# BROTHERLY HOUSE

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*"They made merry for the benefit of Uncle Stephen"*

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*Title page*

# Brotherly House

**by**
**Grace S. Richmond**

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# Brotherly House

## A Christmas Story

"It seems to me," said Mr. Stephen Kingsley thoughtfully to himself, as he laid down his younger brother Samuel's letter, "that it would be a very good thing to get Sam and Sylvester together. Judging by this letter—and one I had not long ago from Syl—it must be some three or four years since they've met—voluntarily. And that is too long—altogether too long—for brothers to remain in relations—er—lacking harmony."

He perused the letter again. As he had observed, its general tenor certainly did suggest that the relations between Samuel and Sylvester lacked harmony, and that that was a very mild putting of the case. Samuel's terse phrases left the situation in no doubt whatever.

"I don't like to say it to you, Stephen," the letter ran in one portion, "but Sylvester has acted not only unfairly, but contemptibly. I could have forgiven him the act itself, but the manner of the act—never. It was done too deliberately, too designedly, to be overlooked. I shall not overlook it. I shall——" etc.

In short, the letter had not been pleasant reading. The white-haired brother who

read it, lying back among his invalid's pillows, with a wry little twist of pain about his gentle lips as his eyes laboriously followed Samuel's vigorous scrawls and equally vigorous language, felt it to be a matter in which it was time to interfere. Men and brothers of the age of Samuel and Sylvester—neither would see forty-five years again—should not be allowed to feel in this way toward each other if their elder brother could help it.

"He 'doesn't like to say it,'" commented Stephen Kingsley with mild irony, "yet he seems to say it with considerable relish, nevertheless. The question is—what can I do?"

He closed his eyes and lay thinking. After a little he put out his hand and touched an electric bell. Its distant summons presently brought into the room the tall and commanding figure of a woman with iron-gray hair and a capable face. Mrs. Griggs had been Mr. Stephen Kingsley's housekeeper for thirty years; there could be no person more fitting for an elderly bachelor to consult.

Mr. Kingsley opened his eyes and regarded Mrs. Griggs with an air of deliberation. His plans were made. He announced them. As one looked at Mrs. Griggs one would hardly have expected an employer so helpless as he to issue orders to a subject so powerful as she, in so firm a manner. Yet he gave the impression of consulting her, after all.

"Mrs. Griggs," said he, "I am thinking of having a Christmas house-party. Merely the family, you know. Yet that means a considerable number, including—er—all the babies. Should you think we could accommodate them?"

Mrs. Griggs's somewhat stern expression of face grew incredulous. Having served Mr. Kingsley so long, under conditions so peculiar, she was accustomed to take—and was allowed—liberties of speech which would have been sternly forbidden any other person outside the circle of kinship.

"The family!" said she. "You—they—why, there won't more'n half of them come. Your brother Sylvester and your brother Samuel——"

"I understand about Sylvester and Samuel. That is why I want a Christmas house-party."

"Your sister Clara and your sister Isabel——"

"That was not serious. They must be quite over it by now."

"Not over it at all. It's worse. I happen to know what they said to each other the last time they were here. Your sister Clara said——"

"Never mind, Mrs. Griggs. We must surely get them here. The others are certainly on the best of terms."

Mrs. Griggs pursed her lips. "I guess you've forgotten, Mr. Stephen about that old fuss between George's family and William's. They've never been the same since. There's a coolness——"

"We will warm it up. Coolness can't exist in the Christmas warmth. If you

feel that you can tuck everybody away somewhere——"

"Mr. Stephen"—Mrs. Griggs's tone was a trifle indignant—"there's eleven sleeping-rooms in this house."

"Are there? I had forgotten. I haven't been upstairs in—twenty years. I can't quite remember whether there are fireplaces in them all."

"All but two—and they have Franklin stoves."

"Have Israel fill all the wood-boxes, Mrs. Griggs. Send him to the woods for ground-pine. I will order holly from the city. Tell Mary and Hannah to begin cooking and baking. But I must write my invitations. It's three weeks yet to Christmas. Plenty of time to plan. Please hand me my writing materials, Mrs. Griggs."

"Mr. Stephen"—the housekeeper's hand lingered on the leather tablet without taking it from the desk across the room—"do you think you'd better try to write all those letters to-day? There's considerable many of the family and—you didn't sleep much last night."

"Didn't I? I shall sleep better to-night, Mrs. Griggs, if the letters are posted. Let me get them off my mind."

Reluctantly she gave him the tablet and his fountain-pen. Then she propped him up among his pillows and lighted a reading-lamp at his elbow; the day was dull and his eyesight not of the keenest—his physical eyesight. The spiritual vision reached far and away, quite out of the world altogether.

The letters went out. With five of them went five others, appendices in the hand of Mrs. Griggs.

At Samuel Kingsley's breakfast-table, twenty-four hours later, letter and appendix produced their effect. But due credit must certainly be given to the appendix. Mr. Stephen Kingsley's letter read thus:

"*Dear Samuel:*

"I am thinking of having a Christmas house-party. It seems a long time since I have seen the family all together. There are at least three new babies among the children. I am asking everybody to come on the day before Christmas—Wednesday—and remain over at least until Friday. Don't refuse me. I should write much more, but must send word to all the others, and you know my eyes.

**"Believe me always "Lovingly your brother,** STEPHEN."

"Sylvester will be there," was Samuel's comment. He closed his lips tight as he said it. They were firm-set lips beneath a close-trimmed gray moustache. He squared his broad shoulders. "Sylvester will be there—*and I won't*!" his keen, brown eyes added.

Then he opened the appendix.

"*Respected Sir and Friend*," began Mrs. Griggs with dignity, "I take my pen in hand to send you a line in regard to Mr. Stephen's letter, hoping this finds you well and will reach you by the same mail. I hope you and Mrs. Samuel and the family will come as Mr. Stephen wishes, as he has set his mind on having this party, which I think is too much for him, but he will do it. Mr. Stephen is not as strong as he was. Hoping you will come.

