

# FOSTER MAXIMILIAN

RICH MAN,  
POOR MAN

Maximilian Foster  
**Rich Man, Poor Man**

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# Maximilian Foster

## Rich Man, Poor Man

### I

Promptly at six every week-day evening in the year Mr. Mapleson came down the stairs of the L road station on the corner and trudged up the side street toward his home. He lived at Mrs. Tilney's, the last house but one in the block; but though for more than sixteen years Mr. Mapleson had boarded there, none of the landlady's other patrons – or the landlady either, for that matter – knew much about their fellow-guest. Frankly he was a good deal of a puzzle. The others thought him queer in his ways besides. They were right perhaps.

He was a little man, round-shouldered, elderly and spare, with an air of alert, bustling energy quite birdlike in its abruptness. Uppish you might have judged him, and self-important too; yet in his tired eyes as well as in the droop of his small sensitive mouth there was something that belied the vanity of a pompous, confident man. Nor was his briskness so very convincing, once you had closely scanned him, for beneath it all was a secret, furtive nervousness that bordered at times on the panicky. He was, in short, shy – shy to a last degree; a self-conscious, timorous man that on every occasion shrank mistrustfully from the busy world about him. A castaway marooned on a desert island could scarcely have been more solitary, only in Mr. Mapleson's case, of course, the solitude was New York.

There are many such. No quarter of the city, indeed, is without its Mr. Maplesons. They are to be seen caged behind the grilles of every bank and counting-room; they infest, as well, the hivelike offices of the big insurance companies; soft-footed, faithful, meek, they burrow dustily among the musty, dusty back rooms and libraries of the law. Mere cogs in the machine, their reward is existence, nothing else. Then when the cog is broken, its usefulness at an end, it is cast carelessly on the scrapheap, while the machine goes grinding on. *O tempore! O mores!* Mr. Mapleson was a clerk in a Pine Street real-estate office. His salary was twenty-eight dollars a week, and his employers thought it high!

But enough! Tonight it was Christmas Eve; and as Mr. Mapleson descended from the L road station and trudged westward on his way, a smile as secret, as furtive as himself, quivered radiantly on his lips. Overhead, through a rift in the fleecy, racing clouds, a host of stars blazed down like the lights of an anchored argosy; and when he looked up and saw them there the little man's eyes blinked and twinkled back at them. Then a gust of the night's raw wind swooped along the street, and he had bent his head to it and was hurrying when a fleck of snow like a knife-point stung him on the cheek. "Hah!" cried Mr. Mapleson, his face beaming, "a white Christmas, eh?" And with a quick look upward, as if to assure himself, he critically examined the sky.

Afterward he chuckled, a silvery tinkle, and tightly clutching the bundles in his arms Mr. Mapleson hurried on, his slender feet padding the pavement like a bunny cottontail's. A little agitated you would have thought him, a little feverish perhaps; and yet, after all, why not? Remember, Christmas comes but once a year; and as the slight figure passed swiftly under a street lamp standing near his door, there was a glow in the gray furrowed face that one would have wagered sprang from a heart filled only with kindness, with the night's spirit of goodwill.

Still smiling, Mr. Mapleson opened the door with his latchkey and stepped into Mrs. Tilney's hall. Then a curious thing occurred. Closing the door, Mr. Mapleson for a moment stood poised in an attitude of acute attention. It was not only furtive, it was a little crafty too. Then his eyes, roaming about him, fled down the dingy hall to where in the dim light of the single gas jet a stair was to be seen. Obviously it led to the kitchen floor below, for there arose from it not only a potent scent of cooking but the sound of a shrill, flustered voice, a woman's. Evidently its owner reigned

in an advisory capacity over the kitchen's busy doings. At any rate, the voice lifting itself in shriller complaint, the words became intelligible.

"Is everything on earth going to ruin? Mary Mangin, don't you hear me? Do as I tell you now!"

"I'm a-doin' ut, ain't I?" an aggrieved voice returned.

Then came an interlude. The kitchen door was slammed, while from elsewhere belowstairs arose yet a third voice, a girl's.

She sang, lilting like a lark:

One shoe off and one shoe on,  
Deedle deedle dumpling, my son John.

That was all. It ended in a little laugh, a burst of merriment that rippled musically up the stairwell.

Mr. Mapleson abruptly moved. Tiptoeing to the stairhead he descended stealthily halfway to the foot. Here he turned, and laying down his parcels on a stair he removed his hat, which he placed on top of them. Afterward the little man hurriedly unbuttoned his coat, removing from the recesses of its inner pocket a newspaper. This he opened in the middle. Then with a painstaking precision, scrupulous with care, Mr. Mapleson compactly folded the newspaper so as to display one particular column among its advertisements.

Its heading, a single word printed in full-faced type, was significant.

## PERSONAL

When he had replaced the paper in his pocket Mr. Mapleson picked up his hat and bundles and on tiptoe crept down the remainder of the stairs. A board partition inclosed the stairway, and on reaching the bottom the little man peered cautiously past the woodwork. The glance revealed to him Mrs. Tilney's dining-room, its lights lighted, its table set for dinner. In a few minutes now the bell would ring, the dozen guests come trooping to their meal. However, as if assured the room was vacant, Mr. Mapleson was just creeping into the basement hall when with a catch of his breath he shrank back suddenly.

On the hearthrug in front of the fireplace stood a girl. She was a young girl. In age she was nineteen perhaps, or it may have been a little more. But whatever her age, or whether you would or would not call her beautiful, there was one thing about her that was not to be mistaken. It was the allurements of her smile, a merriment that danced and rippled in her eyes like the sheen on sunlit silk. At the moment it happened that a young man in evening clothes stood before her, and with her arms uplifted, her slender form close to his, the girl was intently tying his necktie. All her attention was centered on the task as with deft fingers she molded the white lawn into a bow; but with the young man it was different. His face, so far from wearing the vacuous, bored expression seen on the faces of those who must have their neckties tied, seemed interested to an extreme. With parted lips, his eyes smiling, he was gazing down at the face now so near to his.

Mr. Mapleson peeped. Presently he saw the girl's quick slender fingers twist the tie into a bow, then give it a finishing pat; and as if yet fearful he should be seen, he was effacing himself, when the young man moved and he heard him draw a little breath.

"Thanks," said the young man briefly.

The girl's eyes leisurely lifted themselves. Briefly they dwelt on his, then their gray depths lighted suddenly. A moment later a tinkling ripple of merriment left her and she turned away.

"You're welcome!" she laughed; and she and the young man moving out of view, Mr. Mapleson made the best of his opportunity.

Gliding down the hallway, he quietly opened the door at the other end. Then, stepping inside, he as quietly closed it behind him. He was in Mrs. Tilney's kitchen, a sanctuary tabooed usually to Mrs. Tilney's guests. Across the floor the lady herself stood near the range shrilly exhorting her cook, a red-faced person of astonishing girth and – notably – impenetrable calmness.

"Mary Mangin, my Gawd!" Mrs. Tilney addressed her; "d'you wish to be the death of me? Enough's happening without your burning the soup! Take off that kettle at once, d'you hear me?"

Quaking as she moved, the behemoth emerged momentarily out of the vapors surrounding the cookstove.

"Be aisy, will ye!" admonished Mary Mangin. "What wit' y'r carryin' ons th' day 'twill be a wonder we're not worse an' all!"

It was at this moment that Mr. Mapleson spoke.

"Mrs. Tilney," he said.

The landlady turned. She was a small woman with sharp, inquiring features and shrewd, not unkindly eyes. Now, having peered at Mr. Mapleson from behind her steel-rimmed spectacles, Mrs. Tilney began to blink exactly like a small, startled barn owl. Obviously she had suddenly become agitated.

"Well?" she breathed.

Laying down his bundles, Mr. Mapleson removed his hat, after which he produced from his pocket the folded newspaper. Silently he pointed to the column headed "Personal," and as silently Mrs. Tilney read:

Benedict. A liberal reward will be paid for information concerning the present whereabouts, living or dead, of the person known variously as Randolph Benedict, Benedict Ames, or Ames Randolph, who, when last heard of in January, 1897, was about to embark from New York City presumably for some port in South America. All communications will be regarded as entirely confidential. Address Hill, Hamilton, Durand & Hill, Wall Street, New York.

A little gasp escaped Mrs. Tilney. She was still gaping at the paper when Mr. Mapleson took it from her and, turning the page, indicated a new item in another column:

## **BEESTON'S CONDITION CRITICAL**

## **FAMILY SUMMONED TO THE**

## **GREAT FINANCIER'S**

## **BEDSIDE**

There was a pause. Then with a jerk of his thumb Mr. Mapleson indicated the adjoining dining-room where again the girl's voice arose, tinkling with merriment.

"All hers," he said, and as he spoke his voice cracked thinly – "millions!"

Again Mrs. Tilney caught swiftly at her breath.

