THE HELPING HAND

By Christine Whiting Parmenter

It was cold, and stormy, and dark. Mary Mathiesen, moving quietly about the kitchen, preparing supper, paused for a moment to be sure that the locusts slapping against the windows, did not frighten her baby, whom she had just tucked in for the night. As no sound came from above, she sought the dining room, switching on the lights as a welcome to Jim, her husband, who was tramping the half mile from the station in the rain. When she returned to the kitchen, the kettle was singing merrily. It seemed very cosy, she thought, with the rain beating against the windows. If only Jim were here—

Her thoughts were interrupted by an unexpected knock. It was a strange hour for a visitor. Opening the door, she saw a boy in shabby raiment standing upon the little porch.

"What can I do for you?" she asked, as he did not speak.

For a moment the boy was silent, peering into the room beyond, as if in search of something. He didn't meet Mary's friendly glance as he said hoarsely, "I want a home."

"A home!" echoed Mary in surprise.

She stood back, motioning the boy to enter. He obeyed sullenly, as if doing her a favor.

"You're hungry, aren't you?" said Mary quietly. "Sit here by the table and I'll get your supper. Then you can tell me why you want a home."

He slumped into a chair, resting his elbows on the table and staring nervously into every corner. He ate hungrily the bread and milk which Mary set before him, watching her covertly as she moved about preparing her own supper. Mary was perfectly aware of his alert glances. He reminded her of a squirrel devouring a nut while in deadly fear of some alien interruption. When he had finished, she turned to him and smiled encouragingly.

"So you want a home?"

"Yes," answered the boy. He spoke slowly, as if reciting something. "I run away from Saint Luke's Orphanage. I never had no other home. No one would take me when I was little, because I had red hair. Then, one day, a farmer from out this way come for a boy. He picked me out o' the whole bunch—me—the biggest. I thought sure I was goin' to have a home, but all he wanted was a work horse. Look!" He stripped his shirt off one shoulder to show a mark, ugly and new. "He done that. I run away, back to the orphanage, but they licked me. I've done with 'em! I want a home like other boys. I—"

He stopped confused, and Mary looked down on him compassionately.

"You poor boy!" she said, gently. "I can't promise you a home; but I'll give you a night's lodging and try to help."

"You here alone?" asked the boy, suddenly; something cunning creeping into his eyes that repelled Mary.

"No. I have my husband and baby girl. There's Jim now!" she added, joyfully; glad of Mathiesen's guiding hand in this problem.

Mathiesen, who had entered by the front door, met her half way across the dining room and hugged her ardently.

"Some storm!" he exclaimed, boyishly, "and some home to come in to out of the wet! I'm hungry, Mary, and—"

Mary's finger on her lips caused him to stop abruptly. She closed the door, and in a few quick words told him of their self-invited guest.

"Poor kid!" said Mathiesen quietly.

He stepped into the kitchen, holding out his hand in welcome, but the boy did not, or would not, understand. He looked up suspiciously, as the man's hand dropped to his shoulder.

"How old are you?" questioned Mathiesen kindly.

"Sixteen," answered the boy, and flushed.

"M-mm," murmured Mathiesen. He looked down at the boy with eyes that couldn't be anything by kind, yet seemed to demand the truth. "You're tired, aren't you?" he asked. "And wet, and cold. Mrs. Mathiesen has seen to your supper, of course. Suppose you have a bath and go to bed. To-morrow we'll have a talk. Is the guest room ready, Mary?"

She nodded, and the boy, still sullen, followed Mathiesen upstairs. Mary heard her husband moving about, evidently showing the boy where he would sleep and giving him clean clothes. The water was running into the tub when Jim returned. In silence he helped Mary put supper on the table, and sighed with relief as he sat down.

"I hope you gave that boy enough to eat, dear. He's starved. His shoulder blades are almost through the skin, and he has a bruise—"

"I saw it," said Mary quickly. "The farmer who took him from the orphanage did it."

"M-mm," said Mathiesen again; then, quietly: "Sixteen years old and an orphan. Somehow—that doesn't sound quite credible."

"You think he lied?" whispered Mary, one ear on sounds above.