**Respectfully yours**, "SARAH A. GRIGGS."

It could hardly be said that Mrs. Griggs's language possessed to a greater degree than Mr. Kingsley's the quality of persuasion. But one sentence in her letter, together with the fact that she had considered it a matter which called upon her to take her unaccustomed pen in hand at all, gave weight to the invitation. Mr. Samuel Kingsley handed both letters across the table to his wife, with the curt comment that it was a confounded nuisance, and he didn't see what had got into Stephen's head, but he supposed they'd have to consider it.

The other letters met with varied receptions. To all they were a surprise, for Stephen lived well out of town and had been a recluse for so long that nobody was in the habit of taking him much into consideration when it came to affairs social. There could be no question that he was well beloved by every member of his family, and sincerely pitied—when they took time to think about it, which was not often. But, except for brief, infrequent visits at his quiet home, inspired by a sense of duty, few of them felt him in their lives at all.

It interfered decidedly with previous plans, but nobody was quite willing to refuse the invitation—certainly not those to whom Mrs. Griggs, with shrewd grasp of various situations, had ventured to indite her supplementary lines. To each of these her appeal on the score of Mr. Stephen's failing health came as a sting to action and turned the scale. More or less grudgingly, they all wrote that they would come. But not without mental reservations as to courses of procedure when on the spot. George's family need not be familiar with William's. Clara and Isabel would avoid each other all that it was possible to do without attracting

the notice of a certain pair of mild blue eyes beneath a crown of thick white hair. And Samuel and Sylvester—would Samuel and Sylvester even so much as shake hands? Those who knew them best doubted it.

But the children were all glad to go. Family quarrels mattered nothing to then. And in the children lay Stephen's hope.

The house was ready. Dignified, even stately, with its tall pillars and lines of fine proportion, representing the best of the architecture of New England's early days, Stephen Kingsley's country home stood awaiting its guests. Far back from the road, its wide front entrance was festooned with hemlock and pine, a stout young tree fastened upon either side. The long-closed blinds of the upper story were all thrown wide; from each square chimney floated a welcoming banner of smoke. Passers-by upon the road that morning, on their way to family reunions of their own, gazed and wondered. It was many a long day since "the old Kingsley place" had worn that hospitable air of habitation.

Inside, activity reigned from cellar to roof-tree—the activity which is the fine flower of many previous days of preparation. Speaking of flowers, they were everywhere. It would seem as if Mr. Kingsley's orders must have stripped the nearest city of scarlet carnations, so lavishly were they combined with the holly and ground-pine of the decorations. Every guest-room smiled with a big bunch of them, reflected cheerily from quaint old mirrors above low dressing-tables. Downstairs they glowed even from obscure corners, lighting up the severely decorous order of the rooms into a vivid suggestion of festivities to come. One big bloom, broken from its stem, had been picked up by Hannah, the cook, and now, tucked securely into her tightly braided black hair, burned hardly more brightly than her cheeks, flushed as they were with excitement and haste.

"It's the cookin' for so many that upsets me," she averred, standing with Mary, the waitress, before a pile of plates and trying to estimate how many would be needed of that particular size. "I was brought up in a big fam'ly myself, but livin' so long in this quiet house and cookin' for one who doesn't eat what a baby would, has made me forget."

"But you wouldn't take the help he said he'd get for you," Mary reminded her.

"To be sure I wouldn't," Hannah cried, hotly. "After workin' for him all these years and gettin' such wages as he pays, would I see another come in and do for him when he has comp'ny—for once in his life? Not even from Mrs. Griggs would I take help with the cookin' and bakin'—not that she'd offer it. And I guess we've enough in the butt'ry, come there never so many extrys."

"I guess we have," Mary agreed proudly, with a glance into the stone-floored

buttery, where the ample shelves were laden with food until one might well wonder if they were stoutly enough built to carry such a load. "There's nothin' stingy about him. You should see the chambers, Hannah. There's been fires burnin' in every one of the fireplaces since day before yesterd'y, because he was afraid the rooms would be damp, shut up so long. Isr'el's watched 'em like babies, too, thinkin' they might be a chimley catch fire.... And the sheets, Hannah, that Mrs. Griggs has brought out from the linen-closet that she always keeps locked so careful! What such an old bachelor ever wanted of so many sheets——"

"They was his mother's before him," Hannah explained. She hurried away as she spoke, a towering pile of gold-banded plates in her capable hands. "With the fam'ly she had—and not all of them livin' now to come here to-day—she had need of a plenty of sheets, and fine ones they was, at that. Mrs. Griggs knows just how many there is of 'em, too, I can tell you. One would think they was her own, she's that——"

The appearance of the housekeeper's face in the doorway hushed the talk in the kitchen. Mrs. Griggs bore a message from Mr. Stephen, and to Mr. Stephen she presently returned. With all her cares on this supreme morning, Mrs. Griggs's greatest solicitude was for her master. Not that she ever thought of him by that title. If he had been her elder brother she could not have felt herself more of a sister to him, nor could she have been more anxious lest his wilfulness in the matter of the house-party prove too much for his frail strength. She had insisted with a firm hand that he remain in bed until the latest possible moment, and now that, an hour before train-time, she allowed him to get up, it was still to refuse him the trip he wanted, in his invalid chair, about the lower rooms, to see that all was as he could wish.

"You know very well," said she, "that I've not worked for three weeks getting ready, for nothing. Everything's perfect, if I do say it. You can trust me. And there's no use using up what little gimp you've got."

This was indisputable. "I suppose I haven't much 'gimp,'" Mr. Kingsley admitted, with his patient smile, "though I really feel as if I were possessed of a trifle more than usual, this morning, Mrs. Griggs."

"'Tisn't reliable," his house-keeper responded with conviction. "It's merely excitement, Mr. Stephen, and it's likely to leave you flatter than ever if you go to counting on it."

This also being highly probable, Mr. Kingsley submitted to her judgment, and in his own sitting-room, a large and comfortable apartment, across the wide hall from the more formal parlour, awaited his guests, himself in as festal array as he could compass. Instead of his usual dressing-gown he wore a frock-coat, of somewhat old-fashioned cut but of irreproachable freshness. (Mrs. Griggs had a method of her own for insuring the integrity of garments laid away, a method

which endued them with no unpleasant preservative odours.) In his buttonhole gleamed a sprig of glossy holly, rich with berries—his hands trembled a little as he adjusted it. Unquestionably it was an exciting morning for Mr. Stephen Kingsley; he had need, as Mrs. Griggs had sagely urged, to conserve all his energies for the drafts that were to be made upon them.

