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RICH MAN, POOR MAN

BY

MAXIMILIAN FOSTER

AUTHOR OF "THE WHISTLING MAN," "KEEPING UP APPEARANCES," ETC.

ILLUSTRATED BY
F. R. GRUGER

D. APPLETON AND COMPANY
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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

[2]

[3]

[4]

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. [5]

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. [6]

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. [7]

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. [8]

"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.

[9]

"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**

[10]

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!"

[11]

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.

[12]

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.

[13]

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!"

[14]

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!"

[15]

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.

[16]

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.

[17]

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.

[18]

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 pigtails and pinafore, dancing! Funny, wasn't it?"



"Do you know, I've never been at a dance!"

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

[19]

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.

[20]

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. [21]

"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. [22]

"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. [23]

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?" [24]

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.

[25]

[26]

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. [27]

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. [28]

"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. [29]

"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.

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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.

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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.

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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."

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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.

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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.

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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.

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"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!"

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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.

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"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.

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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.

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"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.

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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!"

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"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.

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"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.

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"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,

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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.

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.

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"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.

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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.

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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

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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.

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"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.

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"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?"

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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 stonemason'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.

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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.

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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?

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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.

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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.

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"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.

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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.

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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

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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?

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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.

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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:

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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.

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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?"

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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. [80]

How good it all seemed! How wonderful it was! Not even in her wildest imagination had she dreamed it was to be like this! To think she not only had found her kin, but that they should prove so kind! She did not care now who saw how her eyes were glistening. She could have sung aloud of her happiness.

"Your bath is drawn, miss," Mawson, the impassive Englishwoman, announced, and resigning the flowers to her, Bab arose. As she dressed, it became evident that if Bab and the world at large had been astonished at the sudden change in her fortunes, Miss Elvira had not. Manifestly that able lady not only must have known for days what was to be expected, she also had prepared for it. Many little luxuries she had laid in to make Bab comfortable; and as Mawson brought them out, one by one, Bab felt her heart beat swifter, then more swiftly still. If only Mr. Mapy could have been there! If only he and she could have joined hands once to dance round, to rejoice! Mawson, imperturbable, bony-faced, was about as good company as a gryphon! However, not even Mawson's stoniness could quite repress all her feeling of wonder-growing joy. She was too young, too unspoiled and unaffected, to lose the bloom of it, and as she hurried to finish dressing her face was radiant. [81]

Her first duty, as she hurried down the stairs, was to tap at her grandfather's door. The trained nurse answered, and as she saw who had knocked she beamed pleasantly. The patient, it appeared, was much brighter. He had already asked for Bab. She was to see him at noon; and, thanking the young woman, Bab hurried on. She must not keep the Lloyds!

The dining-room, like the other rooms in that vast house, was itself vast—a great, dimly lighted apartment where the decorations, all of the richest sort, were a legacy of that morose, astonishing era of bad taste, the late Victorian period. Quartered oak and an embossed bronze wall-paper vied with each other in gloominess; while the sideboard, the table and the chairs, in the style of the early eighties, wore a corresponding air of stodgy, solid richness and melancholy. This effect, too, was heightened by the pictures on the wall, all valuable and each, of course, a still life—the usual fish, the inevitable platter of grapes and oranges, the perpetual overturned basket of flowers. A group of sheep by Verboeckhoven, typically woolly, completed the display. [82]

As Bab, her heart doing a little tattoo in anticipation, passed along the hall, she saw that her aunt and uncle had left the table and were standing on the rug before the fire, their heads together, and talking earnestly. A morning coat, Piccadilly striped trousers and tan spats at the moment attired Mr. Lloyd; but one had but to glance once at the pale, myopic, blasé gentleman to guess that presently he would retire to change, his man helping him, into clothes more suitable for motoring—a lounge suit of tweeds, say, or homespun. Bab, smiling shyly, was just entering the dining-room when Lloyd looked up. Instantly she saw him start. She was certain, too, she heard him whisper swiftly a warning: "Look out!" Then, turning away, Lloyd fell to twirling idly his pale, limp mustaches. [83]

That they were talking about her was manifest. That what they said was not meant for her to hear also was manifest. For an instant she faltered. She felt her color self-consciously betrayed her.

"Oh, here you are!" Lloyd exclaimed in his inconsequent, singsong voice. "We've been waiting for you, you know!"

His voice was pleasant enough, though at the same time he smiled. Subconsciously, if not directly though, Bab began to divine a hint of antagonism in the man. Evidently for some reason he had not

as yet accepted her as Miss Elvira had, as his son, too, had accepted her—that is, if the message with the flowers meant anything. However, having greeted him, she turned shyly to her aunt. While waiting Mrs. Lloyd had been frankly studying her.

"So this is our new relative, is it?" she remarked. Afterward she briefly held out a hand. She did not offer to kiss her niece.

Bab felt subtly bewildered. Her aunt was a tall, finely formed woman, a Boadicea in bigness, her eyes a light iris-blue, her mouth small with curiously puckered lips. It was her voice, though, that most held Bab. In it was that note of repression, a studied indolence almost insolent, that women of her class and kind often cultivate. Idly tolerant it was rather than interested, Bab thought.

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There were many things that morning that she would have liked to ask about—her father, for example, his boyhood, what he'd been like, who his friends had been. All this and more! It appeared, however, that the topic held but scant interest for the Lloyds, for Lloyd the least of all. A few passing references, to be sure, were made to Bab's dead father; but in every instance these were as lacking in interest, in intimacy, as if uttered by a stranger. In her own affairs, she felt presently, their curiosity was far more robust.

Lloyd, reaching out, touched a near-by button.

"Breakfast, Lumley," he directed, indicating Bab to the manservant who entered. Then when she had seated herself Lloyd returned to his place on the hearthrug. While Mrs. Lloyd in her dragging, wearied voice addressed herself to Bab, her husband sedulously inspected his finger nails.

