follow their own desires, and the promise of peace to those who refuse to enthrone self, persistently penetrated his thinking.

It was a perfectly appointed office — his father's.

Position, business, home, everything he had was his father's, and yet he had never measured up as a boy or a young man to that father's expectations and hopes. He had always been glad that his father had gone before *it* happened. His little son had his father's name. He looked up at the keen, strong face over the desk. Tears sprang to his eyes, and yielding to a sudden overwhelming impulse, he bowed his head upon his desk and cried aloud, "O God, help me!" He sat there a long time, and then the **Miracle** came — the Creator touched the soul of the man he had made and completed his creation. The words that were wrung from the awakened soul were those of a strong man yielding himself to a greater Will, infinite and good — saying out of a desperate struggle, "I will do *right* — *Thy* Will." The strengthening presence of a Brother who had been through a man's Gethsemane stole into the office on the twelfth floor so quietly that the great, noisy, bustling city roared on unaware.

It was after five when he left his office. He had made his plans. He would send the child to her in the morning for the holidays, and the tree should follow.

When he told the boy a shout of joy filled the

house — “ O Daddy, Daddy, couldn't we go *now*? ” The “ we ” stung the heart of the man, who could not help the jealous pang that came as the boy clapped his hands and danced about the room.

Putting to bed that night was a difficult task for the child's aunt, but she made no comment. When hours later James Carston looked in at him, he stirred in his sleep, opened his eyes, and seeing his father, sat up quickly and cried, “ Is it morning, Daddy? ” The man shook his head, kissed the sleepy little face, told him morning would come soon, and then hurried to his own room. Despite the wakeful hours and the morning that came too quickly, the man was conscious of a strange quietness of mind and heart he had never known before.

At eight they telephoned to ask if Mrs. Carston would be in that morning. She would be until eleven. At half-past nine, his suit-case packed, and dressed in the fur-trimmed coat and cap that made him look, in his aunt's words, “ perfectly adorable,” he climbed into the motor with his father and a maid. The boy commented gleefully on all that he saw in the street. The man was silent at first, then he began to give the half-listening child instructions as to what he should say and do. “ Tell



your mother, Daddy sent you for the holidays because you wanted her at your Christmas tree. The tree will come at noon. Tell her you are a Christmas visitor. You can stay until the New Year; then Mary will come for you. Listen, my boy, telephone Daddy every day at half-past four. I'll be in the office Christmas Day, too. Don't forget."

The chauffeur was turning the car — there was the apartment. The man seized his son, and holding him so tightly that the child uttered a half-frightened cry of protest, he kissed him again and again. He suddenly felt that the Will might ask him to leave with the lonely woman the child who loved her and wanted her. It seemed too much.

Not until the maid picked up the suit-case did the boy realize that his father was not going in with him. He stood still on the walk. "Aren't *you* coming, Daddy?" and in response to his father's "No," the little face shadowed. "Is it to be like summer?" he asked, sadly. The man could hardly answer. "Run along, laddie," he said. "You're a Christmas surprise. Think how surprised she'll be. I will send the tree at noon."

He watched them enter the big door. The maid would see that the boy was safe, then the motor

would take her back. He looked a moment at the great modern apartment which had swallowed up his son, then walked rapidly away. But as he walked with the crowd he was conscious of a Presence. It calmed his soul.



**CHAPTER THREE**

Alma Carston was writing a list of names when the bell rang. The day before had been the first in years that she had known peace or even approached happiness. The quietness that had fallen upon her heart, which was such a contrast to the accustomed turmoil, she did not even try to explain. She rested in it. The list of names included old friends whom she had long neglected, lovers of books to whom she could deliver her gifts on Christmas morning—then she planned to go to the church—she had not been on Christmas Day since she was a little girl. With every thought of dread of the day came the soothing memory of the star that she had paid to see. She gave no attention to the bell until she heard the astonished exclamation of her maid, and then a child's laugh. In a moment she was in the hall. The "surprise" was almost too much, but she heard it saying, "Daddy sent me—I'm a Christmas visitor, a surprise, and the tree will come at noon, 'cause I wanted you for my Christmas tree." Had it not been for the child's evident joy, his insis-