"Bab's?" she whispered. "My little Babbie Wynne?"

Mr. Mapleson slowly nodded.

"It's true," he said; "I phoned them, and it's as true as the Holy Writ! The lawyers are coming here at eight!"

## II

Six o'clock had just struck when Bab, after a brief look at herself in the glass, opened the door of her bedroom and hurried out into the hall. Every evening it was her duty to see that the dining-room table was set properly and tonight she had been delayed. In spite of her hurry, however, her pace perceptibly slackened as she neared the head of the stairs. The room there was Mr. Varick's; and behind the door she could hear him briskly moving about, humming to himself a lively little air as he dressed:

La Donna è mobile,  
Quam plume mal vento!

She smiled at his cheerfulness. How pleasant it always was to hear him!

Frankly Bab's interest in the young man was a bit deeper than the feeling she usually displayed toward the boarders at Mrs. Tilney's. The house, though comfortable enough in its homely way, was still not what one would call enlivening; nor were its patrons any the more inspiring. They were, for the most part, clerks, breadwinners like Mr. Mapleson, with an occasional stenographer or saleswoman to lend variety. To these, however, Varick had proved the exception – notably so, in fact; and this Bab had been quick to see.

One ordinarily does not look to find a Varick in a boarding house. Indeed, until the day he arrived at Mrs. Tilney's Varick had never so much as put his nose in one. He was, in short, what Miss Hultz, the occupant of Mrs. Tilney's third-floor front, so aptly termed a "swell." And when she said swell Miss Hultz meant swell; there was no doubt of that. Being in the hat and feather department at Bimberg's – the Fifth Avenue Bim's of course – she consequently knew.

But then that Varick was a Varick, therefore of the elect, would probably have been evident even without Miss Hultz' authoritative say-so.

He was a slender, tall, gray-eyed fellow with a narrow, high-bred head and quiet, pleasant manners. Newcomers were not many at Mrs. Tilney's, for the house, if modest, was well kept, so that its guests remained on indefinitely. However, the instant Varick for the first time had entered its dining-room he was looked at with interest, the others divining immediately that he was a somebody. Moreover, Mr. Jessup, the gentleman at the head of the table, instantly had confirmed this.

With his wife, a plump, kindly little woman, Mr. Jessup tenanted Mrs. Tilney's second-floor back. Briefly he was a bookkeeper in the National Guaranty's R to Z Department; and looking up from his soup as Varick entered, Mr. Jessup had stared.

"Phew!" he'd whistled, whereat Mrs. J. had nudged him with her elbow. "Don't blow in your soup, Joe!" she'd admonished; "it isn't manners!"

A lot he cared! Months before, when Varick's father had died, Jessup had been called in to help untangle the old man's bank accounts. That they had been as involved as all this, though, he had not even dreamed. A Varick in a boarding house! Again Mr. Jessup had whistled. However, not even this vicissitude seemed to have crushed the young man. A quick smile lit up his face when the bookkeeper ventured to address him.

"Of course I remember you!" he exclaimed. Then he had turned to the bookkeeper's chubby lady in the same frank, friendly way. "Delighted to meet you, Mrs. Jessup!"

Thus it was that, impressed, a little awed perhaps, Mrs. Tilney's other guests learned they had a Varick among them. Not that Varick had tried either to awe or to impress. Like Jessup, he too was merely an employee in a bank now, and he made no bones of saying so. The bank was the Borough National. It was in Broad Street and it paid him twelve dollars a week. That was another reason why Varick was at Mrs. Tilney's.

But not even this – the fact, that is, of the twelve dollars and its contingent relation to his presence in the boarding house – seemed in the least to have marred his cheerfulness. Bab felt heartily she had never met anyone so responsive, so entertaining. As she went on down the stairs, hurrying to her task in the dining-room, she was still smiling, humming softly to herself the while the air she had heard him singing.

A few minutes later, while she was arranging the last knives and forks, the dining-room door opened and Varick himself stood there. His face lit instantly as he saw her.

"Hello, Bab!" he greeted. "I thought I heard you come down!"

He was in evening dress, his attire spick and span save for the one particular of his necktie. This, with its two ends askew, clung to his collar in a rumpled knot.

"Busy?" he inquired.

Bab laughed.

"You want your tie tied, I suppose!" she returned, warned by former experience. "I thought the last time I gave you a lesson!"

Varick nodded.

"I know. What I need, though, is not lessons – it's less thumbs. Now be a good fellow, won't you?"

Bab laughed again; and laying down the knives and forks in her hands, she reached up and began pulling and patting the soft lawn into shape. Finally she had it to her satisfaction.

"There!" she murmured.

Varick did not move away. Instead he stood looking down at her, his gray eyes dwelling on hers, and in them was a gleam of interest she had seen there more than once of late. It was as if recently Varick had found in her face something he had not found there before. That something, too, seemed to inspire in him a growing look of reflection.

Bab, in spite of her good looks, was not vain. At the same time, though, neither was she blind. She gazed at Varick curiously.

"Well?" she inquired presently.

Varick seemed suddenly to recollect.

"Thanks!" he said; and in turn she laughed back: "You're welcome!"

She had just spoken when out in the dimly lighted hall Bab saw Mr. Mapleson emerge suddenly from the stairway, and on stealthy tiptoes dart out of view toward the kitchen. A muffled exclamation escaped her, and as he heard it Varick looked at her vaguely.

"I beg pardon?" he inquired.

"Nothing – it was just someone in the hall," Bab evasively answered; and her face thoughtful now, she finished arranging the table. Planted on the hearthrug, Varick watched her. However, though she was quite conscious of this, she gave little heed to it. Her brow puckered itself still more in thought.

"You're not going to be home tonight, are you?" she inquired presently. When Varick said no, that he'd be out all the evening, Bab perched herself on the serving table in the corner, and sat swinging her shapely, slender heels. "I suppose you're going to a party, aren't you?" she suggested.

Again he smiled.

"Why, yes, Bab – why?"

"Oh, I don't know," she murmured as aimlessly. Then her eyes growing vague, she drew a little breath.

"There'll be a tree, I suppose?" Varick nodded. Yes, there would be a tree. "And you'll dance besides, I shouldn't wonder?" added Bab, drawing in her breath again, a pensive sigh. "I imagine, too, there'll be a lot of girls there – pretty girls?"

She could see him stare, curious at her tone, her questioning; but now she hardly cared. There was something Bab meant to ask him presently, though how she was to do it she still was not quite sure.

"Funny," she murmured, her tone as if she mused; "do you know, I've never been at a dance!"

Varick stared anew. "Really?"

"Honor bright!" said Bab, aware of his astonishment. She had a way, when others amused her, of drolly twisting up one corner of her mouth; and then as her smile broadened, rippling over her face, Bab's small nose would wrinkle up like a rabbit's, obscuring temporarily the freckles on each side of it. "Give you my word!" she avowed.

Leaning back, then, she sat clicking her heels together, her eyes roving toward the ceiling.

"Don't laugh," she murmured; "but often I've wondered what a dance was like – a real dance, I mean. You see, ever since I was a kid everyone round me has been too busy or too tired to think of things like that. Sometimes they've been too worried too; so the only dances I've ever been at have been just dream dances – make-believes. You know how it is, don't you, when you have no other children to play with? I'd make believe I was in a huge ballroom, all alone, and then somewhere music would begin to play! Oh, I can hear it yet – Strauss, the Blue Danube!" Bab's look was misty, rapt; and then with a slender hand upraised she began to beat time to the sensuous measure of the melody drifting in her mind. "Lights, music, that huge ballroom," she laughed at the memory; "music, the Blue Danube. Yes – and then I'd dance all alone, all by myself! Can't you see me – me in my pigtailed and pinafore, dancing! Funny, wasn't it?"

"Funny?" repeated Varick, and she saw his face was grave. "I don't think so. Why?"

But Bab did not heed. Her face rapt, she still sat smiling at the ceiling.

Strangers often wondered about Bab. It was not only her face, however, that roused, that held their interest. They marveled, too, that in the dim and dingy surroundings of the boarding house the landlady's little ward had acquired an air, a manner so manifestly above her surroundings. But Bab's history, vague as it was, gave a hint of the reason. Her mother, a woman who had died years before at Mrs. Tilney's, leaving her child in Mrs. Tilney's hands, manifestly had been a woman of refinement. In other words, despite environment Bab's blood had told; and that it had was evidenced by Varick's interest in her. During his months at Mrs. Tilney's he had, in fact, managed to see a good deal of his landlady's pretty ward.

However, not even this interest, the pleasure he had found in her company, had obscured in the least Bab's perception of the facts. She knew thoroughly her own position. She knew, too, his – that and the gulf it put between them. Young, attractive, a man; the fact that he now was poor had not much altered his social standing. It would remain as it was, too, until he married. Then when he did, his position would be rated by the wealth – that or the lack of it – of the woman who became his wife.