From his window he watched Israel, his reliable man-of-all work, drive off with the old family carriage and horses to the village station, two miles away, to meet the morning train, on which part of his guests were due. Others would come by trolley, still others, the most prosperous of the family, by private motor conveyance of their own, from the city, thirty miles away.

And now, in due time, the first of his Christmas guests were at his door, and Mrs. Griggs, wearing her best black-henrietta gown, her shoulders well thrown back and an expression of great dignity upon her face, was ushering them in.

Clara—Mrs. Pierce Wendell—caught sight of Isabel—Mrs. James Dent—before she was fairly inside brother Stephen's doors. Clara was fair and fine and impressive in elaborate widow's mourning and an air of haughtiness which became decidedly more pronounced at sight of her sister Isabel. Mrs. Dent was tall and thin, and very quietly, almost austerely, dressed. The one lived in town, the other in the country. But just why these differences in mere outward circumstance should have brought about such a breach of feeling that they could barely greet each other with courtesy was a subject to which the elder brother, who awaited them in his own room, had given much thought.

But he did not attempt to force matters. When Isabel, standing beside his chair, nodded coolly at Clara as she approached, and then moved immediately away without further greeting, Stephen took no notice. If they could have seen, his eyes took on a certain peculiar deeper shadowing which meant that his heart was intimately concerned with the matter of the sisterly estrangement. But his welcoming smile as he greeted Clara was as bright as the one he had lately turned upon Isabel, and the questions concerning her welfare with which he detained her showed as brotherly an interest as if he had not been quite sure within himself that Clara was the offender most deeply at fault.

The Christmas guests arrived in instalments. By noon George's and William's families had come—on the same train, although each had taken pains to ascertain that the other was likely to await a later hour. At three in the afternoon Sylvester and Mrs. Sylvester had pulled up in a big, shiny brown limousine, accompanied by Mrs. Sylvester's maid, and driven by a chauffeur swathed in furs to the tip of his nose, as were also Mr. and Mrs. Sylvester. There were no children; it was the one childless branch of the family.

"Seems as if they might have brought somebody else in that great traveling opera-box," declared Mrs. George to Mrs. Clara from the library window. "They came straight by our house if they came the Williamsville road, as I've no doubt they did. That machine will hold seven. I shouldn't say it to Stephen, but it looks to me as if the more money Sylvester makes the closer he gets."

"That's *her* fault," responded Clara, watching between the curtains as her brother Sylvester's wife, in furs which cost several times the amount of Mrs. Clara's own, came somewhat languidly up the walk. "She's getting so exclusive she's likely to cut Sylvester's family at almost any time. Since the trouble between Sylvester and Samuel——"

"I heard through Matilda that they barely speak now," whispered Mrs. George hurriedly. The library had been invaded with a rush by seven children and a dog—the dog, Uncle Stephen's old Fido, nearly out of his head with excitement over the unexpected advent of such an army of playfellows.

"I think it's extremely improbable that Samuel will come at all," Mrs. Clara whispered back. "Mrs. Griggs admitted to me just now that it was Samuel who called her up over the 'phone. 'We expect them *all*!'—that's what she was saying. She tried to put me off with the notion that he was inquiring if the children were all here—something about presents for them—you know how generous Samuel always is with the children. But I've no doubt at all he wanted to know if Sylvester was expected. I shall be very much surprised if we see Samuel."

The five-o'clock train brought James Dent, Isabel's husband, and James Dent, Junior; several young people of the house of Lucas, whose mother—Marian Kingsley—was not living; and the children of Samuel, assorted ages, and accompanied by a nurse. The eldest of them, Anne, explained that her father and mother were coming in the roadster.

Mrs. Clara looked at Mrs. George. If she had shrieked at her she could not have said more plainly: "You'll see! The car will break down, they will *not* come to-night. Else why didn't they come on the train with the children?"

James Dent, Junior, was the last of the evening arrivals to approach his Uncle Stephen's chair. This was not from any lack of desire to greet his host, but because the instant he put his round, smiling face inside the door, he was set upon by fourteen children—this was their number now—and the dog, and pulled hither and yon and shouted at and barked at and generally given a rousing welcome. He deserved it. If ever Stevenson's description of the entrance of a happy man into a room fitted anybody it fitted James Dent, Junior.

It was, indeed, "as though another candle had been lighted," although in this young man's case a dozen candles could not have made so great a difference.

And if it would be understood how impossible it was for anybody not to like Jim Dent it is only necessary to say that when he—the son of Isabel—reached Aunt Clara and kissed her heartily on her fair cheek she did not repulse him. Repulse him? One might as well try to repulse a summer breeze!

"Clear a space, all of you!" commanded James Dent, Junior. "I want a chance at Uncle Stephen. Be off! I'll not speak to any of you again till I've had ten minutes alone with him. Why, I haven't seen him for a month."

A month! Few of the others had seen him for a year. But the young man's tone expressed such hungry anticipation of a talk with the uncle whom he had not seen for a month that everybody obediently cleared out and left the two together.

Then Jim Dent sat down close beside the invalid's chair and looked straight into his uncle's gentle blue eyes with his own very brilliant blue ones—and, somehow, for all of the difference between them there was a look of the uncle about the nephew. The well-knit, sturdy young hand gripped the thin old one and held it close, and the smile the two exchanged had in it love and welcome and understanding.

"Well, you've got them all here," exulted Jim Dent. "Nobody but you could have done it. Uncle Sam's coming, Anne says. That's great, Uncle Stephen!"

"I am confidently expecting Samuel," responded the elder man. "How it will turn out I hardly dare think. They may not speak to-night. This is only Christmas Eve. But to-morrow, Jim, is Christmas Day!"

"Yes, to-morrow's Christmas Day, Uncle Steve."

"Can brothers refuse to speak—on Christmas Day, Jim?"