Curiously he seemed nervous, irritable too; but that he paid close heed to the talk Bab somehow felt sure. It did not add to her easiness. What was the matter? Why was their air so queer? Mrs. Lloyd, her manner on the surface blandly idle but her curiosity still evident, was questioning Bab about her life at Mrs. Tilney's, how she had gone there, why she had remained, when of a sudden Lloyd's increasing interest got the better of him.

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"Look here," he remarked to Bab abruptly, "you know Varick, don't you—the chap there last night?"

Know Varick? The teacup she had raised to her lips hung suspended, and for a moment she gazed over it at Lloyd, inwardly astonished at his tone.

"Why, yes," she replied.

He shot a glance at Mrs. Lloyd.

"Varick's lived there a long time, too, hasn't he?" he demanded.

"Since last spring," answered Bab quietly.

"And you know him rather well, too, don't you?" persisted Lloyd.

Bab put down her teacup. Her uncle's voice not only was querulous; it had in it, for some reason, a note of mocking accusation. Varick, to be sure, was acquainted with the Lloyds; but the uncle's queries had behind them, she saw, more than a mere social interest. Nor was that all! While the man was plying her with his questions her aunt, she was conscious, was studying her with scrutinous attention. Phryne before the Areopagus could not have felt more challenged; and her wonder rising, her discomfort keeping pace with it, she was parrying her uncle's cross-examination when of a sudden there was an interruption.

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"Good morning!" cried a cheerful voice. "Merry Christmas, everyone!"

Bab, as she looked round, breathed a sigh of relief.

The smiling, boyish fellow who stood there, framed for a moment in the doorway, Bab, in the months to come, was destined to know better than any man she yet had met. Her interest in him was instant. In age he was perhaps twenty-eight, and he was slight of figure, with crisp, reddish-brown hair, an animated face, and shrewd, kindly gray eyes, deep-set and expressive. Gentle, one saw he was, but in that gentleness was nothing weak, nothing effeminate. In David Lloyd—Peter Beeston's grandson—the strength, the character, that had skipped Beeston's own children again had made itself evident. As she looked at him a swift, sudden stab of pity pierced Bab to the core. Crutches supported him. He was a hopeless cripple.

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He came forward swiftly, skillfully guiding himself along the treacherous hardwood floor, and his face was lighted with pleasure. "This is Bab, isn't it?" he smiled; and propping himself on the crutches, he held out a welcoming hand. Of his heartiness she saw

she need have no fear; and shyly responsive, she gave him her hand. The clasp of his cool, strong fingers was singularly friendly, reassuring, too; and though the telltale color again flew its pennons in her face, this time it signaled only pleasure.

"Think of it!" he laughed. "A week ago I didn't even dream I had a cousin!" Then he gave her a sly, whimsical look: "Much less such a good-looking one!"

Bab felt her spirits rise mercurially. He pulled out a chair and, teetering perilously for an instant on his crutches, made ready to sit down. Bab caught swiftly at her breath.

"Let me help!" she exclaimed, and half rose from her chair; but the cripple shook his head.

"Don't bother," he chuckled lightly; "I always manage somehow. There now!" he added as he lowered himself to the chair. One might have thought from it that the affliction that had maimed him for life was merely a day's disability. "Now don't mind me," he directed, "just you finish your breakfast!"

His pleasant, graceful good-nature diffused about him an air of cheerfulness that seemed to lighten even the dining-room's atmosphere of gloomy dimness; and inspired by it his father and mother too awoke, joining in the talk. It was not for long though. Again in gloomy abstraction his father began to inspect his finger nails; again his mother resumed her covert scrutiny of her niece.

"Hello!" David all at once exclaimed. "What's the trouble?"

Bab saw the father glance swiftly at Mrs. Lloyd, and as he did so she was sure her aunt made him a swift, subtle signal. It was as if she impressed silence. But if so Lloyd gave no heed.

"Trouble?" he echoed. "What makes you think that?" Then with a queer look he abruptly added: "What do you think—last night we saw Varick!"

"Bayard!" cried David. His interest was evident.

"Why, yes," returned his father. "He's living there in that boarding house."

There was a subtle emphasis in what he said that did not escape Bab, and again her wonder rose. What was their interest in Varick? Why, too, had they looked to her to satisfy their singular curiosity? Was Varick's presence at Mrs. Tilney's more than a mere coincidence? If it were, why were they concerned? She still was cogitating, bewildered now, when out of the corner of her eye she again saw her aunt make Lloyd a guarded signal. But Lloyd merely frowned.

David spoke then, his tone wondering.

"You say he's living where Bab was? Why, what in the world is he doing there?"

"That's what I'd like to know!" instantly answered his father, and again Bab marked in his tone that note of covert significance. David, however, did not seem to hear it.

"You don't mean Bayard's penniless?" he said hesitantly. "It can't be possible his father lost everything!"

He had, it appeared; but even so that was not what Lloyd, Senior, had sought to convey. For a third time Bab saw him glance at Mrs. Lloyd, and in turn her aunt signaled him anew. Now, however, it was David, not Bab, whom she indicated; and Bab's wonder grew. What was it about Varick they did not wish their son to know? As before Lloyd disregarded the signal, this time turning to Bab.

"Come now," he said abruptly, his tone almost brusque, "how came Varick to go to that boarding house? Who took him there? I'd like to hear. You know, don't you?"

Bab laid her napkin on the table and prepared to rise. Her breakfast she had not finished, but in her growing distaste of her uncle she felt she must get away. His tone now was not to be misunderstood. It was very nearly sneering, and yet what motive he had behind his persistence Bab could not fathom. Uncomfortable, irritated too, she was debating how she could avoid answering him when a second time that morning chance came to her rescue.

"Come!" Lloyd was prompting, when she saw her aunt stir uncomfortably.

"Barclay!" Mrs. Lloyd said abruptly. When her husband, not heeding her, prompted Bab anew, again she spoke, her voice now acute. "Barclay!" she said; and not even Lloyd, blundering on, could mistake her warning.

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"What? Well, what is it?" he returned.