So, though Varick single might exist with propriety in a boarding house, there was a vast difference between that and a Varick married – a Varick setting up for life, say, in a four-room Harlem flat. And Bab, too, don't forget, was a boarding-house keeper's nameless ward.

"Tell me something," she said.

Slipping from her perch, she drew up a chair and, seating herself, bent forward with her chin on her hands.

"You've heard of the Beestons, haven't you – that family uptown. By any chance do you know them?"

"The Beestons!"

She saw him frown, his air amazed. However, though she wondered at the moment at his air, her interest was entirely in what he would answer.

"Why do you ask?" he inquired.

"I wanted to know," Bab returned slowly. "I wanted to find out something. Do they ever give parties – dances like the one you're going to tonight? And do you ever go to them?"

Varick's look grew all the more amazed. He not only knew the Beestons, he had often been in the huge house they occupied in one of the uptown side streets off the Avenue. But though that was true, for some reason the fact did not seem to afford him any great satisfaction. His face suddenly had grown hard.

"Who told you about them?" he demanded.

Bab smiled vaguely.

"There's a boy, isn't there?" she parried. "Old Mr. Beeston's grandson?"

The look of wonder in his face grew.

"Who? David Lloyd, you mean? How did you know him?" he questioned.

"I don't," said Bab, smiling at his vehemence; "I've only heard about him. He's a cripple, isn't he – a hopeless cripple?"

It proved that all his life Varick had known the boy – the man rather – whom she meant.

"Look here, Bab," he directed, puzzled, "why do you ask me about those people? I'd like to know that! Will you tell me?"

She deliberated for a moment.

"It was something I heard," she said then, hesitating.

"Here? In this house?" he questioned, all the more amazed; and Bab nodded.

"I heard Mr. Mapy say it," she returned.

Varick in return gazed at her, his face a picture.

"Mr. Mapy," he knew, meant Mr. Mapleson. He knew, too, like the other boarders, Bab's interest in the quaint, gray-faced little man, his next-door neighbor upstairs. True, Bab often laughed blithely at Mr. Mapleson, teasing him endlessly for his idiosyncrasies; but otherwise, as also Varick knew, her heart held for the queer, curious little man a deep well of tenderness, of love and gentle understanding. However, that was not the point. What had Mapleson to do with David Lloyd? What had a musty, antiquated Pine Street clerk to do with any of the Beestons? Now that he thought of it, there was something else, too, that Varick would have liked to know.

For the past ten days – for a fortnight, in fact – he had felt indefinitely that something queer was going on in that room next to his. Night after night, long after Mrs. Tilney's other guests had sought their rest, he had heard Mr. Mapleson softly stirring about. Again and again, too, he could hear him whispering, mumbling to himself. What is more, Varick was not the only one who had been disturbed. A few nights before, quite late, too, he heard a hand rap abruptly at Mr. Mapleson's door. Startled, a moment later he had heard someone speak. It was Jessup!

"Mapleson," Jessup had demanded; "what are you up to, man?"

Varick had not caught the reply; for, after a startled exclamation, Mr. Mapleson had dropped his voice to a whisper. But Varick had heard enough. What, indeed, was Mr. Mapleson up to?

Bab's eyes grew vague. Then she laughed. The laugh, though, was a little strained, a little less free than usual. Then her eyes fell and a faint tide of color crept up into her face and neck.

"Honest Injun now," she again laughed awkwardly, "don't you know what's happening?"

Varick shook his head, and Bab, her eyes on his, bit her lip reflectively. That question she longed to ask him hovered on her lips now, and with it there had come into her face an air of wistfulness. Her blue eyes clouded faintly.

"Tell me," she said, and hesitated – "tell me something. If at the dance tonight – the dance you're going to – if – if things were changed; and I – you – "

Varick nodded quietly.

"Yes," he prompted, "if I – "

"If I were there," said Bab; "if things were changed and I – "

Again she paused. Her eyes, too, fell suddenly. Then she caught her lip between her teeth.

"Yes, Bab," encouraged Varick; "if what were changed?"

But Bab did not reply. Of a sudden, as she raised her eyes to his, a great wave of color rushed into her face, mantling her to the eyes. Of a sudden, too, the eyes fell, dropping before his look. Her confusion was furious and with an abrupt movement, swift and unexpected to him, she slipped from her chair and darted into the half-lit hall. Then the next instant she was gone, and Varick, his own face a study, stood gazing after her dumbfounded.

"Good Lord!" he murmured to himself.

For he was no fool, neither was he a coxcomb; and what Bab had let him read in her face had been a revelation.

### III

Meanwhile, her cheeks aflame, furiously self-conscious at what she had revealed, Barbara Wynne had gone flying up the stairway to her room. There, half an hour later, tapping softly at her door, Mr. Mapleson found her lying in the dark, her face buried among the pillows of her bed.

"Why, Babbie!" he whispered – "Babbie Wynne!"

The boarders at Mrs. Tilney's, and especially those who had heard the story of Barbara Wynne, often commented on Mr. Mapleson's devotion to the landlady's little ward. The fact is the two had long lived together in the boarding house; for the year that Mr. Mapleson came to Mrs. Tilney's was the year Barbara Wynne had come there too. However, that was but a coincidence. They were in no way related. Mr. Mapleson, it seemed, had come first.

That night, now nearly seventeen years ago, nine o'clock had just struck when Mrs. Tilney's doorbell sounded. As the day happened to be a Sunday, and therefore the upstairs girl's evening out, Mrs. Tilney herself had answered.

The night was withering. It was the evening of an August dog day, ghastly betwixt the horrors of its heat and its stagnant, glaring sunshine, yet the man she found in the vestibule was clad in a winter suit not only sizes too large for him but suffocating in its armorlike thickness. Dust powdered him from head to foot. It powdered also the cheap suitcase he had set down beside him.

"Well?" Mrs. Tilney had inquired sharply.

A perfect convulsion of embarrassment had for a moment kept the slight, pallid man from replying. "I – why, your sign outside," he'd faltered then; "if you could let me have a room."

"You have references?" Mrs. Tilney had demanded.

The little man shook his head. Mrs. Tilney was about to shut the door when abruptly he threw out both his hands. The gesture was as timid as a girl's.

"I am from the country," he appealed. "I've come a great ways. I am very tired."

Then he smiled up at her, and somehow, in the wan wistfulness of his look, the sharp, distrustful woman had been placated.

"Oh, well," she grumbled and, standing aside, she waved for him to enter.

It had taken Mrs. Tilney weeks, not to say months, to grasp the real nature of her queer, retiring guest. Summer went, the autumn drew on. A new flock of winter "steadies" replaced summer's birds of passage and she wondered when he, too, would be gone. But Mr. Mapleson showed no disposition to depart. There were, in fact, signs that he meant to remain indefinitely. At any rate, on entering his room one morning Mrs. Tilney found upon the wall three cheap little color prints, each neatly framed in fumed oak. Also in a cigar box and tomato can on the window sill Mr. Mapleson had laid out for himself the beginnings of a window garden. A geranium and a Chinese bulb composed the horticultural display.

However, it was not until Thanksgiving Day, some weeks later, that Mrs. Tilney's suspicions of her guest were effectively set at rest. The circumstance arose over the departure, somewhat abrupt, of one of the other boarders, a Mr. Agramonte. The gentleman, the manager of a vaudeville booking agency, having let his board bill run three weeks, decamped secretly in the middle of the night. This was the day before Thanksgiving. At noon then, the fête day in question, Mr. Mapleson appeared suddenly at Mrs. Tilney's kitchen door. In his arms he bore a small potted plant. The plant was in full bloom and Mr. Mapleson was beaming shyly.

"I have brought you a flower," he said.

"Me?" had gasped Mrs. Tilney.

"Yes, it's a begonia," Mr. Mapleson was saying, when to his wonder, his alarm as well, Mrs. Tilney emitted a laugh, or rather it was a croak, then burst abruptly into tears, the first in years.

Never, never before, as she protested, had one of her boarders shown her such consideration. At the thought Mrs. Tilney wept anew.

However, to proceed: It was exactly one month after this that Barbara Wynne, the ward of Mrs. Tilney, had come there to the boarding house. The day, like the day of Mr. Mapleson's advent, was one to be remembered. A raw wind from the eastward had risen with the morning, and well on in the afternoon rain began. Presently, as if to show what a December storm really can do in New York, it settled itself into a soaking downpour – a flood that changed before long to cutting sleet, then to a wet, clinging snow.

Toward night Mrs. Tilney's upstairs girl entered the kitchen where Mrs. Tilney waged diurnal warfare with her cook.

"There's a lady in the parlor, mum," she announced.

The term was too often vulgarly misused in Mrs. Tilney's cosmos to excite anticipation.

"A lady? How do you know?" demanded Mrs. Tilney.

"Sure, mum," replied the girl with convincing frankness, "she do look different f'm yer boarders!"

