NEW YEAR'S Eve is always a quiet time in our home since Marget died. Marget was our servant; her real name of course was Margaret, but she abbreviated it in such a fashion, and we did likewise. Saint Margaret she is to us now; placed above all others in our household calendar, for she suffered love's cruel test in laying down her life for our sakes. I'll tell you the story if you care to hear it, but my words will be simple and few. When a man feels most he can say least; and the thought of that New Year's Eve brings a queer shaky feeling to my throat.

Marget had only lived with us a year. Where my wife picked her up I neither know nor asked. There was a confidence between them that none other in the house shared; and though I surmised that one woman strong in her purity was holding helping hands to one who had tripped, I had confidence in my wife's judgment and made no enquiries.

Margaret was a young woman, although prematurely aged in appearance; over twenty-five years of age perhaps, but hardly touching the third decade. She had plain, strong features, hair of a nondescript color, and gray eyes, small but bright; a chunky figure, and hands whose shapeliness rough household labor was unable to spoil.

“Marget is proud of her hands,” the children would say; and she would smile without contradicting them.

With the adults of the household she was always grave, meeting the kindest advances most soberly; but with the children she was altogether charming.—quick, bright, tender, and full of quaint little drolleries of speech and action that revealed the naturally merry nature beneath.

My wife and I would pause frequently in our conversation to listen to her whimsical utterances, as she moved about the kitchen with the children dodging her footsteps. Sometimes we heard a little laugh, pathetic in its brevity, when the perpetual "why" of childhood taxed her inventive genius. She was rarely at a loss for some half-witty, half-fanciful, response to such questionings; and it seemed as though her keen sense of humor found its only outlet thus.

She was happiest with the children around her. In their absence her face resumed its melancholy, and her words were few. She had been with us only a year, I said, and yet I trusted her fully. She was devoted to my wife and tender to all the children; but her best love was given to little Jack, our two-year-old baby. Even on her busiest days she managed to keep him in sight; pausing as she passed...
to and fro to touch caressingly the boy's dark curls, or catch the chubby hand and hold it to her lips; while his lightest cry would bring her to his side, a sure comforter. She made no open display of her preference, in fact, seemed rather to avoid any reference to it; but it was, as my wife remarked, "when Marget looks at Jack, her face grows beautiful."

It was five years ago to-day, and we were living at the time in a queer old octagon house, the parsonage of the little Methodist chapel a quarter of a mile away. It was a rough-cast building; a great rambling, oddly planned place, with rooms big and little, whose walls intersected at every possible angle, save a right angle. The children revelled in it, especially in the tiny triangular rooms cut from the larger apartments. To them the house suggested endless games of Puss in the Corner; to me it was a geometric nightmare, in which walls, ceilings, and floor kept carnival.

I often wondered what induced the quiet little body of people, with their small unpretentious church, to purchase such a great ghostly place for a parsonage, and one day ventured to question my head deacon.

"We bought it dead cheap, and there's a good deal of it for the money. The man that built it was a little tetch'd in his head. When he died, we made the first offer and got the place, as his wife was a member in good an' reg'lar standin'." So he answered; and having had experience in the peculiarities of country churches, I accepted the explanation and questioned no further.

It was a charming place in summertime with its lawn and lovely old-fashioned garden, where fragrance ran riot and fruit trees hung sweet and mellow. But when cold winds presaged winter's approach, we were glad to double-sash doors and windows, to close up half of the many-cornered rooms, and make a nest for ourselves in the sunny south portion.

The winter had set in unusually early that year. Throughout December the sleighing had been constant. The river that skirted our little town was bound in icy fastness. For three days after Christmas the snow fell thickly, softly, steadily transforming the ugliest bits of architecture into marble graces, and heaping the high rail fences in ridges of velvet whiteness. In the silence and seclusion we seemed a buried town of olden time, whose colonnaded marbles were freshly unearthed to the light of modern day. But at last the heavy snow-clouds were scattered by the north wind, and a season of keen and icy cold followed.

The last day of the year had come and we had found it necessary to break our comfortable bonds of warmth and ease and Christmas cheer in order to accomplish some shopping; for we kept open house on New Year's day, and the parsonage was big enough to welcome a church membership twice as large.

Well wrapped and prepared for our long tramp through the snow,—for we lived two miles from the town centre,—
we bade the children good-by, and left them, with their rosy faces pressed against the panes, looking after us. Our last look, as we turned out at the gate, showed us Marget standing in the background, with her arm round little Jack. What happened afterward I can only tell you as far as I gathered the facts from the children's frightened version; the exact truth we shall never know.

The dining room had a sunny southern bow window overlooking the great wintry-clad garden. The room above I used as a study. These two apartments were the cosiest in the house and were our chief living rooms. The dining room was heated by a large, old-fashioned box stove, and the pipe ran through the room above, turning into the upper hall thence into the chimney. Leaving the two elder children in the lower room with their playthings, and taking little Jack with her, Marget retired to her kitchen labors, moving busily about while the child contentedly followed her.

"She cometh in sometimes to see if Amy and me was good," said my eldest boy afterwards in telling the story; "and we was; and then Jack fell asleep and Marget carried him up to the study, 'cos it was warm, and laid him on your sofa with a big shawl over him. Then she letted Amy and me come into the kitchen to make pies. We made pies for a long time. Then we smelled smoke, and we looked into the dining room, but there was'n't nothing there. And pretty soon we smelled more smoke, and Marget ran up-stairs, and we ran after her, and there was lots of flames all round the study door and round the banister. Marget told us to run down and out into the street, and we wouldn't; so she just put her two hands together for a minute, then caught us up and carried us down, and runned out with us through the garden into the street, and left us there while she runned back."