With an almost imperceptible nod Mrs. Lloyd indicated the hall outside. There in her usual energetic manner Miss Elvira came clumping down the stairs. Attired in lace and voluminous mid-Victorian brocade, the *doyenne* of the Beeston family sailed toward them, burgeoning like a full-rigged ship. And it was a ship-of-war, too, one observed, its decks cleared for action! With her eye murky, her turtle-like jaw set firmly, onward she came, and the course she set was straight toward her niece's husband.

"Good morning, Bab! Good morning, David!" said Miss Elvira, not looking at them, however, but straight at Lloyd, Senior. "You two go see your grandfather; he's asking for you. Hurry, now!" Then, the two in their wonder hesitating, she waved them to make haste. "Off with you now!" she ordered. Her eyes still were fixed on her niece's husband, and Miss Elvira, one saw, was furious.

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Halfway up the stairs a fragment of talk reached Bab. It was Miss Elvira that spoke, and her voice was frigid.

"Last night I warned you to hold your tongue! The next time now it will be my brother who warns you!"

To whom she said it Bab had no doubt. Lloyd's voice arose then, an unintelligible mumble. But why did that man need to be warned? What was it about Varick they were hiding? She looked at David, and he was frowning thoughtfully. Why? Bab meant to know!

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VIII

That Christmas Day's experience, the first with her new-found family, served as a good index to Bab of what she might expect thereafter from each of her new relatives. It placed accurately, for one thing, the two Lloyds—the husband and the wife. Obviously both her aunt and David's father resented her presence in the house; so that from them, she saw, she must expect nothing. However, though this were true, the division of forces showed she had little to fear. On her side were not only Miss Elvira and her grandfather, there was David Lloyd besides. And of him and his friendliness every instant she felt surer. Time only added to her certainty.

Christmas passed swiftly. After that singular encounter with her aunt and uncle the next event in that eventful day was the morning's visit to her grandfather. At her entrance a muffled growl arose from the pillows.

"Well, my girl!" Beeston mumbled; and with a quick movement, his manner gentle though gruff, he drew down her face to his. Then he seemed to divine, rather than to see, that David was with her. "Hah, Davy!" he cried.

David, again teetering on his crutches, lowered himself to the bed.

"Hello, partner!" he returned.

Bab pricked up her ears. Partner, eh? Her grandfather's feeling for David evidently was different from his feeling for David's father! Of his fondness for the cripple she had shortly, in fact, a rather disconcerting proof. Beeston lay there, his dark face lit momentarily with interest at their talk, when of a sudden she felt his gnarled fingers shut themselves on hers. Then with his other hand her grandfather reached out and touched David on the arm.

"Like her, Davy?" he demanded, a jerk of his head denoting Bab.

Startled, she felt herself crimson. David, too, seemed just a bit embarrassed. Then, the humor of it striking him, he threw back his head and roared.

"That's a nice question!" he laughed, adding then: "Of course I like Bab! Every bit of her! Why do you ask?"

A rumbling growl emerged from the depths of the pillows.

"I wanted to make sure," avowed her grandfather, grimly frank.

Flushed and confused, she was thankful when Beeston saw fit to turn to another topic. The fact is that her new place in life, even with its vast advantages, she had already begun to find trying. Presently she was to find it even more so.

Not only that day, it chanced, but for many days to come, a stream of limousines and smart broughams came trundling up to the Beeston door, their occupants, with well-bred though not the less eager interest, curious to have a look at her. Bab's story, it appeared, already was widely known. Of those who came, though, only a few, the most intimate of Miss Elvira's cronies, were admitted; but few as they were, to see them was in each instance an ordeal. Not that they were not kind—they were—but the girl felt as though she were something on exhibit; and to this Miss Elvira innocently contributed. Bab had a full share of good looks, and in addition to this an easy and charming manner; and of this Miss Elvira seemed with complete satisfaction to herself to be aware.

"Distinguished—a manner, eh?" she snapped at one of her cronies, an antiquated dowager who had remarked on Bab's *savoir-faire*. "Well, why shouldn't she have manner? Wasn't she born a Beeston?"

The dowager agreed hastily. Furthest from her intention was the wish to combat Vira Beeston in anything. It had been tried; but never had the result been fortunate.

However, David before long came to Bab's rescue. Having observed the way his Aunt Vira was promenading Bab before these ancient cronies of hers, he found occasion to protest vigorously.

"Why not hire a hall?" he suggested. "Why not hire a band, too; and get a ballyhoo to bark for your show?" Propped up on one crutch, with the other he began to gesticulate derisively. "Here y' are now, the only living Beeston heiress in captivity! Have a look, have a look!"

Miss Elvira did her best to scowl.

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"David!" she protested.

"That's all right!" he retorted. "How would you like it yourself?" His aunt hadn't thought of that! "Think how absurd it is too!" he added. "Why, look at Bab, even she's laughing at you!"

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After that when there were callers Bab found herself less frequently put to the ordeal of what David irreverently termed prancing. Nor were the callers themselves, even the softest, the most insinuating, allowed to satisfy in her their thinly veiled craving for the romantic. David, too, saw to that. At his heels usually was a small, sad-faced, rowdy-looking Irish terrier, Barney by name. "Sing, Barney!" David would say, pointing a finger at him; and Barney, lifting his head to heaven, would sing, "Ow! Ow,! Ow-wow!" One day when a visiting dowager had made to Bab the brilliantly intelligent remark: "How glad you must be they found you!" David secretly pointed a finger at Barney. Instantly Barney responded.

"Ow! Ow! Ow-wow!" he sang. "Ow! Ow-wow!"

"Mercy!" exclaimed the visitor. "What ails the animal?"

"Oh, he's glad too," answered David—"glad, you know, Bab was found!" Even the dowager had to laugh.