"I don't believe they can—under your roof, Uncle Steve."

"My roof, boy! Under God's roof!"

"It's pretty nearly the same thing," murmured Jim Dent, not irreverently.

"I may need your help, Jim."

"Sheep-dog—to bark at their heels and run them into the same pasture?"

Uncle Stephen smiled. His eyes and Jim's met with a twinkle.

"Just about that, perhaps," he admitted. "I can't tell yet. But keep your eyes open."

"I'll stand by," agreed his nephew. "It's a good thing the kiddies are here, Uncle Steve. When I came in Uncle George's children and Uncle William's were keeping more or less in separate squads, but the minute they pitched on to me the whole bunch were so tangled up I don't think they'll ever get untangled again. I had a glance at the fathers and mothers. Their faces were worth coming to see."

Mr. Kingsley looked at Jim earnestly. "I'm counting on the children, boy," said he.

"When it comes to a general mix-up," replied Jim Dent, "you can count on the youngsters every time."

The gray roadster belonging to Mr. Samuel Kingsley ran swiftly and silently through the gateway and up to the side entrance of his brother Stephen's home. Mrs. Samuel sat beside her husband; a sharp-eyed mechanician rode in the rumble behind.

"How long, Evans?" inquired Mr. Kingsley as the machine came to a standstill.

"Forty-two minutes, sir. That's pretty good time over these icy roads."

"I should say so. Came as fast as if I wanted to come," muttered the man of affairs, with his hand under his wife's arm to escort her up the steps. "As fast as if I wouldn't rather be hung, drawn and quartered than meet that skinflint Sylv—"

"Sam!" Mrs. Sam pressed his hand with her plump arm against her side. "Please be civil to Sylvester for Stephen's sake and the children's. Don't let him or them see signs of the quarrel—not at Christmas, dear."

"I won't shake hands with him," growled Samuel. "Not with Stephen himself looking on."

"Yes, you will, dear, on Christmas Eve," whispered Mrs. Sam.

By which it may be seen that the mothers of many children have large hearts, and that Mr. Stephen Kingsley had with him one more ally than he knew.

Although Mr. Samuel Kingsley may have infinitely preferred, according to his own declaration, to be hung, drawn and quartered than to enter the great, old-fashioned doorway within which somewhere awaited him an encounter with one of his own flesh and blood, nobody would have guessed it from his demeanour. Long training in what James Dent, Junior, mentally characterized, as he watched Uncle Samuel make his entrance, as the art of bluffing—acquired by men of prominence in the world everywhere—enabled that gentleman to appear upon the scene with an expression of affability mingled with pleasure on his handsome countenance, and his accustomed bearing of dignity and distinction well in evidence. As it happened, Mr. Sylvester Kingsley was at the moment close by his brother Stephen's side, although he had by no means intended to be there when his brother Samuel should arrive. How this happened it is possible that only the "sheep-dog" could have told.

"Samuel, this is giving me great happiness," said Stephen, and held his brother's strong hand for a moment in both his weak ones. Then he looked at Sylvester, who was on his farther side. Samuel also looked at Sylvester. Sylvester looked back at Samuel. Blades of steel could not have crossed with a sharper clang.

"How are you, Sylvester?" inquired Samuel, and his glance dropped to Sylvester's chin as he said it. His hand remained in Stephen's, where it received a weak pressure, a quite involuntary one, born of anxiety.

"How are you, Samuel?" inquired Sylvester in return, and his glance low-

ered to the expensive scarfpin in Samuel's neckwear.

Jim Dent said "Good heavens!" somewhere inside of him, and the incident was closed by his uncle Sylvester's rising and walking away out of the room. The brothers had spoken—if this were speech. They had not shaken hands. An apprehending onlooker, betting on the probabilities, would have staked a considerable sum on the proposition that they would not shake hands within the next twenty-four hours—or twenty-four years.

"Well, well—here's Anne!" cried Jim Dent joyfully. He had been looking about him for first-aid to his uncle Stephen's wounded heart. Anne was no longer of the group of children who were accustomed to leap upon Cousin Jim and demand instant sport with him. Anne, being now eighteen, and lately returned from a two-years' absence at a boarding-school somewhere abroad, had allowed James Dent, Junior, to be in the house for a full half-hour before she emerged from some upstairs retreat and came to greet him. Being Mrs. Sam's eldest daughter she was naturally extraordinarily pretty, looking much as her mother had looked twenty years before. As Mrs. Sam was still a beauty, and as she was his favourite aunt—by marriage—it will be easy to imagine that when her nephew James had greeted her he had not failed to inquire for Anne. Still, he had had no possible idea that the change in Anne was going to be so great.

Anne held out her hand with a delightful smile. But Jim Dent would have none of such a sudden accession of reserve, and promptly kissed her, as of old. Whereupon her colour, always interesting to observe, became even more attractive, though she only said, reproachfully:

"Don't you see I'm grown up, Cousin Jim?"

Cousin Jim looked her over, from the crown of her charming dark head to the tips of her modishly shod little feet. "Bless your heart, so you are!" he exclaimed. "But will you tell me what that has to do with it?"

"Everything. I no longer can be kissed as a matter-of-course," declared Miss Anne Kingsley. "Only by special dispensation."

"Well, what do I think of that?" he demanded. "Sure, an' I don't know what I think! Still, as I see plenty of mistletoe about"—he had only to reach up a sinewy arm to secure a piece—"I can easily obtain that special dispensation."

Whereupon he kissed her again, and with appreciably more fervour than before, having discovered, between the first kiss and the second, that Anne, grown up, was unquestionably more alluring than Anne as he had last seen her, although he remembered that even then he had had premonitions as to her future which he was now not at all surprised to find had been well founded.

Feeling that nothing could be better for that heavy heart of his uncle

Stephen's than the application of such balm as lay in a girl's sweetness, Jim Dent conducted his adorable cousin in to spend the next half-hour beside the invalid's chair. In this act he showed the difference between himself and the average young man—between the sheep-dog, so to speak, always under the sway of a sense of duty to send his charges where they belong, and the sportive terrier, who thinks of nothing but his own diversion. It must be acknowledged, however, lest this young man be thought quite unnaturally altruistic, that he himself shared with his cousin Anne the pleasant task of making a dear and gentle elderly man forget for a time the load upon his breast, and that the pair of them, while they made merry for the benefit of Uncle Stephen, also laughed into each other's eyes quite as often as they did into his. Which, of course, gave him fully as much pleasure as it did themselves.