A woman with three helpless little children in a house nearly a quarter of a mile from any other, standing far back from the road and partly hidden by trees; the house old, dry and draughty; the day bitter cold; the wind almost a gale; a defective flue, plenty of woodwork for stray sparks to feed upon and an hour to gain headway;—can you picture the situation?

We had finished our shopping and were a mile from the town's centre on our homeward way, burdened with parcels and chatting cheerily of the New Year and its prospects. Passing a few acres of fragrant cedar bush, we came out upon the cleared roadway, and looked across the fields to where our home stood like a great white temple in its snowy grounds. Even as our glance rested lightly upon it, a dark, cloudy mass rose above its roof and rolled skyward in waving, curling columns, to be succeeded by others blacker and more dense. A cold grip caught my heart, and for one instant stilled its beating. Then a great throb sent the blood surging through my body, and with one brief look into the terror-stricken face beside me, I tore down the road, hearing quick panting breaths as my wife struggled on behind
me. It seemed an hour before I reached the little garden, though it was probably only five minutes.

A crowd had gathered; there was confusion and shouting, and through the keen air came the distant sound of the town alarm bell. I remembered it all afterwards, but then I heard nothing but the ominous crackle of burning wood, the roar of wind and flame,—saw nothing save two little figures running toward me with outstretched arms, and shivering with cold and excitement.

"Jack,—Marget?" I questioned almost fiercely.

"Jack's asleep and Marget runned back for him."

I pushed them aside and ran up the path, my ears filled with the flame's roaring, all life suspended in me save that which bound me to my pretty curly-haired baby.

I flung myself through the small crowd who stood helplessly looking on, and rushed into the lower hall crying "Jack! Jack!"

The staircase was a mass of flame.

Some one touched me with firm restraint.

"Come round to the south, pastor; the fire ain't got there yet, and we've sent for a ladder."

The fire had reached it, even as he spoke. The flames, like fiery tongues, were licking the lower window case-ment, while within the room burned the deadly glow. At the upper window stood Marget. Her face was pale, and the yellow light behind her gave it a peculiar gleam. One arm hung loosely by her side, and the other held our little boy still sleeping or else in a stupor. She spoke, but the roar of the wind and flame prevented us hearing her words. The awful glow in the background grew brighter.

"Marget! Marget!"

It was my wife's voice, as she threw up those mother arms in wild appeal. Marget heard, and a strange little smile answered the cry. Half turning from the window she laid the child against her breast, and disengaging one arm threw down my great Scotch plaid,—as soft and thick as any blanket. Then, with a glance at the flames so close about her, and with a marvelous inspiration of muscular strength, she held out the sleeping child.

In an instant the men about me interpreted her movement, and the soft, thick plaid was held by firm hands. Leaning out as far as she dared, with a steady iron-nerved hand she threw the fat little fellow into the very centre of the blanket that slipped from the men's grasp into the soft snow. A cheer broke from the crowd as my wife sank on her knees beside the child. Marget heard the cheer and smiled again.

The flames were very near her now; their scorching breath played about her cheek and lifted the tresses of her hair. "That ladder will come too late," groaned someone beside me.

A crash of a falling wall sent the crowd backward, and with a shower of sparks the fire shot forward for its prey. In an instant Marget had sprung upon the window sill, and with one brief look skyward leaped from
the burning mass, while the flames reached fiercely out behind her.

She lay motionless on the hard packed snow-ridge where she had fallen, the white face up-turned, one arm,—burned so terribly as we now saw,—thrown out upon the white bank.

We lifted the still form reverently, and carried it to a neighbor's house. She opened her eyes as we laid her upon the bed, then closed them again; while with hearts too full for speech we waited the doctor's verdict.

"Internal injuries; severe shock to the system; she will last a few hours," was the brief medical utterance.

I shall never forget the vigil we kept on that New Year's eve.

Marget recovered consciousness very soon, and lay smiling in the face of those about her.

"Marget;" my wife said, bending over her; "Oh my dear, do you know that your troubles are nearly over!"

"Yes," she answered in a low, clear voice. "How strange it is to die like this;—no pain, only a great quietness." Then with a faint little laugh she glanced at the one hand, rough and hardened but shapely still, that lay like a brown-veined leaf upon the coverlet. "It will grow white and soft soon—up there," she said. Presently she asked for Jack, and we brought him in and laid him beside her. She stroked his dark curls, and he patted her cheek with his chubby hand.

"I shall see my own little Jack soon?" Very slowly and faintly she spoke, looking at my wife.

"Yes, Marget, you'll see him first," she answered.

The afternoon light grew dim; the early setting sun drifted a few golden bars across the white quilt. No sound broke the room's deep silence, for our grief was hushed before that peaceful face.

"I have atoned;—I am glad."

The words came in little pauses, and the voice was very low. The eyelids drooped wearily over the grey eyes; and presently, with a faint "good night" and a quivering sigh, Marget passed away.

We buried her in the quiet churchyard; and every summer we take the children on a little journey to visit Marget's grave. A plain tablet of grey-veined marble marks the spot, and the inscription is simply: Marget, New Year's Eve, 1890; Luke vii., 47. My wife would have it so, and she knew best.

That is why we spend New Year's eve so quietly. And with the passing of the year our hearts turn in tender memory to the brave girl whom we still call "Our Marget."