Jim smiled. "Oh, we'll give him the benefit of the doubt. He needs attention anyway. To-morrow's Saturday and I'll come out early. You keep him busy through the morning and I'll talk with him when I get home."

"It's—it's terrible for a boy to want a home, Jim," said Mary, gently.

"I know," answered Mathiesen. He leaned across the little table to give Mary's hand a squeeze. "Sometimes I feel like a sinner to have so much; but—I can't just see us adopting a sixteen-year-old son!"

Mary laughed. Then her face sobered. "But we must do something, Jim."

"Why, of course," responded Mathiesen, quickly. "We'll begin with a suit of clothes. I'll bring one out to-morrow. He'll have to swim round in my wardrobe till afternoon. He's small for sixteen; but, then, he looks as if he'd never had enough to eat."

Mathiesen had departed for the city before their guest awoke next day. Mary, tiptoeing into the boy's room, looked down with pity on a face which, in sleep, had lost its sullen lines. Yet, there was a hard expression to the mouth that she couldn't understand in one so young. Then she remembered the livid bruise he had displayed, and her heart melted. When, later, the boy came down, she set a bowl of oatmeal before him, and went to the stove to turn a griddle cake.

"Good morning," she said, cheerfully. "I hope you like griddle cakes and maple syrup?"

It was a question, but the boy made no answer as he seated himself before the oatmeal. It struck Mary that he might be embarrassed, so she did not look at him. When, at length, she glanced him way, she had to suppress an astonished exclamation. He hardly looked like the same boy. He was smiling—it was the first smile Mary had seen—but he was smiling neither at her nor at the prospect of griddle cakes and maple syrup. His smile went straight to the corner where Baby Mathiesen reigned supreme in a fenced-in spot, from which she was grinning a friendly welcome.

"I like kids," said the boy, suddenly.

It seemed to Mary that it was the first natural speech that he had made. But he flushed at the words and looked stonily away from the baby's coquettish gaze. Mary lifted a golden cake from the spider.

"That's good," she answered, calmly. "I'm going to ask you to look out for her till nap time, I have so much to do. Mr. Mathiesen will be home early. He's going to bring you a suit of clothes. Yours look pretty well used up."

"Clothes for me!" gasped the boy. "New ones?"

"Yes, new ones! Ready for your cakes?"

"Da, da," answered the baby, and the boy laughed.

"Can't she have one, ma'am?"

"Oh, she had her breakfast long ago," said Mary. "Will you keep an eye on her while I make the beds? I'm late because I didn't want to wake you."

Mary knew tactfully, that the boy would enjoy his breakfast more if he ate alone. When she returned he was on the floor beside the baby's fence, making faces which Miss Mathiesen evidently considered a great accomplishment. She wept when her mother took her up, and stretched out imploring hands to her new friend.

"She'd rather play than go by-by, any day," laughed Mary. "Perhaps you'll carry her upstairs while I get her bottle. Then she'll go to sleep in the sun-room and you can do what you want till lunch time. Do you like to read? There are lots of books and magazines in the living room."

"Well, Jim," said Mary, after their guest had gone to bed the second night, "what do you think?"

"I'm puzzled," replied Mathiesen, slowly. "I don't get at him, Mary. He liked the clothes, oh! tremendously; but he watched me while he was dressing as if he thought I had an axe to grind or was going to spring something unpleasant on him. He told the same story, though, that he told last night; and when he's alone for any length of time, he looks sullen. The only time he acts like a real boy is when he's with the baby; and that's queer, too, for most boys would take pains to hide the fact that they liked to amuse a baby. We'll keep him here a day or two, dear, if you don't mind. Perhaps, when he gets used to us, he'll talk more freely."

The day or two grew into a fortnight, at the end of which Mathiesen, who was accustomed to receiving everybody's confidences confessed himself baffled. The boy had a confusing way of evading questions or answering them in a way that revealed nothing.

"He reminds me of a shrewd lawyer" Mathiesen complained, one morning. "He has brains—that boy; but we can't keep him here indefinitely, Mary. It's too much for you. I've got a scheme—"

Mary didn't hear the scheme just then, because the baby demanded her mother's presence, and when she returned Jim was ready for his train. Later, the boy—he had told them his name was Joe—brought in an armful of kindlings and, dropping them into the box, got down on his knees for a romp with Mary's baby. It was a noisy romp, but Mary only smiled at the joyous youth of it. She turned in surprise, when the door opened to admit a man whose knock she had not heard.