"Mother," said Jim Dent in a corner somewhere, "why not take a day off from the fuss and show Aunt Clara how to narrow, or widen, or double up, or whatever she seems to be trying to do, on that pink silk thing she's knitting? It's Christmas Eve, and she's finishing it up to give to Uncle Sam's baby, and she's all balled up. She never knit socks before. Somebody else helped her on the other one."

"James," said his mother sternly, but not as sternly as she might have spoken if her son's lips had not lightly kissed her ear before they murmured these words into it, "it is impossible to ignore your aunt's manner to me."

"It's not so awfully different, though, mother, from your manner to her. Still, let's see, how did the thing begin?" mused Jim. "She wrote that they'd all come out in July for a month, and you wrote back——"

"I said the simple truth, James, that my kitchen was quite as hot in the country as hers in the city, in July."

"It certainly was the simple truth, mother. Somewhat undecorated by a garnish of hospitality, though—eh?"

"I had not accepted your aunt's invitations to visit her in town in the winter."

"You'd had 'em, though. Don't unaccepted invitations count any?"

Isabel Dent stirred in her chair. "She had visited me time and again without invitation."

"How far back did all this happen? When I was in my cradle? I've forgotten."

"It was seven years ago last July."

"Seven years outlaws an unpaid account. Let's start another. I'll back you up if you'll go over and offer to fix up that sock. If you do, the late unpleasantness will fix itself up. It's just as easy as that. And—Uncle Steve wants it."

"James," his mother's tone was firm, "if your Aunt Clara comes to me I will not repulse her."

"She won't come. You said the last hard word."

"James!"

"All right," said Jim Dent with apparent resignation. "But even enemies declare a truce—on Christmas Eve."

Then two small boys and four girls of various sizes romped into the corner after him and he went away with them. It was difficult to do otherwise, with all six twined about his arms and pulling lustily.

"'*He that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen?*'"

Stephen spoke the words thoughtfully.

"Steve," said Samuel, with a flushing face, "it's a mighty sight easier to love a God a fellow hasn't seen than some men he has seen. Whatever the Almighty is He's square. Sylvester isn't."

"Sam," said Stephen gently, yet with a quiet firmness which made Samuel look at him curiously, "are you absolutely certain Sylvester was not square? Admitting that his methods were peculiar, annoying, without seeming reason or justification, are you sure they were not square?"

"I'm as confident he meant to deceive me as I sit here."

"But do you *know* it? Could you prove it in a court of law?"

Samuel hesitated. That was a question not to be answered quite so easily. "I believe I could."

"But you don't *know* you could?"

"Great Cæsar, Steve, I'm not omnipotent. I don't *know* I could. But——"

"Then there is a possibility—just a possibility—that you might be mistaken in your judgment of Sylvester."

"If there is it's so small that—"

"The smaller it is the more danger of losing sight of it. Yet, if it exists——"

Samuel rose abruptly. "See here, brother," he said with an effort to command his usual manner, "why not let well enough alone? I've treated Sylvester civilly here under your roof. What more can you ask? What's the use of stirring up strife on Christmas Day?"

"Am I trying to stir up strife?" breathed Stephen Kingsley, his delicate face turning even a shade paler than was its wont. "I—Sam, I'd give my right hand—not that it's worth much—to see strife end between you and Syl, here—on Christmas Day.... *What was that, Sam? What was that?*"

Samuel ran heavily to the door, opened it, looked out, glanced back, then

rushed through and shut the door sharply on the outside.

"O, Lord, dear Lord, not any of the children, on Christmas Day!" pleaded a low voice inside.

It was Jim Dent who had reached young Syl first when he fell through the well from the third story to the first of Uncle Stephen's spacious old halls. Young Syl, Samuel's twelve-year-old son, named for his Uncle Sylvester at a period when the brothers had been business partners and close friends, had been having a lively scuffle with his cousin Harold, Uncle George's fourteen-year-old athlete. The set-to had raged all over the house, had reached the third story, and had arrived at a point where any means for either to get the better of the other had prevailed. Harold had succeeded in forcing his adversary into a position where he could throw him, after some schoolboy method, and, blinded by the excitement of the affair, had not realized just where he was. He had thrown Syl with such success that the younger boy had lost his clutch upon his antagonist and had gone over the low rail before Harold knew what had happened.

"Keep cool!" was Jim's first command, learned in many an emergency on school and college athletic fields. "A boy can stand a lot, and he landed on the rug."

They tried hard to obey him. His mother succeeded best, his father least. Samuel Kingsley could not wait to see his boy return to consciousness, could not wait after he had summoned a physician—two physicians—by telephone, but must needs rush out to get the gray roadster, with its sixty-horse-power cylinders, declaring that he would meet Graham on the way. Graham ran only a turtle of a forty-horsepower machine and would never get there.

His mechanician, Evans, was not on the ground. He, with Ledds, Sylvester's chauffeur, had gone off on some Christmasing of their own. With hands that trembled Samuel got his motor throbbing—it took time, because of the stiffening cold of all the mechanism. Then he leaped into his car.

"Better take time to put on your coat and gloves," said a voice behind him. "You'll drive faster, warm."

His brother Sylvester climbed in beside him, himself in fur-lined garments. He held Samuel's coat for him, and handed his brother the heavy motoring gloves of which Samuel had not stopped to think.

"I'll look out where you back; let her go," commanded Sylvester, and Samuel backed his car out of the narrow space where it had stood between Sylvester's big brown limousine and Stephen's modest phaëton. Samuel used care until he had made the curves from barn to road, between trees and hedges and the brown remains of a garden, out through the old stone-posted gateway. Then, with a

straight turnpike road before him and the city only twenty miles away, Samuel opened his throttle. The slim, powerful machine, its exhaust, unmuffled, roaring a deep note of power, shot away down the road like the wind.