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But David always was forgiven. His aunt's cronies all adored him. Pink-cheeked little old ladies in bonnets would simper and smile and look arch when he laughed and joked with them; tall, grenadier-like females, classic dowagers, would titter and shake and look rollicking when he poked good-natured fun at their foibles. He had, indeed, to him a human, friendly side that few who came near him could resist; and day by day Bab felt her liking grow for her crippled cousin—a sunny, cheerful figure, the most courageous she had ever known. However, that was but a part of it. As time went on and those first days turned themselves into weeks Bab began to realize how much David had done and still was doing for her. His consideration never flagged. His thoughtfulness seemed instinctive. All his time; indeed, he stood ready to give to her.

It was a vivid period to her—that first month or so of her new life. For one thing it made her realize clearly what the power, the persuasion of wealth like the Beestons' meant. Fifth Avenue, the Fifth Avenue that would have turned up its nose at Bab the boarding-house waif, now turned itself inside out for Barbara, old Peter Beeston's grandchild. Modistes, milliners, bootmakers, all that horde of outfitters that batten on the rich, swarmed at the Beeston door. Clothes, hats, gloves, laces, what not were showered upon Bab. She had music lessons, she had dancing lessons; lessons in French, and in Italian, too, she took daily. Miss Elvira saw to all this. Bab, indeed, might have a manner; she might, indeed, be born to it; but even so, Miss Elvira was still determined there should be no mistake about it. Bab at times felt as if her head were whirling.

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"It's ridiculous!" she protested. "I'm just living my life in hatshops! What do I need with so many things?" Indeed, as she pointed out, already she had enough for a dozen débutantes. "You try on that hat!" Miss Elvira directed grimly, adding that by the time she'd finished with Bab, Bab would look like someone.

Bab thought so too—either that, or Miss Elvira would destroy them both. However, all that her aunt did could not compare with the aid David lent. What he did was invaluable. It was he who first helped Bab make friends in that big world about them—girls whom he himself knew, men who were his own friends. Miss Elvira had wished to achieve this by a single, magnificent coup.

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"Why not give a dance?" she suggested; but David put his foot down firmly. Bab happened to overhear him.

"Don't be an old silly!" he laughed, at the same time playfully pinching Miss Elvira's cheek. "A dance when she doesn't know a soul? Why, she'd feel as if she were alone in New York!"

"Well!" retorted his aunt. "What do you expect when you keep her always to yourself?"

The remark seemed provocative. At any rate after this on every pretense David went out of his way to have her meet his friends. To them, it appeared, Bab was for many reasons an object of more than passing interest. Good taste usually restrained them from probing too intimately into her past, but when curiosity got the better of them Bab laughingly revealed what they longed to hear.

One girl in particular seemed deeply interested. She was Linda Blair, a bizarre, slender creature, tall, with reddish-brown hair and a thoughtful smile.

"A boarding house!" she exclaimed, incredulous when Bab told her the nature of Mrs. Tilney's establishment. "Do you really mean it?"

"Oh, yes," returned Bab, amused; "it was the landlady and one of the boarders who brought me up!"

"Not *really*?" cried the girl, her air shocked. "A clerk and a boarding-house keeper?"

"They were the two kindest people in the world," returned Bab, and after a gasp the other recovered herself.

"Oh, I'm so sorry!" she exclaimed hurriedly. "I didn't understand!"

Bab knew she hadn't.

Kind, pleasant, friendly like himself, these were the friends that David brought to her. The grim, dark old house after years of silence awoke again. Young voices were heard within it; there were young folk roaming its vast dim rooms and halls. Upstairs one day Beeston, its master, heard unwonted sounds below; and he sat up, frowning curiously. Not for twenty years had he heard such sounds in his house.

"What's that?" he grumbled.

Miss Elvira happened to be with him.

"It's Barbara," she answered—"she and David. They have some friends with them."

There was a pause. "Huh," said Beeston. Then: "The old tomb seems waking up, don't it?" It did, indeed. Now that she had caught her breath, found the time to look about her and to see what life, this new and wonderful existence, held in store for her, Bab's spirits soared buoyantly. And yet even in the midst of it, as the time sped on and the flitting days had changed themselves into weeks, then into that first vivid month, a shadow, a little cloud, began all at once to creep hazily over the spirit of her dream. Varick—where was he? She had not seen him once! She had not even heard from him! Why?

In those swiftly changing hours, the time that had so swiftly sped, Bab's greatest delight had been to think that the friends she had made were his friends too; that this life she was living was his life also. Eagerly she waited to see him. Eagerly too, as eagerly as she had wished for that, she had wished to have him see her. Vanity was no fault of Bab's; but she wanted him to know that the Bab at Mrs. Tilney's had been transformed, transfigured, into a different sort of a Bab. As well as Miss Elvira she divined what the new hats, the new dresses, all these and the rest had done for her. No need to look in the glass to know that! Already she had seen the eyes, frankly admiring, that followed her wherever she went. Even David had shown it! The first night she had walked into the drawing-room, her slender throat and round, girlish, white shoulders revealed in the first dinner dress she had ever had on, David had stared. For a long moment he had gazed; then his lips parted.

"Bab!" he'd cried. "Why, you're lovely!"

At the compliment, breathed low in admiration, the color had crept faintly into her delicate face, tinting it to a hue lovely in its contrast with the soft pale ivory of her neck and shoulders. If Varick only could have seen her then! But Varick apparently had vanished.

After that encounter—her first day's surprising experience with the Lloyds—it was clear to Bab that she was not the only one toward whom their feeling was antagonistic. That Varick was included seemed clear. That he was suspected of something seemed as evident. Nor was that all. His attitude had itself been curious.

The more she thought of it the more queer seemed his manner when he had learned of her relationship to the Beestons. What had happened? What had he done? Why was he no longer welcome in that house? In learning who she was Bab's first thought had been: "Now I'll see him there! Now he'll come to see me!" But Varick had not come. However, though he hadn't, Bab had said nothing to anyone. Not for worlds would she have shown the ache that day by day, hour by hour, ate gradually into her heart. It was not like him to have done that. Why had he? Then, finally she learned!