It proved, moreover, to be the truth. Upstairs in the parlor Mrs. Tilney found a slender, wan-faced woman to whose dripping skirts clung an equally rain-soaked child; and that they were persons of distinction not even their appearance could dispute. The visitor's voice, when she spoke, was low and modulated. It rang like the undertone of a bell.

"I am looking for rooms – a room," she corrected.

A shudder accompanied the words, and with a gesture of uncontrollable languor she held her hands to the coal glowing in the hearth.

The landlady debated. Transients of this sort were as little to her liking as they were rare. However, after some misgivings she showed her visitor the one vacancy. It was a top-floor bedroom just down the hall from Mr. Mapleson's. Board included, the rent would be sixteen dollars.

"Thanks," said the visitor. "I'll have my trunk sent in at once."

Her tone Mrs. Tilney had thought hasty, over-eager. Before the landlady, however, could utter that shibboleth of her calling, "You have references?" the child spoke. Clinging to her mother's skirts, she had been staring at Mrs. Tilney.

"Babbie Wynne's hungry," she said.

With a start and a swift contraction of her mouth the mother leaned down to her.

"Hush! Yes, dear, in just a little while now!"

Mrs. Tilney did not ask to have her pay in advance. A certitude, subconscious but still confident, told her the visitor hadn't it. And to have turned that woman and her child outdoors on a night like this needed more courage than Mrs. Tilney had.

"Can we stay, mother?" asked the child earnestly.

There Mrs. Tilney had grimly interposed.

"You're married, aren't you?" she demanded, with a directness as designed as it was blunt.

A startled look leaped into the visitor's eyes. Then with a quiet dignity she slipped off her glove, displaying on her finger a narrow gold band.

"I am a widow," she said.

Mrs. Tilney had asked no more.

"While you get your trunk," she directed, "you leave that child with me. Tonight's no night for her to be traipsing the street! I'll see she has her supper too. What's she eat?"

And there you are! Barbara Wynne had come to Mrs. Tilney's!

There's not much more to be told. At seven the mother returned. Then, sometime later, an express wagon left a trunk at Mrs. Tilney's door. That night Mrs. Wynne came down to her dinner; but after that, of Mrs. Tilney's guests none but Mr. Mapleson saw her ever again. Late the second night the little man pattered down the stairs and tapped at Mrs. Tilney's door.

"You'd better go up," he said; "something's happening."

Donning a dressing sack, Mrs. Tilney hurried upstairs. Half an hour later the doctor came. He gave one look at the woman moaning on her pillow – in her nightdress, her hair in braids, she seemed scarcely more than a girl – and then the doctor shrugged his shoulders.

"Pneumonia – going fast," he said.

By evening, the day after, it was all over. Steadily the lamp of life burned dimmer, fading down to darkness; yet before its light failed altogether it flickered once, gleaming momentarily. Then the watcher at the bedside saw the dulled eyes open, grow bright, and she saw the lips part and flutter.

"What is it, dearie?" whispered Mrs. Tilney.

Only an unintelligible murmur came, but of a part of it Mrs. Tilney thought she was certain.

"Babbie! Barbara Wynne!" the lips seemed to call.

Down the hall Mrs. Tilney had gone hurriedly. Mr. Mapleson's door was ajar, and there on the floor sat the little man and the child. They were cutting strings of paper dolls out of newspaper.

"Come," Mrs. Tilney had said.

That brief flicker, though, had been the last. The mother love that momentarily wrung back the passing spirit to its shell had yet not been able to hold it there. Life had fled when Mrs. Tilney got back to the room with the child.

The little girl's hand in hers, Mrs. Tilney walked from the room and shut the door behind her. Never had she looked so grim, so sharp-faced, so unlovely. Never had her bony, angular face, her slack figure and sloping shoulders seemed so unalluring. But what of that?

Not one clew to the identity of either the mother or the child was to be found among the dead woman's few possessions. The fact is her trunk contained little. Such papers as were in it comprised only half a dozen undated letters, brief notes for the most part, and none of any value. All were addressed "Dearest D," and signed either "B," "H" or "V." However, from a remark let fall by Mrs. Wynne it was inferred that she had neither friends nor family in New York. It also was inferred that she had come originally from out of town. That was all. However, the trunk delivered up one thing that, if it were of no value in identifying its owner, at least had a monetary value. This was a diamond brooch. It paid ultimately for its former owner's burial.

Bab, you understand, never left Mrs. Tilney's. The night of the mother's funeral Mr. Mapleson slipped down the hall toward Mrs. Tilney's parlor. She sat there shrouded in the dusk and crooning softly.

"Well?" asked Mr. Mapleson.

"Hush!" whispered Mrs. Tilney fiercely. Pressed tight to her flat, unlovely breast was Bab's rumpled head, and Mr. Mapleson had said no more.

For those first few years the little old man sold dictionaries for a living. It was a sordid, distressing trade. Then, too, the snubs he received were, to a man of his shy nature, each a crucifixion. Eventually, though, he was enabled to get other employment. It was as bookkeeper in the Pine Street real-estate office.

That day his joy rose to a pitch of bubbling exultation. Picking up Bab, he tossed her high.

"Diamonds and pearls! Diamonds and pearls! You'll wear 'em yet, you wait!"

But Bab Wynne was of a far more practical turn of mind.

"Did you bring me my licorice stick?" she demanded.

It was Mr. Mapleson who had first taught Bab her letters. Step by step he brought her up until it was time to send Bab to a school. Then, the school having been selected, with the child's hand in his Mr. Mapleson walked there with her every morning. At night, too, it was Mr. Mapleson who always heard her lessons. "Spell *cat*," Mr. Mapleson would say; and when Bab, after deep thought, announced that c-a-t spelled cat, Mr. Mapleson would exclaim: "Very good! Very good!" and, laying down the spelling book, would pick up the reader. "Read, please," he would direct; and the little girl, bending

earnestly over her book, would display to the man's breathless interest that wonderful evidence of the Creation, the marvel of a child's growing mind. "Oh, see the ox! Is the ox kind? Yes, the ox is kind."

Mr. Mapleson would be enthralled.

"Diamonds and pearls!" he'd say. "Diamonds and pearls!"

There are times, though, one fears, when Bab Wynne, with the spirit that betokens the dawning of a character, was not just so earnest, so tractable. Pouting, she'd mumble: "Don't know how to spell cat!" or, "No, I don't see the old ox!"

Mr. Mapleson would slowly shake his head.

"If you won't read and won't spell, Bab," he'd say, "how can you hope ever to grow up a lady – a fine lady?"

"Don't want to be a fine lady!" Bab would answer.

Usually after this was a little silence. Then Mr. Mapleson would hold out both his hands to her.

"D'you want to break Mr. Mapy's heart?" he'd ask.

That always fetched her. And thus had passed the years, one by one drifting by. Bab had just turned twenty, and Mr. Mapleson's promise had come true. "Diamonds and pearls! Diamonds and pearls!" he'd told her. They were to be hers now. Bab Wynne at last had found her people!

She still lay with her brown head buried among the pillows; and Mr. Mapleson, his eyes gleaming like a bird's, bent above her, quivering, his slender hand gently touching her on the cheek.

"Why, Babbie!"

She looked up suddenly, her eyes suffused.

"Oh, Mr. Mapy!" she whispered. "Is it true? Is it true?"

He had left the door open, and had one looked closely it would have been seen in the light from outside that Mr. Mapleson started first, and that then the color fled swiftly from his face.

"What do you mean?" he whispered; and rising from the pillow Bab bent closer to him, her face rapt, her lips parting with excitement.

"I mean about me," she answered, her breast heaving gently – "about everything! Last night you were talking and I heard – I couldn't help listening! You were telling about the Beestons – about them – about me! Oh, Mr. Mapy, is it true?"

Mr. Mapleson stared at her, his face like clay. He was shaking too. Then he spoke, and his voice when she heard it was thick and harshly broken. One would hardly have known it for his.

"Yes," said Mr. Mapleson, and quivered; "it's true! You're old man Beeston's granddaughter. Your father was his son." And then Mr. Mapleson said a very curious thing. "Yes – God help me!" he croaked.

Belowstairs all Mrs. Tilney's boarders sat at dinner, and in the room lit dimly by the single gas jet the two were quite alone – the white-faced, white-haired, faded little old man; the girl, youthful, lovely, alluring. But alone though they were, the whole world at that instant might have whirled about them, roaring, yet neither would have heard it.

Bab presently spoke.

"You mean," she said slowly, wondering – "you mean that I'm theirs? That they are coming to take me?"

Mr. Mapleson said, "Yes."

"And I'm to have everything now, really everything?" she asked. "You mean I'm to have pretty clothes? To go everywhere? To know everyone they know?"

It was so; and his face convulsed, his mouth working queerly, Mr. Mapleson fell to nodding now like a mandarin on a mantelpiece.

"Yes, yes – everything!"