"Want any beets or carrots, ma'am?" he asked.

His wares were temptingly displayed and Mary decided that she wanted beets. "Joe, will you bring a dish from the pantry?" she called over her shoulder, as she made her selection.

There was no response. Suddenly, Mary realized that the joyous shouts were stilled. Only the baby's voice, raised in a hurt whimper, was audible. Turning, she saw that the boy had vanished, though on the floor lay a huddled shape under an old shawl. Without a word, Mary brought the dish herself, paid the man and watched him depart before she crossed the room and lifted the shawl to disclose the boy. His face was white, though he forced an unnatural smile.

"Peek-a-boo!" he laughed at the baby.

The baby crowed delightedly, but Mary laid a hand on the boy's arm. "Joe—was that the farmer who abused you?"

"Nope," said the boy, not meeting her eyes. "I never see that man before. I was just playin' with the baby. She likes for me to hide and then jump out at her."

"All right," said Mary, but the boy's white face and trembling hands did not escape her, nor the fact that he did not return to the carefree romp. He kept close to the house all day, sometimes reading, sometimes staring into space, his brows knit in thought; and, as the hours passed, the bitter lines about his mouth which had been slowly vanishing, returned. At times Mary caught him watching her furtively, as if he were trying to read her thoughts. In the afternoon she manufactured an errand to the village in order to leave the baby in his care. If she showed that she trusted him with her dearest treasure, perhaps, in time, he would trust her. But night found him still sullen. Not even Mathiesen's kindly smile brought a response. He went to bed early, but they could hear him tossing restlessly until they slept.

"Poor boy," said Mathiesen, gently. "If only he'd say what's on his mind! If he doesn't confide in you tomorrow, I'll tackle him at night. I can't divulge my plans for him until I feel he's to be trusted. He's not sixteen, Mary. I'm sure of that."

It was late that night, when Mary was soundly sleeping, that Mathiesen awoke with a sense of something wrong. He sat up in bed and listened. All was quiet for a while—then, from the dining room below, sounded a stealthy footstep. Mathiesen slipped out of bed, reached with unerring instinct for his blanket wrapper, and crept downstairs. Through a crack in the closed door of the dining room, a faint light was visible. It didn't occur to Mathiesen that he might need a weapon. His hand closed firmly on the door knob which yielded quietly, so quietly that the boy standing before the sideboard, did not know he was interrupted. Then he turned, stifling a frightened cry.

Mathiesen's keen eyes, at a glance, took in the scene before him. Dressed once more in his old clothes, his cap pulled low over his eyes, stood Joe, grasping in one hand what looked like a pillow case, the contents of which clinked queerly as he moved. The sideboard was swept bare of Mary's silver candlesticks and dishes. Only the baby's porringer remained, telling its own story.

Mathiesen drew a quick breath. Then he came nearer, took the boy's burden from him, and said, quietly: "Suppose we sit down, Joe, and talk it over."

The boy obeyed, trembling.

"Take off your cap," said Mathiesen kindly. He was quietly removing the silver from the pillow case, laying it upon the dining table, and talking, giving the boy a chance to pull himself together.

"These candlesticks were a wedding gift from Mr. Carey for whom I work," he explained, calmly. "Mrs. Mathiesen is very fond of them. They're worth a good deal of money, I am sure. And this dish came from a stenographer in my office. I suppose it took her a whole week to earn it, maybe more. These salts and peppers are hardly worth the trouble of carrying away. They wouldn't bring much; but we love them because a little sick girl, in the house where I used to board, spent all her savings to give them to us. The forks and spoons we'll miss, of course. I suppose I've been careless about burglar insurance. Somehow I never thought that anyone would steal from us; because, really we haven't very much. I——"

A smothered protest came from the boy, and Mathiesen sat down suddenly before him. "Now—" he began, but Joe interrupted hoarsely: "I know your game! You'll just keep me talkin' till the cop you've sent for gets here."