IX

It was from her grandfather that this revelation came. The holidays had passed. January with its cold and snow was gone; February followed, in turn giving way to a mild, spring-like March; and daily gaining strength, Beeston was up and out of doors. Overwork was the man's chief trouble; his vitality literally had burned him out. What he needed was rest, much rest. Every afternoon, tucked up in the corner of a big motor landau with the top let down, he drove in the park and on Riverside Drive, Bab and David with him. Bab before long learned to look forward with pleasure to these excursions.

By now she had lost the feeling of uneasiness that Beeston once had roused in her; and in its place had risen a deep affection for the dark, lonely, grim old man. Of his son he no longer asked now, silenced when once he realized she could tell him nothing; nor did he ever probe her about her own experiences. The past, it seemed, he had accepted as a closed book. It was as if he had resolved to rouse no sleeping dogs, but meant to take out of what was left him of life whatever happiness it held. Bab, for all his prickly ways, could not have had a kindlier, more devoted relative. Certainly he let her want for nothing. All that money meant was hers. Beeston every day made sure of that.

"Happy?" he'd rumble at her.

"Happy!" she'd return.

To see her few indeed would have thought any shadow hovered in her heart—not David, not Beeston, at any rate. Perched up between them in the motor, she laughed and chatted, her face radiant, the slim figure in its furs, its jaunty little toque, a charming, animated picture. Indeed, with David's gentleness, with her grandfather's gruff, amused indulgence, there were times when she could almost forget that shadow; when, in fact, she was forgetfully happy, almost as happy as she averred.

It was on a day, a ride just such as this, then, that Bab first got that hint about Varick. That day David had not gone with them. The Lloyds having closed their town house, transferring themselves to their country place out on Long Island, David was spending the day there. Alone with Bab, Beeston all at once grew communicative.

A smile, lurking and sardonic, had crept into his face. Curiously, though, as Bab was to learn, it was at himself that Beeston smiled. The man, it appeared, had been trying to do a kindly turn; and this, the cause of his cynical amusement, seemed to have been no less than an effort to reward Mrs. Tilney and Mr. Mapleson for what they'd done for Bab. To his amazement, however, the two had declined, Mrs. Tilney refusing stiffly, not to say indignantly, the offer made by Beeston's lawyers, Mr. Mapleson, for his part, growing suddenly agitated.

Bab pricked up her ears. Mr. Mapleson's queerness long had been an old story with her. Of late, though, in her visits to Mrs. Tilney's, she had noted he had grown still more queer. Why was it? What had happened that made them all so queer? Why the last time she had gone there she had happened suddenly on Mr. Mapleson, and the little man was in tears! And then, too, that was but a part of it.

"Yes, ran up the stairs!" Beeston was saying, still speaking of Mr. Mapleson. "The lawyers tell me the man looked downright terrified!"

Bab spoke then. "Dad"—it was thus she called him—"dad," she demanded, "what's wrong? Why is it that Mr. Varick never comes to our house? He used to, you know!"

Varick! At the name she saw a quick gleam spring in Beeston's eyes, and then, his brows thickening, he scowled. But Bab now had forgotten caution in her determination to know. Assuredly there must be some good reason why Varick had avoided her.

"Huh!" said Beeston abruptly. "What difference is it to you what that fellow does?"

"Only that I like him, dad! That's enough, isn't it?" Bab answered deliberately; and Beeston, from under his shaggy brows, gave her another sharp stare.

"Oh, so you like him, eh?" he returned, his eyes lowering. "That's how the land lies, is it? And why do you like him, let me ask?"

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"Why shouldn't I?" Bab retorted quietly. Then without calculating the consequences of what she said, she added: "So would you have liked him if he had been as kind, as pleasant as he always was to me!"

The statement seemed to hit Beeston as significant. Again his eyes lit darkly and he gazed at her, his face sneering.

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"Huh, I see!" he drawled. "Made love to you, I suppose, down in that boarding house! Eh? So that's it, is it?" At his brusqueness, the blunt, brutal frankness of his scorn, Bab felt all the blood in her body rush hotly into her face. Before she could answer him, however, Beeston spoke again.

"Yes," he rumbled, "it'd be like a Varick to want to do me dirt!" His voice came thickly, contempt and hatred bubbling together in his tone. "You don't know, I suppose, why that fellow's living in that house? Eh? Well, I'll tell you why. His father set out to trim me and I turned the tables on him. That's why. Lord!" growled Beeston. "And now, I take it, the son wants to get back at me! Trying to get you and your money, isn't he?"

But this, it happened, was too much.

"That's not true!" said Bab. "You shan't say that!"

She would have said more but Beeston, with a scornful laugh, cut her short.

"You don't think, do you, he'd marry you without your money? If you do," he sneered, "then why didn't he do it when he had the chance? He was there in that house with you, wasn't he?"

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Each word, as he drawled it slowly at her, seemed barbed with a venom calculated to destroy. Her face white, Bab heard him in wonder. Curiously she had no answer. When she tried she could not find the words. Beeston, leaning forward, tapped the chauffeur on the shoulder.

"Drive home!" he ordered.

Was it true? Was it, indeed, that Varick never would marry her except that she had money? She knew it was! How could she disguise it? She herself had said as much in the days when she had been only Bab, Mrs. Tilney's unknown ward. The words, the phrases of that very thought kept recurring to her now. A Varick single and living in a boarding house was far different from a Varick married, living in a four-room Harlem flat!

That was it, then. If he married her it would be only for her money? Bab couldn't believe it! He was not that sort. She didn't care who said it, Varick was not a vulgar fortune hunter. Yes, but if he wasn't, then why hadn't he married her when she was only Bab—Bab of the boarding house? Why? Why? Why?

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Her face like stone, Bab sat out the remainder of that drive plunged in those gnawing reflections. Beeston, too, seemed stricken into silence. His brows drawn together, his murky eyes peering from beneath their heavy lids, he was slouched down in his seat, staring straight ahead of him. What visions stalked before him, wraiths of his dead, stormy past, Bab had no guess; but that hatred stirred thickly in his heart one had but to see his face to know. Bab, though, gave little heed to that. Deep in her own heart, too, poison bubbled.