Again he bent over her, his expression once more rapt, once more transfigured.

"Yes, and you can marry. You understand, don't you?" said Mr. Mapleson, his voice eager, clear. "You can marry anyone. You understand – anyone?"

Then with a sudden gesture he held out his slender, pipelike arms; and Bab, her face suffused, crept into them. For a moment Mr. Mapleson patted the head hidden on his shoulder.

"You are happy, then?" he asked.

"Oh, Mr. Mapy! Mr. Mapy!" she whispered.

## IV

The lawyers were to arrive at eight. Long before that hour came the conviction that something startling was in the wind had begun gradually to dawn in the minds of Mrs. Tilney's boarders. The dinner in itself was significant.

Usually under Mrs. Tilney's practiced eye the meal progressed with order, with propriety. Not so tonight. In fact, the longer it continued, the more it seemed to take on the haste, not to say the impulsiveness, of an Alpine avalanche. Food, plates, silverware, all were hurled across the terrain of the tablecloth as if discharged upon it by some convulsion of Nature.

"Pardon!" said Miss Hultz, pausing abruptly in the middle of the repast. Then she grasped Lena, the waitress, firmly by the wrist. "You give me back that slaw!" directed Miss Hultz, her tone minatory. "The idea, the way you're snatching things before I'm finished!"

Lena valiantly defended herself.

"You needn't lay it on me, miss! There's folks callin' to see Mrs. Tilney at eight, I tell you, and I gotta git th' room cleared!"

"That's all right too!" retorted Miss Hultz. "Mrs. T. can ask in the whole street if she's a mind, only I'm not going to give up eating! Pass th' bread, Mr. Backus!"

Mr. Backus, the gentleman at Miss Hultz' left, was a plump, pasty young man who worked in Wall Street, and as he passed the bread he inquired:

"What's th' madam giving, a *soirée*?"

"Sworry" was what he called it, but Miss Hultz seemed to comprehend. Shrugging her shoulders, she raised at the same time her fine, expressive eyebrows.

"Search me," she murmured indolently.

The colloquy, it appeared, had not been lost on the others; neither had they missed the vague evidences that something unusual was happening in Mrs. Tilney's house.

Mr. Jessup spoke suddenly.

"Did you say someone was coming?" he abruptly asked. Then he added: "Tonight?"

His tone was queer. His air, too, was equally curious; and Mrs. Jessup glanced up at him astonished.

"What's that?" she asked.

"I asked what was happening," said Mr. Jessup. Then, as no one seemed able to answer him, he looked round the table. "Where's Mr. Mapleson?" he suddenly inquired.

No one seemed able to tell him this.

"H'm!" said Mr. Jessup queerly, and picking up his knife and fork he silently went on eating. His face, however, still wore a strange expression.

Varick arose. He too had been conscious throughout the dinner of the haste, the hurry that had filled it with confusion. However, he had given little heed to that. Assured that something was happening, he was at the same time little interested in its effect on Mrs. Tilney's table arrangements. For Mr. Mapleson's was not the only face that was absent. Bab, too, was missing.

A growing worry, in spite of himself, had begun to nag and nettle Varick. He still pondered curiously over what had occurred between them there in the dining-room before dinner. Then, besides, what was it that was happening? Was she affected? His dinner half finished, he shoved back his chair from the table.

"Hello, off for a party, I see!" knowingly cried Mr. Backus.

Varick nodded.

"Yes, just off," he returned; and glancing about the table, he bobbed his head, smiling shyly. "Merry Christmas, everyone!"

Miss Hultz, for one, gave him a flashing smile, all her handsome teeth revealed.

"Same to you, Mr. Varick! Many of them!"

"Sure! And a happy New Year, son!" added Mr. Backus.

All the others joined in, even crusty old Mr. Lomax, the broken-down, disappointed life-insurance solicitor who tenanted Mrs. Tilney's back parlor.

" – Christmas, young man!" he grunted; and again fell to pronging his slaw in moody silence. His wife leaned over and touched him. She was a tall, faded woman in black silk and a lace cap, with the frail pink cheeks that go with caps and black silk. "Some night you must put on your full-dress suit too," she whispered. "We will go to a theater!"

As Varick passed toward the door her eyes followed him. She could remember the time when Mr. Lomax, too, had looked young; when he had seemed slender, vital, energetic. Varick saw the look, and as his eyes caught hers he smiled at her in his friendly, boyish way. Mrs. Lomax beamed.

The young man had reached the floor above and was passing on his way up the second flight of stairs when Mr. Mapleson appeared suddenly at the stairhead. The little man's haste was evident. The instant he saw Varick he exclaimed:

"Why, there you are! I was just looking for you!"

He came pattering down the stairs, his small figure more alert, more fussy, more bustling than ever. About it, though, was an uneasiness that was unmistakable. His air was, in fact, as if he had steeled himself to face something.

"You are going out?" he asked, his tone quick.

Varick said he was. Mr. Mapleson at the reply seemed to fuss and flutter even more. Then, swiftly putting out his hand, he touched Varick on the arm.

"Could you wait?" he appealed. "It is a favor – a great favor!"

Varick regarded him with surprise. The little man was quivering. For the moment a fit of shyness more than usually awkward seemed painfully to convulse him. His eyes leaped about him everywhere. Nor was his speech less agitated.

"If you could wait," he faltered, "I have something to tell you."

Then his emotion, whatever the cause of it, got the better of him. "I beg of you do not go yet!" he piped; and he peered up at Varick, his eyes gleaming, his mouth working nervously.

A moment passed while Varick, his wonder growing, gazed down at the white face turned up to his. Then he laid his hand quietly on Mr. Mapleson's shoulder.

"Why, what's wrong, Mr. Mapleson?" he asked. "You're not in any trouble, are you?"

Mr. Mapleson at the question looked blank.

"In trouble? I?"

"Yes. If I can help you – " Varick had begun, when the little man gave vent to a sudden exclamation.

"I'm in no trouble! Who said I was?" he cried; and Varick stared, gazing at him with renewed astonishment. If it wasn't for his own sake that Mr. Mapleson had begged him to stay in, for whose, then, was it? Varick at this point started with a sudden thought.

"Look here," he said sharply; "it isn't Bab, is it?"

The effect was immediate. Again Mr. Mapleson peered up at Varick, his face transfigured; and again, his manner impulsive, he touched the young man on the arm.

"She is very lovely, isn't she?" he said; "and she is very good and sweet; don't you think she is?"

There was no doubt of it, but still Varick did not reply. A vague understanding had begun to creep into his mind, and questioningly he gazed down into the little man's upturned face.

"Tell me," said Mr. Mapleson – and as he heard him Varick's eyes grew wide – "tell me," he faltered, "you do think her lovely? You do think her sweet and lovely, don't you?"

Varick nodded slowly.

"Why, yes," he said, "she is very lovely." And at that Mr. Mapleson gave vent to an eager exclamation.

His face gleaming, again he threw out both his hands.

"Oh!" he cried, "then if she were rich, if you knew her to be well-born, too, why – why – " Here Mr. Mapleson began awkwardly to falter – "Why, then you would – would – " There he paused. Moistening his lips, the little man quivered suddenly: "She could marry – marry anyone, don't you think?" he shrilled. "She could marry whom she chose; you think so, don't you?"

But if he did, Varick did not say so. A moment passed, and then, as it had been with Bab, a tide of color swept up into his face, mantling it to the brows. In other words he had seen at last exactly what Mr. Mapleson meant by his vague, faltering phrases. If Bab were rich, if Bab were well-born, then would Varick marry her? The question was never answered. Just then at Varick's back Mrs. Tilney's doorbell rang suddenly.

## V

Would he marry Barbara Wynne? That night with its train of abrupt, confusing happenings, all following swiftly, one hard on the heels of another, Varick ever afterward could remember only as the mind recalls the vague, inconstant images of a dream. The least of it all, though, was that veiled query put to him by Mr. Mapleson. However, he had still to answer it, even to himself, when the clang of the doorbell interrupted.

Outside in the vestibule stood two persons – a woman and a man. Their voices, as they waited, were audible through the glass; and Varick, once he heard them, listened curiously. Something in their tone was familiar, especially in the woman's tone; and though the footfalls of Lena, the waitress, already could be heard slipslopping on the stair, he did not wait. Instinctively he threw open the door.

It was as he'd surmised. The two outside were known to him, and for a moment he gazed, astonished. The lady – for manifestly in spite of her curious appearance she was that – was the first to break the silence.

"Bless me!" she said in a voice that boomed like a grenadier's. "If it isn't Bayard Varick!"

Her escort seemed equally astonished. The gentleman, a middle-aged, medium-sized person with pale, myopic eyes, pale, drooping mustaches, and thin, colorless hair, gave vent to a grunt, then a sniff. The lady's buglelike tones, however, at once submerged this.

Her surprise at finding Varick there was not only startled, it was scandalized, one saw.