"No," answered Mathiesen, quietly, "I haven't sent for any cop. In fact, I don't know where to find one out here in the country. I'll make a bargain with you, if you like. If you'll answer my questions truthfully, I'll promise not to send for an officer in any case—even if you walk off with Mrs. Mathiesen's treasures. Isn't that fair?"

Joe didn't answer, and Mathiesen chose to take silence for consent. "Let's begin at the beginning," he said, kindly. "How old are you, Joe?"

The boy hesitated—then blurted out defiantly: "I'm goin' on fifteen, anyway!"

"And why did you tell us you were older?"

"I thought," began the boy, then raised his head, and for the first time met Mathiesen's eyes. They were stern eyes now, but something compassionate in their depths stirred things long dormant in the boy's heart.

"I didn't come from no orphanage," he confessed, suddenly.

"I knew that," answered Mathiesen. "I inquired at Saint Luke's the day after you came."

"You knew I lied!" cried Joe, "and—and kept me?"

"Yes. You told Mrs. Mathiesen that you wanted a home. We were sorry you didn't trust us; but if a boy wants a home there's something good in him, so we decided to trust you anyway."

A shamed red crept into the boy's cheek. He started to speak, but the words came as if they hurt.

"It was a lie, sir. I didn't want no home—not then."

"Then why—" began Mathiesen, in genuine surprise, when Joe interrupted: "I didn't know nothin' about homes—then. I read that all in the paper, how a guy went to a house and told the folks that story—wantin' a home, and how he come from an institution. Then when they took him in and he got the run o' things, he lit out with all the jewelry and money."

"And got caught," supplemented Mathiesen, "and sent to prison. I read that story, too. And you thought it paid?"

The boy's voice shook. "I guessed I could put it through," he confessed, miserably. "I was goin' to bury the stuff till the police stopped lookin', but—"

"Yes?" encouraged Mathiesen.

"But—I—I liked the baby. I sort o' hated to be mean. I'd most give up thinkin' about that scheme; but when I see that man again I—I wanted to get even with—with *somebody!*"

His face hardened, and his brows were seamed and angry.

"You mean the farmer who came this morning?" asked Mathiesen quickly.

"Yes; him that give me this cut." He pointed to his shoulder. "I was workin' for him—honest. I thought I'd try the country for a spell; and one day he give his little girl a smack that knocked her flat. I see red, sir, and I lammed him one on the jaw. He had a whip in his hand and—"

The boy shuddered, and Mathiesen said compassionately, "I understand. You needn't tell me. And—and you thought we'd send you back to him?"

"I thought, maybe, you'd think he had a right to me. I ain't but fourteen year old. But I'd go to hell, mister, before I'd go back to him. I run off that night. I'd have burned his barns for him if I hadn't been afraid I'd burn his wife and kids. I didn't have nothin' to eat all next day. It was then I remembered that boy what asked for a home, and I looked in these windows and see all this silver shinin'. I—I thought it was some rich guy's summer place. I—didn't hardly know what a home was—then. I never got anything but knocks all my life. Oh, you don't know, sir! You don't understand. You got so much. Don't—don't the world owe me *somethin'*, mister?"

"No," answered Mathiesen, sternly, "*not one thing.*" He paused, letting the words sink in. "Everything that we want, Joe, we have to earn—*everything*—even love. But," his voice softened, "I do understand, boy. When I was your age I was as alone as you. But if I hadn't lived straight, and kept my soul and body clean, do you think for a moment I'd be where I am, to-day, with a home like this, and friends who care for me, and a wife and baby to love and work for?"

He waited, but as the boy was silent he went on slowly. "We reap what we sow, son. There is nothing truer; and if you live honestly, and play fair, and hold out a helping hand to the man below, sometime, sooner or later, the reward comes—if it's only the satisfying knowledge of days well lived."

The boy looked up. His eyes were bright, because back of his eyelids there were tears. "What—what'll I do, sir?" he asked humbly.

"I hope you know," went on Mathiesen, as if he had not heard the question, "that if I could, I'd give you the home you asked for. But I'm not rich, Joe—far from it—and I have a wife and baby, as well as an old mother, whom I have to consider; but—I've another plan for you."

The boy was leaning forward, scarcely breathing, as Mathiesen went on quietly: "I've got you a job as elevator boy in our office building. It's easy work that will leave you time to read and study, which is what you need. You'll learn enough for your needs at present; but I don't want you in a cheap boarding-house. You need a home, and I think I've found you one."