At a window inside Mr. William Kingsley was watching excitedly. A tall figure of the general proportions of his sister Isabel's husband, James Dent, was at his elbow. "By George!" he ejaculated, "Syl's gone with Sam!"

Mr. George Kingsley, partially deaf, caught his own first name. "What's that, Will?" he responded eagerly.

William wheeled and saw whom he was addressing. George, his anxious eyes peering down the road, was plainly not thinking of family quarrels. Why should anybody think of family quarrels with Sam's young Syl lying upstairs looking as if the life had been knocked out of him by that terrific fall? William found himself unable to answer this question.

"Sylvester's gone with Sam after Doctor Graham," he announced in George's interrogative best ear.

"You don't say!" responded George. "Well, it's a good thing."

It certainly was. Not a member of the family but would admit that. Also, if it was a good thing for Sylvester and Sam to tear down the road together in a sixty-horse-power car, after a quarrel the proportions of which anybody must concede were far more serious than those of the difficulty between George and William, it would seem rather forced, at least until the truth was known about young Syl, for two other brothers looking out of the same window to cling to outward signs of estrangement.

"Sam's got an extremely powerful machine," observed William, continuing to gaze down the road, though the aforesaid machine was already probably a mile away and far out of sight.

"I guess he has. Must go faster than Sylvester's, I should say."

"Sylvester's isn't made so much for speed as for getting about the city warm and comfortable for his wife. Syl's not much on speed, as I remember. Shouldn't wonder if Sam's pace going to meet the doctor would make Syl hang on some."

"It's Sam's boy," said George in a lower tone.

"So it is," agreed William. "Couldn't blame him if he took some chances. Don't know as he'll get Graham here more'n five minutes quicker'n he could get here with his own car, but it'll relieve the strain for Sam a little to be doing something."

"That's so," admitted George.

At this moment Harold, George's boy, with a pale, frightened face and a pair of very red eyes, came into the room and up to his father. He had no eyes

for his Uncle William standing half within the long, crimson folds of the library curtains.

"Dad," said the boy, "did you know I——"

"Eh?" said his father, turning his best ear. Then he saw his son's face. "Why, what's the matter?" he asked anxiously. "Is Syl——"

"Dad," burst out the boy, "I—I was the one that did it. *I—threw—Syl!*"

He buried his head against his father's arm.

"Why, Harry—Harry, boy——" began his father in consternation.

Uncle William came out from behind the curtain. He thought he had better get out of the room. But as he passed Harold his hand patted the young head. He stooped to the boy's ear. "We all know it was an accident," he whispered.

A nursemaid knocked upon the door of Mr. Stephen Kingsley's room. In her arms was Mrs. Sam's baby, the prettiest baby of the three who were in the house.

"Mr. Kingsley," said the maid, "Mr. Dent—the young man—said I should bring Dorothy to you and ask you to take care of her for a little while, if you didn't mind. He has something for me to do."

"Yes, yes—yes, yes," answered the invalid. "I'll keep her." He reached out his arms. "How is the boy now, do you know?" he asked. He had had a bulletin within the last five minutes, but minutes go slowly under suspense.

"They think he may not be badly hurt, sir," said the maid.

But this was what they had told him from the beginning. He felt that they could not know. They were afraid to alarm him. Fall so far and not be badly hurt? It was not possible.

He took the baby, and laid his white cheek against hers of rose-leaf pink. So Jim had sent him the baby to take up his mind. Was there anything Jim didn't think of? And one certainly cannot look after an eight-months-old baby and not give the matter considerable attention.

Young Sylvester Kingsley, Samuel's son, opened his eyes. The first thing he saw was his mother's face, which smiled at him. Mothers can always smile, if necessary, thank God! The next thing noticeable was his Cousin Jim's bright blue eyes looking rather brighter than usual. He heard a caught breath somewhere near and then a whisper: "Sh-h—don't startle him!" It sounded like his Aunt Clara's rather sibilant whisper. Aunt Clara had the tiniest sort of a lisp. There was a strong smell of camphor in the air, and Syl's forehead seemed to be oppressed by something heavy and cold. He attempted to put up his hand to his head, but the thing didn't work, somehow. He was conscious that his arm hurt, besides. He didn't feel exactly like speaking, so he stared questioningly into his Cousin Jim's face.

"All right, old man," replied Cousin Jim instantly, in a quiet, cheerful sort of way which was most reassuring. "You've had a bit of a knockout, but we'll soon have you fixed up. Yes, I know that arm hurts—that'll be all right presently."

Out in the upper hall Aunt Clara, who had crept out of the room lest the relief of seeing the lad alive, and the wonder of watching Syl's mother smile at her boy like that, should make the sob in her own throat burst out, ran blindly into a figure at the top of the stairs.

"Oh, he's come to!" she whispered loudly.

"He has? Thank the Lord!" came back in another joyful whisper. "But he must be awfully hurt, just the same. We can't know till the doctors come. Don't you suppose it must be time for them now?"

"I don't know. Who's with him?"

"His mother and that angel Jim. I never saw anybody like Jim Dent. He's the dearest fellow, so cool and cheerful, thinks of everything and everybody. No wonder Stephen adores him."

"Thank you, Clara," whispered the other woman. Clara hastily wiped her eyes. The hall was dim and her eyes had been thick with tears. She had been exchanging whispers with Isabel.

It didn't matter. She was glad of it. The mother of Jim Dent deserved recognition, if she had said her kitchen was hot in summer. Clara put out her arms. Isabel came into them. Clara's plump cheek touched Isabel's thin shoulder. Isabel's hand patted Clara's back. Jim Dent opened the door. Seeing the affair outside he closed it again and went to find something he wanted, by a different exit. His anxiety was still great, but a side issue like this one must not be upset.

But by the second exit he found somebody else in his path. All the beautiful colour shaken out of her cheeks, her dark eyes wide with alarm, her lips pressed tight together in her effort at self-control, young Syl's sister, Anne, caught at Jim Dent's capable, blue-serge arm. She said not a word, but he answered her as if she had spoken:

"He's opened his eyes, dear. That means a good deal, I'm sure. Keep cool."