tence that his suit-case be unpacked, his questions about where they should put the tree, what should be on it, whether Carl the Scout might come to it—a perfect volley of questions that gave her no time to think, she could not have controlled the emotions that surged over her. At noon, as they sat at lunch at the little table she always used for him at the Lake, he looked over at her, his face beaming, and said, “It’s nice, isn’t it, mother, just like summer, only its ’most Christmas?” She could control herself no longer and fled to her room, but he followed, calling, “Has it come? Has the tree come? Daddy said it would.” And it had. It must be attended to and there was no time for tears. A box filled with all sorts of decorations came with the tree, and it was nearly four o’clock when tinsel and gay balls, colored chains of every sort, candles that must not be lighted, Santa Clauses little and big, and a wonderful electric star, were fastened to the branches to the satisfaction of both the decorators.

The child was tired. The excitement of the day had been a strain, and he showed it. He was content to lie quietly in his mother’s arms listening to the story. “Tell me about ‘The Boat that never got to Shore,’” he begged. “Daddy doesn’t know

it and Auntie doesn't." Two or three times he had asked, "Is it half-past four?" and as the story closed, asked again. "Why do you want to know, darling?" she asked. "'Cause then every day, I telephone Daddy. I musn't forget it," he answered. "It's half-past four now," she said, and he ran to the telephone. He seemed such a baby to her that she listened in astonishment as the clear little voice gave the correct number. She did not know how often he had interrupted important business interviews since he had learned that call.

"Hello, Daddy," she heard. "It's come. Yes, she was *very* surprised. It's all decorated. Yes, it's beautiful. I like it. There aren't any presents on it, but there will be in the morning. Yes, lots." Then in dismay she heard, pleadingly, "Daddy, won't you come and see it 'fore I go to bed? We can light the star when it's dark. Will you come? *No, Daddy, tonight!* What?" Then he turned to her. "He says, 'Can he come to see it?' He says I'd have to ask you. *Can* he, mother? Say yes, quick." The tense little face was turned toward her. A moment's struggle, and she answered, "Yes." "You can, Daddy; I asked her *twice* and she says you can." The man at the other end of the wire tried to speak calmly, but the child said,

“I can’t hear you, Daddy — what?” Then — “Oh, all right. Good-bye.” “He’ll come at half-past six,” he announced. “Oh, Mother, aren’t we glad?” The woman leaning her head upon her hands did not know what to answer. The child looked at her with misgiving, but she said cheerfully, “My little boy must take a nap right away. I’ll wake you at six, and then we can be ready when Daddy comes.”

The small arms clasped tightly about her neck, the warm kisses of the boy who from babyhood had been an unusually affectionate child, seemed so good to her after the long months, that she lay beside him thinking of what it would mean if she need never let him go again. The arms relaxed, and turning on his side, the child slept quietly. She watched him, pressing one soft little hand again and again to her lips. “I will forgive his father,” she said softly. “I will tell him I have paid to see the star. I do forgive him. Do you hear me, my boy?” But the child did not hear.

She did not need to waken him, for in less than an hour he sat up, rubbing his eyes. “Has Daddy come? Can we light the star? It’s dark enough, isn’t it?” He sprang out of bed to be made ready. The bell rang — it was only the last mail, very

late. Again, but it was a box of flowers from a friend. Then a third time, and she heard her maid's cold and dignified greeting. The boy ran to his father, but he scarcely saw him. He looked past the child at her — the first time he had seen her for three years. There was a wonderful new light in her face! He had planned carefully what he should say to her about their being *friends* for the sake of the boy, but instead of the carefully chosen words, he cried passionately, "Try to forgive me," and reached out both hands to her. She looked into his face and saw there what all the years had never shown her. She did not know that he had only just found his soul, but she knew in a moment that she wanted, longed to forgive and be forgiven. "I do, oh! I do," she said, and went to him. The moments seemed to blot out the pain of years.