"You don't mean you're living here?" she demanded. Afterward, having given her bonnet a devastating jab with one hand, she remarked eloquently: "My Lord!"

Varick in spite of himself had to smile. The world, or that part of the world at least which arrogates to itself that title, ever will recall with reverence – a regard, however, not unmixed with humor – that able, energetic figure, Miss Elvira Beeston. The chatelaine, the *doyenne* too, of that rich, powerful family, Miss Elvira enjoyed into the bargain a personality not to be overlooked. Briefly, it would have made her notable whatever her walk in life. But never mind that now. In years she was sixty – that or thereabouts; in figure she was short, not to mention dumpy. Bushy eyebrows, a square, craggy face, inquiring eyes and a salient, hawklike nose comprised other details of her appearance.

As the prefix suggests, Miss Elvira never had married. There were reasons, perhaps. Of these, however, the one advanced by the lady herself possibly was the most plausible. "Life," she was heard to observe, "has enough troubles as it is."

However, that she was a woman of mind, of character, rather than one merely feminine, you would have divined readily from Miss Elvira's dress. Her hat, a turban whose mode was at least three seasons in arrears, sagged jadedly into the position where her hand last had jabbed it; while her gown, equally rococo, was of a style with which no washerwoman would have deigned to disfigure herself.

Her companion, the gentleman of the myopic eyes and pale mustaches, was her niece's husband, De Courcy Lloyd. Old Peter Beeston was his father-in-law. His air bored, his nose uplifted and his aspect that of one pursuing a subtle odor, Mr. Lloyd advanced into Mrs. Tilney's hallway. Evidently its appointments filled him with distaste, for having glanced about him he was just remarking, "Good Lord! What a wretched hole!" when of a sudden there was a diversion.

Mr. Mapleson was still in the hallway. The instant the doorbell rang he started; and then had one looked, a quick change would have been seen to steal over the little man's gray, furrowed features. In turn the varying emotions of alertness, interest, then agitation pictured themselves on his face; and now, having for a moment gazed blankly at Miss Beeston, he gave vent to a stifled cry. The next instant, turning on his heel, Mr. Mapleson fled at full tilt up the stairs. He ran, his haste unmistakable, flitting like a frightened rabbit. Then as he reached the stairhead he turned and cast a glance behind him. It was at Miss Beeston he looked, and Varick saw his face. Terror convulsed the little man. The

look, however, was lost on Miss Elvira. Having glanced about her for a moment, she leveled at Varick a pudgy yet commanding finger.

"Well, young man," bugled Miss Elvira; "you haven't told me yet what you are doing here?"

Varick, with a queer expression on his face, turned to her.

"Don't you know?" he inquired quietly.

Miss Beeston didn't. From the time Varick had been a boy in short trousers she had known him. Added to that, he long had been a friend, a close friend, too, of her nephew, crippled David Lloyd.

"That reminds me," Miss Elvira said abruptly, "why haven't you been to see us lately?"

Varick gave his shoulders a shrug. The shrug, though, was deprecatory rather than rude. That somehow he felt awkward was evident. Miss Beeston stared inquiringly.

"Well?"

"Your brother knows," Varick was saying; "perhaps you'd better ask him," when he became aware that Miss Elvira was neither interested in what he was telling her nor, for that matter, listening to him.

Her square, unlovely face raised expectantly, she stood looking up the stairway, and as Varick gazed at her he saw a sudden transformation. The square jaw seemed to grow less square; the bright, inquiring eyes visibly softened, their gleam less hard, less penetrating, while Miss Elvira's mouth, set ordinarily in a shrewd, covert grin, seemed for a moment to quiver. Her breast, too, was gently heaving and, marveling, Varick turned to look.

At the head of the stairs stood Barbara. Her hand on the stair rail, she paused momentarily, staring at the strangers in the hall below. Then a faint air of wonderment crept into her face, and, her eyes on Miss Elvira, she came slowly down toward her.

Miss Elvira's square, squat form was as if suddenly transfigured. For once in her life a rare, indefinable beauty shone upon her plain unlovely features – a radiance that would have startled into wonder Miss Elvira's cronies had they been there to see it. She did not speak. She stood, bending forward, her mouth working, her eyes glowing beneath their shaggy brows.

Bab walked straight to her.

"I am Barbara – Barbara Wynne," she said. "You've come to see me, I suppose?"

Varick, puzzled, looked from one to the other in his wonder. As yet he grasped nothing of what was going on. "Why, what is it?" he murmured to Miss Elvira. By now, however, that lady had forgotten that Varick even existed. With a jab at her bonnet, her hard old face twitching queerly, she suddenly threw out both her hands.

"Come here, girl," said Miss Elvira thickly, her voice cracking as she spoke; "you know me, don't you? I'm your father's aunt – yours too. I've come to take you home."

Late that night, long after the dinner hour at Mrs. Tilney's, the news of what had happened ran from room to room. To say the boarding house was stupefied but barely expresses it. The story read like a fairy tale.

It was told, for example, how twenty years before, old man Beeston's son, against his father's will, had married an insignificant nobody – a girl without either wealth or position. Disowned, then disinherited, the son as well as the woman he'd married had disappeared. It was as if the grave had swallowed them. Which, indeed, had been the case, as both the man and his girl wife were dead. A child, however, had survived them, and that child was Bab. Picture the sensation at Mrs. Tilney's!

"Well, talk of luck!" remarked Miss Hultz, who had been among the first to hear the news. "She can have anything she wants now!" A thought at this instant entering her mind, she gave a sudden exclamation. "Why, she can even have Mr. Varick!" There seemed no reason to doubt it.

In Mrs. Tilney's house, it happened, was one person who did not share Miss Hultz' view. This was Varick himself!

Eleven o'clock had struck and Bab, with her little handbag packed, her face white, had been whirled away uptown in the Beestons' big limousine. Mrs. Tilney, too, had made her exit. Her gaunt

face drawn and grim, she sat in her bedroom staring into the cold, burned-out grate. Its ashes seemed somehow to typify her sense of desolation, of loneliness; for, as she reflected, Bab was gone, Bab was no longer hers. How swift it all had been! How unexpected! However, with that fortitude bred of a long familiarity with fate – or call it fortune if you like – Mrs. Tilney accepted dry-eyed this last gift it offered; and with a sigh she arose and made ready for bed.

Meanwhile, on the floor above, Varick had just knocked at Mr. Mapleson's door. His face was a study. All the color had left it until he was white, ash pale, and his gray eyes were clouded darkly.

"Mapleson," he said thickly, "do you know what you've done?"

The little man gaped. He cringed, starting as if he had been struck. Then from Mr. Mapleson's face, too, the last vestige of color sped swiftly.

"I?" he gasped.

Varick grimly nodded.

"Yes, you, Mapleson! It was you, wasn't it, that had those letters, the ones in that dead woman's trunk? It was you, too, wasn't it, that gave the lawyers the other papers – their proofs?" His voice rasping, he stared at the little man fixedly. "A fine mess, man, you've made of it!"

Both hands at his mouth, Mr. Mapleson shrank back, quivering.

"What do you mean?" he shrilled, and Varick shrugged his shoulders disgustedly.

"Just what I say!" he returned. "You don't know, do you, it was that man, that scoundrel, who ruined my father? You don't know, do you, he was the one who trimmed him in Wall Street? And now you've given her to him!"

Mr. Mapleson stared at him appalled.

"Ruined? He? Your father?" he stammered brokenly. "Beeston?"

The sweat started suddenly on Varick's brow.

"Don't you know I love her?" he cried. "Don't you know I want her? You don't think they'd let me have her now, do you?"

But the little man did not heed. All at once he tossed up both his hands.

"What have I done?" he groaned. "Oh, what have I done?"

## VI

The wayfarer familiar with the highways and byways of New York will recall that in one of the widest, the most select of the uptown side streets opening off Fifth Avenue there is a row of brownstone double dwellings of imposing grandeur and magnitude, and of the most incredible ugliness as well. Not even Mayfair in London can show worse; for that matter, neither can Unter den Linden or even Pittsburgh. A wide stairway with swollen stone balustrades guards the street front of each; and above these the houses themselves rise flatly, their façades chiefly notable for their look of smug, solid respectability – that and a wide acreage of plate-glass windows. Formerly a vast variety of rococo tutti-frutti decoration in the stonecutter's best art ornamented these fronts; but today the weather, as well as a sluggish uneasiness awakening in the tenants' minds, has got rid of the most of it; so that now the houses look merely commonplace, merely rich. But be that as it may, this particular Christmas Eve it was to the largest, the richest, and most formidable of these dwellings that the Beeston limousine brought Bab. For Bab had come home.

The ride, brief as it was, up the lighted, glittering Avenue, Bab felt she ever would remember with a vividness that not even time could mar. It was her first opportunity to get her mind in order. She a Beeston? She, the little boarding-house waif, heir to a goodly fortune? Bab felt she had only to say "Pouf!" to burst, to shatter into air the frail, evanescent fabric of that bubble!