"If I could only *do* something!"

"You can—what we're all doing."

"Oh, *yes*!" breathed little Anne. "O Jim!—do you think it helps—really?"

"Know it," asserted Jim Dent, as confidently as he had ever said anything in his life. He smiled at her and hurried on. That smile of his had been known to win games for his college teams which had been all but lost—why shouldn't it cheer a frightened girl and encourage her to go on doing that one thing which was the only thing she could do, and which Jim Dent was so sure would help?

The gray roadster came down the road at a speed which barely allowed it to slacken in time to make the curve at the gateway. It missed the stone post on the left by the width of a tenpenny nail. Sylvester, in the rumble, turned not a hair. Thirty miles of driving, with Sam's hand on the steering-wheel, had brought Sylvester to a condition of temporary paralysis as regarded danger.

The three of them were in the house in less time than it takes to tell it, Dr. Wilford Graham propelled by a hand on each arm. It would have been difficult for him to say which of his companions seemed the more eager to get him up the stairs.

Samuel opened the door of the room where he had left young Syl, his hand shaking on the knob. A somewhat feeble but decidedly cheerful voice greeted him.

"Say, dad, you'll tell me where I tumbled from, won't you? The rest of 'em have got me stung about it."

Samuel turned around to the doctor behind him. He pushed past the doctor and bolted out into the hall. He bumped smartly into his brother Sylvester, who had stopped to wait just outside the door. Sylvester put his hand on Samuel's shoulder.

"I heard, Sam, I heard," he murmured.

Samuel nodded. He could not speak. There was no particular need that he should.

Young Syl had a broken arm. But what is a broken arm, when by acquiring it one escapes injuring some vital part of one's body? He had, also, a large-sized contusion on his head, because on the rebound he had come somewhat forcibly into contact with the newel-post. But the contusion was precisely on the spot specially fortified by Nature for such emergencies, and the doctors feared no evil results from it.

"In short," declared Doctor Graham with great satisfaction, "the boy has managed to get out of his fall easier than many a football victim who is thrown only the distance of his own height. I won't say that a Turkey carpet with a leopard-skin rug on top of it doesn't make a fairly comfortable bed to fall on. If it had been one of our modern bare floors, now!—But it wasn't."

"Mayn't I have my dinner with the rest of 'em?" begged Syl.

Dinner! The Christmas dinner! They had all forgotten it except the hero of the day. "Because I'm awfully hungry," urged Syl.

In the deserted hall downstairs Jim Dent happily encountered Anne. He seized her hand.

"Come with me to tell Uncle Stephen!" he commanded. "But—stop cry-

ing first! Uncle Steve's a pretty wise man, but he can't be expected to tell the difference between tears of sorrow and tears of crazy joy—not at first sight."

"I don't know why I'm crying," sobbed Anne, breaking down completely and burying her face on the blue-serge shoulder which conveniently offered itself at the moment, just as she had done many times since she was a baby. Even when she was eight and Cousin Jim was fifteen, that shoulder of his had been one to hide one's unhappy eyes upon. "I didn't cry a drop—till I knew Syl was s-safe!"

"I know. Queer, isn't it? It always works that way. I confess I had some difficulty in seeing the way across the room myself, a few minutes ago. But wipe 'em away and come on! Uncle Stephen mustn't have to wait for his news. Look up here. Smile! Here—maybe this will help——" and for the third time within twenty-four hours he stooped and kissed her.

The tremulous lips broke suddenly into the smile he sued for. Through the tears shone a sudden mischievous light. "Cousin Jim," she observed, "you seem to have changed your methods a good deal. Always before it was chocolates. Are you out of chocolates?"

"No, I'm not out of chocolates." James Dent, Junior put his hand into his blue-serge pocket and produced a small box. "But you're too old for 'em," he explained, and put the box back.

He hurried her past the threshold of Mr. Stephen Kingsley's room. Across the baby's golden head Uncle Stephen looked tensely up at them. It needed but one look. Then his nephew sprang forward and took Anne's baby sister from a grasp which had grown suddenly nerveless, and his niece, stooping over her uncle's chair, gently patted a white cheek down which the first tear of relief was slowly trickling.

It seems to "work that way" with the whole human race. Except, perhaps, with mothers. Upstairs, Mrs. Sam sat beside her boy's bed, and his keen young eyes saw no tears upon her lovely, radiant face. If she cried at all it was only in her heart—her happy heart—which ached yet with the agony of what might have been—on Christmas Day.

It was a good thing that the dining-room in the old house was a big one. Mr. Kingsley had specially decreed that everybody—everybody—should be seated at one great table. There was to be no compromise effected by having the children wait for the "second table"—has any one who has ever waited for that "second table" at a family gathering forgotten what an ordeal it is, or how interminably long the old folks are about it? There were twenty-nine of them, including the three babies, but by some marvel of arrangement Mrs. Griggs had managed to make a place for every one.

"But you'll have to say how we're to seat them," said Mrs. Griggs, anxiously invading Mr. Stephen Kingsley's room. "With all our planning we've forgot that part. You'd better make me out a list, so I can lay those holly cards you've written the names on."

"Bless my soul," murmured Mr. Kingsley, "must they be specially arranged? Of course they must. I had forgotten. Clara"—he turned to his sister who came in at the moment—"help me with this, will you?"

"Give me the cards, Mrs. Griggs," requested Mrs. Clara capably. She swept a clear space on the table at her brother's elbow as she spoke.

"What's all this?" asked Jim Dent at the door five minutes later. "Card games?"

"Do come and help me, Jim," cried his aunt. "I thought this would be easy, but it's not. I can't keep George's and William's families apart," she explained in a lower tone. "There are so many of them."

"Don't try."

"Oh, but I must. They—you know that old——"

"It seems to be a thing of the past. I met Uncle George's boy Harold and Uncle William coming downstairs hand in hand just now. They'd been up to see Syl together."

"Jim!" His uncle's face lighted as if the sunlight had struck it. "But the fathers?"

Jim put his head out of the door and took a survey of the room beyond. "Sitting on opposite sides of the fireplace," he announced.