"Where?" questioned the boy, breathlessly.

"I have a friend who's worked in our office for twenty years. She had a snug little home with her mother, who died a year ago. This seemed to take away all her courage. She wasn't well, and the firm decided that she deserved a rest. So, last January, they retired her on a liberal pension, and told her to take life easily.

"But that didn't do the trick. The truth was, she was lonely, and one day, when she was staying here, Mrs. Mathiesen had an inspiration. 'Miss Garnet,' she said, 'why don't you adopt a baby?'

"Well—she did! She'd always wanted to, but thought her friends would disapprove. She's very happy now, but she needs someone she can trust to bring up wood, and tend the furnace, and be a big brother to her baby. Would you like to try?"

The boy looked up, still shaken.

"Is—is she like your missis?" he hesitated.

Mathiesen smiled. "She's not so young, nor perhaps so pretty, but she's awfully nice. And the baby—"

"I bet it's not as good as *our* baby!" said the boy suddenly.

Had Mathiesen's over-burdened heart needed warming, that tribute to his wee daughter would have done it. But before he could reply, the boy's eyes crept to the silver on the table and he gasped, as if suddenly reminded of some dreadful thing he had forgotten, while Mathiesen, watching him closely, said quietly:

"It's in your hands now, Joe. I gave you my word; and if you still want to carry away our silver, I shan't stop you. But if you wish, you can be a son to Miss Garnet, and earn the friendship we want to give you. It's for you to choose; and, I think, you're man enough to choose the right."

Then the boy, still staring at the silver, voiced the thought born of his new-found sense of shame: "But—but what'll she think, sir?"

His eyes crept from Mary's treasures to the room above, and Mathiesen smiled. It was a smile that had healed many a hurt heart before, and now it fell like balm on a tortured soul.

"I have no secrets from my wife, Joe," he said quietly, "but this is *your* secret, and if you want me to keep it—"

"Oh, would you?" cried the boy breathlessly.

His head went down amid the silver on the table, while the storm that had been gathering shook his slender form. Mathiesen arose, and a feeling of helplessness crept over him. He knew that the boy needed the comfort one would give a child, yet he had appealed to him as a man, and that thought he must leave intact. If Mary were only here—

Then, to his joy, he saw her in the doorway. Her eyes held his for a brief moment—swept past him to the silver on the table—to the boy's head bowed amid his plunder—to the baby's lonely porringer—mute witness for the defence, and Mary, being Mary, understood. She crossed the room and put her arms about the boy.

"You hadn't any mother, had you?" she said, tenderly. "You didn't understand. There. There."

She might have been comforting her own baby, thought her husband. He paused a moment, looking down adoringly at her bowed head. Then, turning quietly, he went out and closed the door. He knew how the boy would choose. Mary would finish the task he had begun.—New Success.

Ancient New Year's Customs and Their Origin

Probably after Hallowe'en and Christmas there is no festival of the year so girt about with long-established customs as New Year's Day. Among the best known of these are the auguries drawn from what was called the "Candlemas Bull." In Scotland and other northern countries the term Candlemas, given to this season of the year, is supposed to have had its origin in religious ceremonies performed by candle light. The candles used were very large and highly ornamented, and were brought in at the midnight hour to the assembled guests, who, since the falling of dusk, had been drinking freely of the wassail bowl. Then, in procession, they marched out into the night, and to their imaginations the passing clouds assumed the shape of a bull. From the rise and fall and general motions of these clouds the seer foretold good or bad weather. Sometimes, too, auguries for the future were gathered from the state of the atmosphere on New Year's Eve, and also from the force and character of the wind.

In the imagination of most primitive peoples, especially those of the North, who were forced to battle against the elements of nature for life and sustenance, the eves of great feasts were considered occasions when the spirits of good and evil were in deadly conflict. The moment of midnight on New Year's eve was always considered a time of special activity for the spirits of evil. In order to overcome them holier and more powerful influences had to be invoked. The evil spirits, or genii, as can be gathered from the Icelandic and Anglo-Saxon folklore, and even from words in their dialect, could be overcome by an appeal to the good genii, the *hoghmen*, or hillmen.