It was true! He never, never would marry her but that she had money! And if marry her he did, never would she know whether it was for herself or for her money. She was still thinking of it, mulling it all over and over in her mind, when the motor rolled up to the Beeston door. Beeston, leaning heavily on the footman's arm, alighted. Bab, still plunged in reflection, sat where she was.

"You coming in?" her grandfather demanded.

Bab shook her head. She had something to do, she said; and saying no more Beeston turned away. She watched him hobble up the stairs and, still on the footman's arm, disappear indoors. Then when he was gone, when the door was shut and the servant had returned to the car, Bab, as the man touched his hat to her, sat up, suddenly alert. She knew what she must do.

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"Drive to Mrs. Tilney's," she said.

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The window was open, letting in a flood of the spring day's mellow sunshine, and the leaves of Mr. Mapleson's geraniums in their boxes on the sill quivered delicately in the breeze. There was a lily, too, standing in a dish beside them; and as the air stirred its stalk and slender, rapier-like leaves, they gracefully curved themselves, nodding and curtsying like a maiden. Outside the clocks had just finished striking six.

Mr. Mapleson sat on the bed; and with his chin in his hands, his shoulders sunken, he gazed vacantly at the wall. Never had his lined face looked so gray, so furrowed; never had it seemed so worn. Age in the last few weeks, it seemed, had told heavily on the little man.

At Mrs. Tilney's the boarders had not only seen this, but had noted more than one other change in him. His shy, friendly voice no longer joined in the talk at the dinner table; his timid, frosty little giggle no more was heard to echo their merriment. Banquo at the feast indeed could not have been more dejected. Submerged, downcast, detached, he had altered utterly in the brief two months since Christmas.

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What it was that weighed on the little man's mind was of course not known to the others. But Mr. Mapleson knew. And it was this knowledge that had worn on him so destructively. Even now at the thought his face grew full of pain; and as he raised a hand to draw it across his brow a penetrating sigh escaped him. "Oh, God!" said Mr. Mapleson.

He was still sitting there, the tragic simpleton, that sentimentalist, when of a sudden a quick footfall, a step he well remembered, sounded in the hall. Then a hand rapped swiftly on the door.

The limousine bearing Bab to Mrs. Tilney's had come swiftly; as a matter of fact, for her it had come too swiftly. Uptown, when she had made up her mind, she had felt so sure, so certain. The thing to do, she had been convinced up there, was to see Mr. Mapy; he would set everything right. Yes, but now that she had come, what was it he was to set right? What was it he or anyone else could do? She confessed she didn't know.

Beeston's sneering, contemptuous speeches still rang echoing in her ears. Even had they been true, the affront in those utterances could not have been more stinging. And again, how did she know they weren't true? A vulgar fortune hunter Beeston had termed him; and what reason had she to believe he wasn't? To be sure, he had neither asked her to marry him nor openly made love to her; but then how did she know he wouldn't if once he got the chance? That was it—if once he got the chance!

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"Oh, Mr. Mapy!" called Bab. "Oh, Mr. Mapy!"

Closing his door she stood there smiling wistfully.

The little man's face was a picture. Amazement and alarm together struggled in it—alarm most of all. Then of a sudden, as if from the cloud in her eyes he divined something, Mr. Mapleson scrambled to his feet.

"What is it?" he wheezed, and caught thickly at his breath. "Bab, they haven't sent you away?"

Sent her away? What in the world did he mean?

"Don't you understand?" she faltered; "I needed someone to talk to; I had to come to you! Aren't you glad to see me, Mr. Mapy?"

Mr. Mapleson wet his lips. Whatever it was that had troubled him seemed again to have laid its burden on his soul; for when he spoke it was with difficulty, his words clacking brokenly between his teeth.

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"Then nothing's happened—nothing up there? They are kind to you? You are happy?" A half-dozen questions came dragging from his lips. After that, of a sudden Mr. Mapleson held out his pipelike arms to her. "Bab, Bab!" he cried. "Tell me you are happy!"

"Oh, happy enough!" she answered dully.

Then she told him what she herself had been told. After that what happened at Mrs. Tilney's was swift.

That evening, as Varick came down the stairs to the L road station on the corner and trudged briskly up the side street toward Mrs. Tilney's, a curious thing occurred. Across the way, as he

approached, two men had come out from the shadow of a doorway; and after a sharp glance at him they had followed him, matching their step to his. The night before, the same thing had happened, and the night before that too. What was more, when he had left the bank a moment that morning he had seen one of the pair standing on a corner across Broad Street. What did they want with him? It hardly could have been a coincidence, his seeing them; for on reaching his room he drew the curtain to look and they still were there. Just then a hand rapped at Varick's door; and his face grim, curiously thoughtful, he turned away from the window.

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"I beg pardon," said Mr. Mapleson. His manner hurried, he looked about him sharply. "You are alone?" he inquired. "You have a moment you can spare?"

Varick stared at him fixedly. His expression was, in fact, singularly hard and penetrating for one of his usual kindness; and when he spoke his tone, too, was no less uncompromising.

"What do you want, Mr. Mapleson?" he asked.

The little man, it seemed, was not to be rebuffed.

"You must come with me!" he said. "You must come with me for a moment!" Catching Varick by the arm he half led, half tugged him down the hall. Then having reached his own door he paused, at the same time peering up at Varick like a little gnome.

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"Be kind! Oh, be kind!" whispered Mr. Mapleson; and with this, having thrust open the door, he pushed Varick into the room, then closed the door behind him. Afterward, wandering along the hall, Mr. Mapleson sat down on the stairs.

It was a queer sight, the picture that slight, insignificant figure made huddled there in the dimness of the hall. A ray of light from the gas jet overhead fell upon his face, and Mr. Mapleson, one saw, was smiling rapturously. It was as if all were well now. It was as if, as in the fairy tale, all were to live happy ever afterward. But Mr. Mapy, it appeared, had counted without his host. Perhaps ten minutes had passed, certainly not more than fifteen at the most, and he was still sitting there, his face radiant, when behind him the door suddenly was thrown open. Bab spoke then, and as he heard her Mr. Mapleson got up hurriedly. Both in tone and in manner she seemed abrupt.