The scene he had been witnessing did not please the child, who stood waiting and puzzled. Suddenly in a trembling voice, he protested. "Come," he said, "Mother, let's show him the *tree*. Daddy, just look at the star — it's lighted." But the man and the woman who followed their son into the room where the tree glistened had seen another Star, in whose white light selfishness

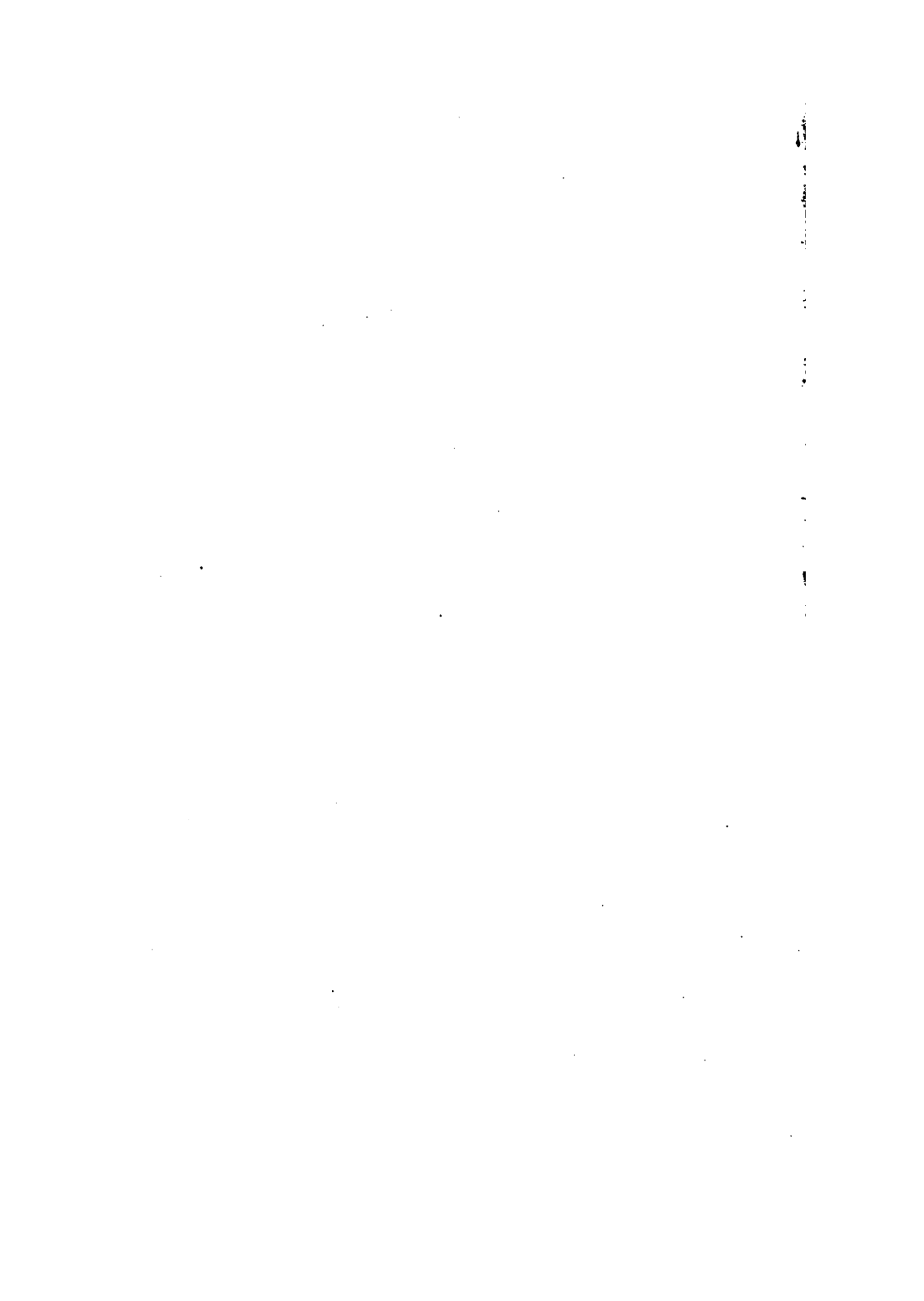


died, a costly star, that brought reconciliation and peace, a star that all the men and women and nations of the world may see if they will pay the price.



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