So many things had happened! So many, too, had happened all at once! The excitement fading now, she began to feel herself languid and oppressed. And yet, as she knew, the night's ordeal had scarcely begun. In a few minutes now she was to see her father's own father, that grim and masterful figure, Peter Beeston. What would happen then?

In the newspapers that day Bab had read that the old man was at death's door. If this had been true, though, there was now a surprising change. Peter Beeston was not dead, neither was he dying; instead, the news having got to him that his son's child had been found, it had roused him like an elixir. "Bring her here!" he'd said. When they had protested, fearful of the effect on him, the man had turned in smoldering wrath. "Bring her, d'ye hear!" he'd rumbled fiercely. "You bring her, I say!" So Bab, as he'd ordered, was being brought.

It would be difficult to tell how much she dreaded it! If only Mr. Mapy could have come with her! To be sure, Miss Beeston had been kind, she had been gentle; but still Bab wished she could have with her in the coming ordeal someone she had always known. Curiously, however, Mr. Mapy had disappeared. Neither she nor anyone else for hours had laid eyes on him.

She vaguely wondered why. As she remembered now, on her way downstairs that night she had met him coming up; Mr. Mapy was running, helter-skelter too. Besides, she recalled how queer his face had looked – agitated, quite fearful, in fact. More than that, though she'd tried to speak to him he hadn't heeded her. He had rushed on up the stairs.

But then Mr. Mapy was not the only one that night who'd acted curiously. There was Varick too. The impression crept over her that for what had happened, her good fortune, Varick had seemed even sorry. That was it – sorry! Why?

It was when he came downstairs, dressed ready to go out, that he had said good-by.

They met on the stairs, and for a moment she had stood with him in the dim light on the landing. His face was grave, silent, grim. It looked to her, too, as if he'd had something he would have liked to say to her. But he didn't. Awkwardly he put out his hand.

"Good-by, Bab," he'd said.

"Good-by, Mr. Varick," she had answered, clumsily at a loss for anything else to say; and again he had smiled, a dry, dusty smile.

"Good-by; I won't see you again!"

It was not at all what she'd pictured – that parting.

Bab, however, had little time, little opportunity to mull over thoughts like these. She had no more than begun to reflect on Varick's curious attitude when the limousine, turning the corner, rolled up to the Beeston door.

"Ah, here we are!" the condescending voice of Mr. Lloyd announced; and the footman having thrown open the limousine door, Bab glanced past him at the house beyond. Dark, no light from its windows anywhere, it loomed like a cliff, a towering crag high above the pavement. She could have gasped at its magnitude.

Miss Elvira, who had sat during the drive sunk back in a corner of the car, arose briskly.

"Come!" she said, and the next instant, the street door opening from within, Bab stood gazing about her with breathless interest at the house which once had been her father's home.

If the place outside had seemed huge, within she felt engulfed by it. A drawing-room, now a vast vault of darkness, lay on one hand, while on the other was a reception room, itself cavernous in its immensity. Beyond, other rooms opened too. Bab glimpsed a library, then a dining-room, its sideboard and serving table glittering with silver. But of all this she had no more than a glance. A footman had opened the door for them, and in addition to him the butler stood in the hall. To him Miss Elvira turned abruptly.

"Well, Crabbe?" she demanded.

The man, a white-haired, pink-cheeked old fellow who had been staring round-eyed at Bab, got himself hastily together.

"The doctor's still upstairs – the assistant, that is, madam. The master's stronger, 'e says."

Miss Elvira did not tarry. With a sign to Bab the energetic lady went bustling up the stairs, the others trooping after her. Not more than half a minute later Bab found herself standing at her grandfather's bedside.

What happened upon that was swift, inexpressibly confusing. The room in which old Peter Beeston lay was huge, like all the rest of that house. It was a crypt-like impressive chamber, and was furnished darkly in the same massive way. And like his surroundings, the room and its furniture – the big dressing table, the vast writing desk, the massive four-poster that held him – the man himself was huge, a bulk of a man whose fierce, brooding face glowered about him as threatening as a thunder-cloud.

Bab gazed at him in awe. He lay outstretched, his limbs crossed like a Crusader's beneath the sheets; and though both age and illness had ravaged him the impression he gave was still of giant force, of giant fierceness too. His face, framed among the pillows, gazed up at her with a quick, inquiring look; and then, as he seemed to comprehend, Bab felt his eye drill through and through her with piercing intensity. His lips moved, his mouth worked momentarily, and he seemed about to speak. But when he did speak it was not to Bab.

Lloyd as well as Miss Elvira had accompanied Bab into the room, and of this Beeston instantly was aware. One gnarled, knotted hand raised itself from the coverlid, and, turning his eyes from Bab, he spoke. The speech came fiercely rumbling.

"Get out!" he said.

Lloyd's air thus far had been singularly curious, and now Bab saw him start.

"Do you mean me, sir?" he asked awkwardly. His manner, Bab thought, was uncomfortable, strangely uncertain for one heretofore so cocksure, so condescending; and she looked at him surprised.

Again Beeston spoke. The hand he had raised struck the coverlid a sudden blow, and the room rumbled with the echo of his voice.

"Get out, I say!" he repeated; and Lloyd, after a quick look at Bab, a glance the resentment of which she did not miss, withdrew abruptly.

Then old Beeston raised his hand, his forefinger beckoning.

"Vira," he said. "Vira!" And when his sister bent over him old Beeston growled thickly, his voice, if rough, still friendly: "Vira, you go too, old girl!"

So Bab found herself left alone with that grim, dark figure lying there – her grandfather.

"Come closer!" rumbled Beeston. "I want to look at you!"

A pause followed. Her heart beating thickly, Bab drew nearer to the bed, and as she stood there gazing down at the swart, fierce face staring darkly up at hers, pity for an instant welled into her heart. This was her father's father, she told herself; and troubled, she began to see now that if this masterful, unconquerable man had ruined others' happiness in his life, he had ruined his own as well.

The knotted hand upon the counterpane reached out suddenly.

"They say you're my son's child," said Peter Beeston. "Well, are you?"

His voice carried in it a note of intimidation, of truculent disbelief, but now she felt no fear of him. The hand that held hers she could feel quiver too.

"Yes," she said.

Again a pause. He wet his lips, his tongue running on them dryly, eagerly; and then of a sudden his eyes left hers and went drifting toward the ceiling. His voice when again he spoke broke thickly.

"Tell me about him, about my son!" said Beeston.

Bab looked at him hesitantly. It was this that she had dreaded.

"What shall I tell you?" she asked.

Beeston's eyes still were on the ceiling.

"Dead, isn't he?" he demanded.

Yes, he was dead, as the man lying there long must have known; and her trouble growing, Bab stared silently at him. But the grim eyes gave no sign.

"You don't look like him!" said her grandfather suddenly, so abruptly that she started. "You must look like that woman, eh!"

Bab gazed at him steadily.

"You mean my mother, don't you?" she inquired. She had been prepared for this, and in her voice was a tone of quiet decisiveness she meant him clearly to see. "You mustn't speak like that," she said clearly. "My mother did you no wrong!"

She saw his eyes leap from the ceiling to her and back again. Then a smile, a grim effigy of merriment, dawned in his somber face. A growl followed it.

"So you're self-willed, eh?" he rumbled. "You're all Beeston, I see!" Then a grunt, a sneer escaped him. "I'd be careful, young woman! I'm all Beeston too, and I've seen what comes to us self-willed folk! Your own father, because of it, ruined himself. That's not all either. Because of it, too, my daughter is married to a fool! Oh, I've seen enough of it!" he rumbled.

Bab was startled. She knew, she thought, the fool he meant, but to that she gave but momentary heed. Struggling up, his face dark, convulsed, no doubt, with the thoughts rioting in his mind, Beeston turned and shook roughly into place the pillows that supported him. And this was the man they had thought dying! Grumbling, growling thickly, he lay back then, the growls subsiding presently like thunder muttering away among the depths of distant hills.

She was still gazing at him, absorbed, startled, when she saw a change steal upon the man's distorted face. It was as if that instant's rage, flaming hotly, must have lighted in the dim recesses of his mind some forgotten cell; for of a sudden the smoldering anger of his eyes passed and he sat staring at the wall.

"Well, won't you tell me?" he asked heavily. "I want to know about my son."

But Bab knew nothing to tell. That was why the ordeal she had faced that night had filled her so with dread. The little she knew of either of her parents was what they had told her at Mrs. Tilney's. Vaguely they'd had the impression that the mother had come from somewhere upstate; where, they did not know. But scant as this information was and shadowy, what they'd learned of the father was even less. Of his history they had gathered nothing, not even an impression. As for herself, she remembered nothing of him. Nor did she know when he had died or how. She could not, in fact, even

tell where her father's grave was; and, sunken among the pillows, Beeston lay staring at the ceiling. Then suddenly he stirred.