"No, no, you've said enough!" said Bab. "I won't hear you!"

Mr. Mapleson's face fell.

"Why, why!" he exclaimed. "What is it?"

Bab went straight toward him, toward the stairs.

"I'm going," she said, and her voice was like steel. "I'm going," said Bab, saying it between her teeth, and over her shoulder she gave Varick at the same time a look. Its air of disdain Mr. Mapleson did not miss. Neither did he miss the break in her voice, a note of hurt, of outrage, and nervously he put out his hand to halt her. "No, don't stop me!" she said, and pushed his hand aside. "It's true! It's true what they told me about him! He's just what they said he was!"

Varick's face was like a mask. He did not speak; he made no effort, so much as by a look, even to answer her.

Again after a glance at him Mr. Mapleson stammered: "What is it? Why, what is it?"

Bab answered with a laugh.

"Ask him!" she said; that was all. The next instant she had gone hurrying down the stairs. Then presently, far below, the street door slammed. At the sound, his eyes still on Varick's, Mr. Mapleson shuddered involuntarily.

"What is it?" once more he whispered. "Tell me what you've done."

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Varick's face did not alter.

"I tried to save her," he said; "I did my best I asked her to marry me."

"To save her?" echoed the little man, and a gasp escaped him. "To save her!"

Varick's face grew still harder.

"Mapleson, are you mad or what is it? My soul, man; whatever in the world possessed you?"

Mr. Mapleson's jaw dropped suddenly. Again the last vestige of color fled from his furrowed face. He gaped at Varick like one bemused.

"What do you mean?" he whispered.

Varick said it then.

"I've found you out, Mapleson! You had those letters, didn't you? You gave those lawyers their proofs. It was you, wasn't it, who got together all those papers?"

Yes, it was Mr. Mapleson who had done all this, but still he did not speak. It was as if his tongue, paralyzed, cleaved to the roof of his mouth.

"Well," said Varick, "they were all forgeries! You forged them, John Mapleson. You cooked them all up yourself! Bab is no more Beeston's grandchild than I am!"

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Mr. Mapleson did not even deny it.

"Hush!" he whispered, his voice appalled. "What if they should find out! Think what they'd do to her!"

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XI

And there you are! Forger and fraud, jailbird too—all these, as Varick charged, Mr. Mapleson had been. Bab, indeed, was no more old Peter Beeston's grandchild than was the little man himself.

That night the dinner hour came and went disregarded; time sped and midnight drew near before the colloquy in Mrs. Tilney's top-floor back had ended. Mr. Mapleson admitted everything, bit by bit laying bare the whole of that tragic farce, the story of his past. And what a tale it was! Grotesque you'd call it, an outlandish, ludicrous affair, and yet of a pathos, banal as it was, one could not mistake. For Mr. Mapleson was not by nature in any way a criminal. Neither had he become a jailbird in seeking to serve his own ends. That was his story. Not once but twice the little man had become a forger, and each time he had forged only to help others. It had never been for himself.

"You mean you got nothing!" questioned Varick.

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"I!" cried Mapleson. His tone was not only surprised, it was resentful. "Certainly not!" he said.

"Good Lord!" Varick murmured.

Absurd as it was, though, Varick could not overlook or disregard the fact that what Mr. Mapleson had done had its sinister side. Not above a week had passed when out of a clear sky the first bolt descended. Fraud and forgery, sad to say, seldom lack effect.

At one o'clock on a Saturday afternoon—it was the first half-holiday in April—Varick slammed shut the covers of the ledger he was working on and, his task finished for the day, donned his hat and hurried out into Broad Street. The day was glorious. A mild breeze was stirring, while from overhead, pouring down between the cañon-like walls of the skyscrapers, a burst of sunshine filled all the neighborhood with light. Its radiance contrasted vividly with the lower city's usual dingy dimness, though Varick gave little heed to that. He bustled onward, his face grim. Even when across the street a man stepped out from a doorway and followed him, matching his step to Varick's, he gave it scant attention. To be watched, to be followed, was not any novelty now. It neither worried him nor made him wonder why he was the subject of that espionage. The night before, shoved under his door at Mrs. Tilney's, he had found the card of no less a person than his one-time friend, David Lloyd. "I'd like to see you," was penciled on the back. But until that morning, some time after he had reached the bank, the full significance of the card and its message had not dawned on him.

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Why did David Lloyd wish to see him? It was a year since the two had last met, and the friendship that Varick himself had at that time broken up he meant David to see never would be renewed. No Beeston, nor any kin of Beeston, should be a friend of his. He would arrange for that. Blunt, brusque, in fact, he had said good-by, then turned abruptly on his heel, leaving David Lloyd staring after him. This, however, was not the point. Though Varick often had regretted that day's harshness, he had still made no overtures. Neither by word nor by sign had he given the least hint that he wished to end the feud.

So what was the meaning of that card? What was it David Lloyd wished of him? It was not until nearly noon that a thought came to him. Then with a staggering certitude the suspicion flashed into his mind. Mr. Mapleson! Had the Lloyds heard something? Was the fraud already known? As murder will out, so, too, would a thing like that cry itself from the housetops.

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"My soul!" said Varick to himself. "If they should know!"

That was why he had hurried homeward—to find out if they had. All the way uptown in the crawling L road train he sat mulling over in his mind the tale he had dragged piecemeal out of Mr. Mapleson. Across the aisle a pair of girls, office workers evidently, gave him an appraising look, frankly appreciative; then they began to giggle and whisper together, their eyes stealing consciously toward him. But Varick did not heed.

It was a queer tale—that story he had heard from Mr. Mapleson. He hailed, it appeared, from a town in western New York—Buckland, a village near Rochester. Here the little man had come of sound stock, a line of God-fearing, sturdy men, of thrifty, virtuous women. Of the man's family, however, only one besides himself

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survived. This was a married sister, and to her Mr. Mapleson owed the first of his two forgeries, a crime that had sent him to state's prison, and that he had committed to save her from dishonor and her husband from disgrace.