"That's pretty near," admitted Mr. Kingsley. "That's certainly pretty near. With a fire between them. I wonder what——"

"Syl's tumble did it. It made the mix-up we were looking for. Not exactly as we would have planned it, but rather more effectively, I should say."

"Stephen," said Mrs. Clara, moving the cards about in an absent sort of way, "Stephen and Jim, I want to tell you that—well—Isabel and I——"

"Yes," helped Stephen eagerly.

"Good for you!" encouraged her nephew.

"We couldn't seem to keep it up—not here—on Christmas Day—after Syl——" Tears were suddenly threatening the holly cards. Mrs. Clara rose quickly. "I think they're all right now, Stephen," she said, indicating the cards and clearing her eyes with a touch of a lace-bordered handkerchief. "I've put Sam and Syl at the far ends of the table."

"I want them near together."

"But—had you better?"

"I'm going to risk it."

"Risk it, Uncle Steve," advised Jim. "Everybody's taking chances to-day."

"But—Sam and Sylvester!" persisted Clara doubtfully.

"It's Christmas Day with them, too," argued Jim.

Mrs. Clara went out with the cards and laid them down at the proper places. She had arranged them as nearly as possible in approved dinner style, a man next a woman, then a boy, then a girl, then another man, another woman, and so on.

When she had gone Jim sneaked out and scrutinized this arrangement. Laughing to himself he picked up the cards and juggled with them. About his uncle Stephen he grouped the cards of his three brothers and their wives. At the other end of the table he put all the children together.

"There, that's better," said Jim with conviction, to himself.

Mrs. Griggs announced dinner. Jim Dent brought Uncle Stephen out first in his wheel-chair and placed him at the head of the table. Then came the rest, Samuel Kingsley carrying his son Syl, looking very hero-like indeed, with his bandaged head and his arm in a sling. All the children's eyes were riveted fascinatedly on Syl as he was placed in a special easy chair at the foot of the table, where nobody could possibly by any chance hit the injured arm.

On one side of Mr. Stephen Kingsley, Mrs. Samuel found her place; on the other side, Mrs. Sylvester. Sylvester was next Mrs. Sam, Sam beyond Mrs. Syl. How he dared, every one wondered, thinking it Uncle Stephen's plan. Uncle Stephen himself turned a little pale as he saw them standing behind their chairs. Only Jim Dent, whose wide-awake eyes had been seeing things all day, felt at all cool about it. And even he was not quite as cool as he looked.

There was a moment's hushed silence before they sat down, even the children fluttering into quiet. Then, just as everybody laid hands on chairback, Samuel Kingsley spoke.

"Steve," he said, looking at his brother, "I want to make a little speech."

Everybody was at attention. Stephen Kingsley looked up, wondering. He smiled at his brother, but his heart was making riot in his feeble breast. What was Sam going to do?

"I want to say," said Samuel—then he stopped. He was an accomplished after-dinner speaker, was Samuel Kingsley, but he had never had a speech to make like this one. He had thought he had it ready on his tongue, but it stuck in his throat. He turned and looked down the table at his boy Syl. Syl nodded at him, comprehending in a boyish way that his father was having some sort of difficulty with his speaking apparatus. Then Samuel looked at Mrs. Samuel, who smiled at him. She was a little pale yet, but her smile was bright as ever. Yet still Samuel could not make his speech.

The silence grew tense. Jim Dent, leaning forward and watching his uncle eagerly, felt that it must be relieved. He lifted his glass. "Here's to Uncle Sam's speech!" he cried.

The tension broke. Everybody laughed—a little agitatedly, and Uncle Sam's firm lips, under the close-cut, gray moustache, wavered, then set themselves. He looked at his nephew, and something about the sympathetic affection in the bright blue eyes steadied him.

"I'm afraid I can't make it, after all, Jim," said Samuel. "But perhaps I can act it."

And he stretched his hand across the table toward his brother Sylvester, who grasped it, as everybody could see, with a grip that stung.

Jim Dent's eyes flew to his Uncle Stephen's face. He saw it like that of Saint Stephen's of old, "*as it had been the face of an angel.*"

To young Sylvester Kingsley, hero of the day, was destined to come still further distinction. It was all of a chance observation of his, made just before his removal to bed—at the same hour as his baby sister, much to his disgust. But, resigning himself to his fate, as Cousin Jim stooped to bear him away he gave one last look about the pleasant, holly-hung room.

Although their elders had kept as many of the family differences from their children's ears as was possible, they had not been able to forestall the use of the children's sharp eyes, and the sight Syl now saw struck him as unusual. It was nothing more than the gathering of five brothers, of varying ages, about the chair of one of their number, in front of the great fireplace where roared and crackled a mighty fire of logs. But the expressions of geniality and cordial interest upon the five faces indicated such good fellowship that the young son of Samuel Kingsley was moved to say to his cousin Jim:

"What a lot of brothers there are in this house! Dad's got four, and I've three and Harold's two, and they're all in this room. This ought to be called 'Brotherly House.'"

"So it ought," agreed Jim Dent, smiling at the thought. "It would be a fine name, and true, too."

He carried the boy away, and stopped to tell him a story after he was in bed—a football story, such as only Cousin Jim could tell, because he knew all about it from the inside. But when Jim came back to the fireside he told them of young Syl's idea. "And a jolly idea I call it, don't you?" he added.

Uncle Stephen looked from one to another of the four men around him, and saw the assenting smiles upon their faces—a bit shame-faced, perhaps, yet genuine.

Samuel Kingsley rose to his feet. "I could make my speech now," he said, with a happy laugh, his hands shoved well down into his pockets, where they jingled some loose change there in a boyish fashion. "But I don't want to. I'm only going to say that as long as I have a brother in the world like Stephen Kingsley I'm coming to see him as often as he'll have me. And the more of you boys I meet here the better I'll be pleased—particularly if the boy I meet here happens to be—" he glanced, smiling, across the little circle—"my brother Syl!"

"Hear, hear!" answered Sylvester Kingsley's deep voice.

So, to Stephen Kingsley's intense delight, "*Brotherly House*" it was—and has been ever since.

THE END

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[image]

*Printer logo, sample page*

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