Probably imported from Italy was the superstition that on New Year's eve the "evil eye" was all the more malignant. Then, too, there was a widespread practice of the "setting of mete or drynke by nighte on the benche to fede Allholde or Goblyn." In some of the dialogues of the famous medieval morality play "Dives and Pauper" we find mention of this and many other New Year's customs intended to counteract the activities of the forces of evil.

Perhaps what contributed most of this general fear of sinister influences was the deep drinking among the people, which continued almost uninterruptedly from Christmas until New Year's Day. Up to the ninth century, except in the Syrian and Coptic churches, New Year's day was not celebrated as a special feast day, but was looked upon as merely the octave of Christmas. Therefore the Christmas cheer was continued throughout the entire octave without abatement. It flickered up for the last time on New Year's Day, as is clear from the 19th sermon of Augustine, Bishop of Hippe.

In England on New Year's Eve the young women went about carrying the "wassail bowl" and singing from door to door certain verses—a custom which had much in common with the *hogmany* practice in Scotland. *Het pint*, the strange brew which in that country was carried about in the streets at midnight, was composed of ale, spirits, sugar, nutmeg or cinnamon. It was a powerful potion, the effects of which were almost immediately evident. Ritson in a collection of ancient songs gives us a few sung to the quaffings of this "prince of liquors, old or new." One such is:

"A jolly wassel bowl,
A wassel of good ale,
Well fare the butler's soul
That setteth this to sale;
Our jolly wassel!"

Notwithstanding the opposition which it has met since the year 1811, when many abuses were discovered in the practice, the custom of hurrying first across the threshold of his sweetheart has been practiced by many a young lad in Anglo-Saxon countries. The young lady listened attentively from the time the midnight bells ceased to ring to catch the first footfall on the floor.

The welfare of the family, particularly the fairer portion of it, was supposed to depend upon the character of the first comer after the midnight hour had sounded. Great care was taken to exclude all improper persons, especially as the midnight intruder enjoyed the privilege of imprinting a "hearty kiss" on the lips of the expectant lassie.

The custom of bestowing gifts has become so inextricably linked with the New Year's celebrations in Paris that New Year's Day is still called the *Jour d'Estrennes*. This custom seems to have had its rise in the conduct of the nobles of the late Middle Ages, who were in the habit of bestowing gifts upon their sovereign.

The giving of gifts was also very common in England among the people. On Christmas Day, and often on St. Stephen's Day, employers, parents and masters presented Christmas boxes to their dependents. It was a form of Christmas charity. On New Year's Day, however, gifts were exchanged between friends and acquaintances as a sign of good will. This custom, perhaps, had its origin in the box which was taken aboard every vessel that sailed out of port during the octave of Christmas and which was not to be opened until the return of the vessel. Contributions were to be dropped into this box, large or small, according as the day had been propitious or otherwise. Hence the name of "Christmas boxes," which were given up to and including New Year's Day. Each one of these days became known as "Boxing Day." At the present time the 26th of December is known as "Boxing Day."

The Year's End.

Full happy is the man who comes at last
Into the safe completion of his year;
Weathered the perils of his spring, that blast
How many blossoms promising and dear!
And of his summer, with dread passions fraught
That oft, like fire, through the ripening corn,
Blight all with mocking death and leave distraught
Loved ones to mourn the ruined waste forlorn.
But now, though autumn gave but harvest slight,
Oh, grateful is he to the powers above
For winter's sunshine, and the lengthened night
By hearthside genial with the warmth of love.
Through silvered days of vistas gold and green
Contentedly he glides away, serene.

A Prayer.

Oh, young New Year, take not these things from me—
The olden faiths; the shining loyalty
Of friends the bitter, searching years have proved—
The glowing hearth fires, and the books I loved;
All wonted kindnesses and welcoming—
All safe, hard-trodden paths to which I cling.

Oh, gay New Year, glad with the thrill of spring—
Leave me the ways that were my comforting!

—Laura Simmons.

To every reader, young and old, we extend our heartiest New Year's greetings and best wishes for a most prosperous and happy 1924.

This is the best season of the year for the farmer to turn over a leaf in his account book.

Let us fully resolve to keep our good resolutions.