"You mean you can't tell me anything? Answer me!" he said, his voice breaking thickly. "He was my son; I drove him from me! Don't you understand? I want to know! I've got to; he was my boy!"

Bab strove to free her hand from his.

"You're hurting me," she said, and at that he abruptly recovered himself.

"Eh?" he said, as if awakening.

He dropped her hand then, and, his eyes closing, he lay back among the pillows, his breast heaving with the tumult of emotions that had tortured him. But now that the struggle had passed the man's face changed anew with one of those astonishing transformations that so often marked his character. He smiled wanly. The fierceness waned from his face. And as Bab, pitying anew, sat gazing down at him, Beeston's hand again crept out and softly closed on hers. Drawing her toward him, he laid his cheek to hers.

"Don't be afraid," whispered Peter Beeston. "Don't be afraid! You're my boy's girl – his! You need never be afraid of me!"

Ten minutes later, when Miss Elvira and the nurse looked into the room, they found Bab perched on the bed talking to Beeston as if she had always known him. A smile played about the corners of the man's grim mouth. He held her hand in his.

## VII

As Mr. Mapleson, bubbling with anticipation, had foreseen, the city the following morning awoke to a good, old-fashioned white Christmas. At midnight the snow began to fall and, the storm thickening hour after hour, by dawn the streets were deep with it.

Her room had been darkened, the hangings at the windows tightly drawn, so that Bab, worn by the strain of the night before, slumbered on long past her usual hour for awakening. But presently a peal of chimes clanging a stave from a near-by church-steeple broke in on her, and with a start she sat upright. Dazed, drowsy-eyed, her perceptions still misty, she gazed about her in momentary wonder. Brunnehilde awakening could not more have been at a loss. Then with a throb she remembered.

Outside the chimes still pealed; the snow crept whispering on the window panes; and at the end of the street, murmuring like a sea, the muffled roar of the Avenue arose. Within the house, though, all was silent; and, her breath coming swiftly, Bab gazed about her open-eyed.

The surroundings, in contrast with her own little room at Mrs. Tilney's, were quite enough to make her stare. At the boarding house chintz of a cheap but pretty design was the fabric most in evidence. The curtains were made of it and so was the valance on Bab's little bed – that and the drapery on her dressing table. But here brocade thick and board-like formed the window hangings; the bureau cover was linen edged with Irish lace; and the bed was a vast thing of mahogany, its four posts crowned by a canopy, its coverlid of costly embroidered silk.

The other appointments were as rich. Her eyes, roaming about the room, glanced from one side of it to the other in wondering appreciation. Ivory and heavy, finely chased silver filled the dressing table; a great tilting pier glass stood beside it, and there were ornaments of porcelain and chased crystal on the mantel; while at each side of the four-poster, on the carpet's yielding pile, was spread a white fur rug, the skin of a great Polar bear. The more Bab's glances roved about, the more she marveled at the many costly evidences of wealth, of luxury that surrounded her.

And to think that this room, once her father's, was with all its wealth, the riches it conveyed, now hers! Propped up among the pillows, her diminutive figure lost in the midst of the great four-poster, Bab sat absorbed in profound reflection. It was the strangeness of it all that for the moment weighed on her spirits. The big, dim room, too, so vast and solemn, sent a shadow of loneliness creeping into her heart; and just then, on the mantel over the fireplace, the clock ticking busily there softly struck the hour. That was the finishing touch! Each stroke she counted separately. There were nine of them! With a catch in her breath, a stifled gulp, she remembered that at Mrs. Tilney's they would just be sitting down to breakfast!

Breakfast – Christmas breakfast – and Bab would not be with them! First there would be grapefruit, each like an apple of the Hesperides, a golden globe of juiciness, its edge fluted by a dexterous hand. Then would follow beefsteak, baked potatoes, coffee with real cream and, to finish, a great heaping platter of waffles of a luscious golden yellow and steaming hot. Where could food be found better than this? Where, too, would one look for more goodwill and simple kindness, more cheerfulness and pleasure, than in that simple, homely party there gathered about Mrs. Tilney's board?

Her eyes misty, the lump thickening in her throat, Bab sat poring on that picture in her mind. In honor of the occasion Mrs. Tilney herself would be seated at the head of the table. At the opposite end would be Mr. Mapleson, his eyes snapping with excitement and merriment, his shy, frosty little giggle sounding at every turn. For Christmas was a great day with the little man! The night before he had been up until all hours trimming a tree in the parlor. The tree was for all. No one, not even the newest boarder, would be forgotten.

"Understand," Mr. Mapleson would say, "we all can't have a home – not our own maybe; but we all can have Christmas, can't we?"

Even Mary Mangin, the kitchen behemoth, would be bidden in. Her arms akimbo, a mountainous monument of tittering embarrassment, she would be escorted to the tree by Mr. Mapleson himself. Then with a great to-do the little man would squirrel fussily among the many packages, hunting the required one. "Ha! here we have it!" he would finally exclaim. "Miss Maria Mangin, with Merry Christmas from Kris Kringle!" Whereat Mary Mangin, with a seismic convulsion shaking her from pediment to dome, would totter to the nearest sofa and, to the peril of that piece, crash down upon it, exclaiming the while in Mr. Mapleson's behalf: "Th' fairies be good to ye! Th' fairies be good to ye!" Then, when all the others had had their presents, and he had made sure no one had been overlooked, the little man would sit down in a corner and, his eyes gleaming, his hands trembling eagerly, would open the parcels that held the presents for himself.

What a time then! What chirps! What giggles! What laughter and merriment! "Just what I wanted!" "Why, the very thing!" "Who told you I needed that?" "Why, Mrs. Jessup!" he cried once. "How did you ever dream – " The sentence never was finished. "Here, give me that; it's for Bab!" Mrs. Jessup cried scandalized; and she snatched from the little man the pink silk hairpin case which he'd been delightedly accepting. One present, however, Mr. Mapleson always reserved to the last, carefully laying it aside until all the others had been opened. Then, his eyes glowing with soft brightness, and his deft, slender fingers prying skillfully, he would make haste, but gently, to undo its ribbons and its wrappings. But first, before he came to the present, he would find a little card with a border of bright green and red Christmas holly:

**For Mr. Mapy,**

**With love and Merry Xmas,**

**From Bab!**

"H'm!" Mr. Mapleson would say, and he would violently blow his nose. "H'm!"

Then – The picture faded, blurring suddenly, and with a stifled sob Bab turned and buried her head swiftly among the pillows of the big four-poster. Mr. Mapy this morning would not have his present. It lay forgotten in a drawer of her bureau at Mrs. Tilney's.

Poor Mr. Mapleson! She lay for a while thinking of the little man and of all his tenderness for her; and presently out of that thought, a feeling of comfort cheered her. Mr. Mapy would understand. He always did. He would know she did not really forget him. It was only because everything had been so sudden, so amazing. Her spirits climbing, she again sat up among the pillows and, with a growing excitement gently stimulating her, once more glanced about her in the big, dim room.

She was still sitting there, her mind alive with a hundred thoughts, when there was a tap at the door, then a maid stole in. The servant, a tall, angular Englishwoman with a stony, imperturbable face, went to the windows and began throwing back the hangings.

"Begging pardon, it's nine o'clock, my lady, and snowing. Mrs. Lloyd asks if you will see her shortly."

"Mrs. Lloyd?"

"Yes, miss. She and Mr. Lloyd are motoring out to Long Island for luncheon."

Then Bab remembered. Mrs. Lloyd was the aunt she had not yet seen. How kind of her to think so soon of her new niece. Surely Bab would go down to see her, and at once.

"And if you please, miss," the maid announced, "a box of flowers was left for you this morning. Will you have it now?"

"Flowers?"

Even under the Englishwoman's cold, impassive stare she could not restrain the exclamation. Who could have sent her flowers, Christmas flowers? A moment later the maid handed her the long pasteboard box, then she withdrew. With rounding eyes Bab lifted off the box cover.

"Oh, you darlings!" she whispered.

A great sheaf of cut flowers lay within. There were roses, pale Gloire de Dijons; there were lilies of the valley, mignonette, and hyacinths – these and lacelike sprays of maidenhair fern. Never before had she seen a box like this, much less had it sent to her; and lifting out the cluster of fragrant, delicately tinted roses she pressed them to her face, reveling in their beauty.

"Oh, you darlings!"

Then the card lying in the box caught her eye:

For Bab, with a Merry Christmas  
and much love from her new cousin,

*David Lloyd*

Her heart beat quickly, and she was conscious that a faint color burned in her cheeks as she read the writing, penned in a delicate, well-bred hand. She knew of David Lloyd. He was the cripple boy – the man rather – she had asked Varick about; and as she read anew his kindly, pleasant greeting her heart warmed instinctively to her new-found relative.

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