The sister's husband, it appeared, was a politician. He was, furthermore, like many of his ilk, smug, self-satisfied, selfish and dishonest. One might guess offhand his part in the tale. Some countyroad funds having fallen into his hands, the fellow had appropriated them, and then, unable to repay and in imminent peril of exposure, he had appealed in terror to his wife. She, in turn, appealed with a like terror to her brother.

One may picture the little man's trembling horror. One may picture, too, his shame. To clear the politician, however, fifteen hundred dollars must be had forthwith; and not having that much, Mr. Mapleson had obtained the amount in the only way he knew how—by forgery. He endorsed a check, the property of his employer. And the employer had been Beeston!

It was there, in fact, working in Beeston's office as a clerk, that Mr. Mapleson had obtained the information he later put to use in his second forgery. He knew Beeston's son—Randolph Beeston that was. He had known, too, of the man's surreptitious marriage. [127]

At the time of his first offense he had salved his conscience with the usual sophistries. It was a loan, he had whispered to himself. It would be returned at once. He had indeed paid back all but a few dollars when an accident exposed him. No excuse availed then; and the joke of it, too, was that when once his disgrace became public the politician, with characteristic effrontery, publicly disowned him! Thus broken, beaten, outraged, he had served a five-years' penalty; and emerging from jail, he had renounced not only his family but all else that connected him with the unhappy past. The day he had come forth from Sing Sing was, in fact, the day he first had shown himself at Mrs. Tilney's. And then?

There were those first years of Mr. Mapleson's stay in the boarding house. There was the coming, too, of that unknown woman—the widowed girl mother and her child; then the mother's death. Lonely and shy, a man at heart as tender as a woman, the child thus brought to Mr. Mapleson had given him all the love and tenderness that life theretofore seemed to have denied him. And comforted by it, with all that child's affection to cheer him, to heal the hurt he had felt, Mr. Mapleson had sought in every way to repay Bab for all she had been to him. The forgery, his second effort, was a guaranty of this. [128]

"Diamonds and pearls!" That had been his promise. However, it was not merely to get these that the fraud had been committed. Bab's interest in Varick, the newcomer at Mrs. Tilney's, Mr. Mapleson had been quick to see. Beeston beginning then to advertise for news of his long-lost son, the little man had grasped at the chance of a desperate coup. Bab's people he had not found. What is more, he knew he never would. The story the mother herself had suggested—that she was a widow, that she had come to New York to earn a living, that neither she nor her husband had any kin left living—all this, Mr. Mapleson had assured himself, must be true. His fraud, therefore, had been deliberate. How in his cracked wits, though, he hoped to succeed with it, who knows or who can tell? It is enough that he not only had tricked the Beeston lawyers but, shrewd as Mrs. Tilney was, had managed to cozen her as well. And Bab had been entrenched in the Beeston household as firmly, it seemed, as if she had been born there. [129]

But now— Across the car aisle the two girls giggling and whispering there paused to nudge each other as Varick abruptly arose. Little wonder too! As the guard called his station and he wandered toward the door he had wrung his brows into a scowl, a frown of gathering disquiet. Why had that card been put beneath his door? What was it the Beestons knew? Had they so soon discovered the fraud, or was the message no more than a coincidence? It seemed to Varick inconceivable that David Lloyd should have sought him for any but the one reason. And yet why him? That in itself was startling. Why apply to him? Why not apply to the man responsible? Why?

With a swift look, turning as he left the car, Varick glanced behind him. Yes, he still was followed! That man, his shadow, still was there! He sped on toward Mrs. Tilney's, and, racing up the steps, was panting softly as he shut the street door behind him. [130]

Why were they following him? Why had David Lloyd come to Mrs. Tilney's? More than that, if they knew, what was to happen to Bab? A moment later Varick rapped at Mr. Mapleson's door.

The Pine Street real-estate office that employed Mr. Mapleson at twenty-eight dollars a week, and long had thought these wages high, still further added to a reputation for free-handed generosity by making each Saturday in the spring and summer a half-holiday for their employees. These for years had been the joy of the little man's life. Swiftly he would put his desk in order, breathe a timid good-day to his fellow-clerks, then speed on his way uptown. There Bab would be waiting him.

The years had made little change. She had always been there—in the beginning as the Bab that Mr. Mapy had first known, the child in pigtailed and pinafores, hanging over the gate and waving wildly when she saw him coming; then as a little bigger, a little older Bab, a stilty-legged young one who came running up the street to meet him. As soon as Mr. Mapleson had bolted luncheon, gobbling in his haste, he and Bab would sally forth, the man almost as eager as the child, bound together for an afternoon in the Park. Pennies in those days were scarce with the little man, but somehow he still managed to find enough for a voyage in the swan boats, a trip or two in the goat wagons, a mad whirl on the merry-go-round. "Who's got the brass ring? Ride again!" The first time Bab, by skill of arms, speared the treasured prize, Mr. Mapy was nearly beside himself with excitement.

"Who's got the brass ring? Why, she has!" he cried indignantly when the master of ceremonies monotonously chanted his cry. "My little girl's got it, of course!" snorted Mr. Mapy.

But time flies. There came a year when the carrousel even, with its gilded, splendid steeds, its giraffes, its stages, its flying dragons, gave way to other charms, more sedate, older, more grown up. On Saturdays then, Bab and Mr. Mapy wandered elsewhere, Bab now a slender, slim thing with dresses let down to her boot tops. It was to picture galleries and places like that, theaters too, that they now went, to see a good play that Mr. Mapy beforehand had made sure was good. For the little man, peculiar as he might be, in one respect had no delusions. Whether or not Bab fell heir to her diamonds and pearls, Mr. Mapleson meant her to grow up into a clean-minded, healthy-headed woman—the kind that looks you quietly in the face, clean, unafraid, as clear-eyed as Diana. She should be good, whatever else, vowed Mr. Mapy; and though the term be homely, as homely as his ambition, there is somehow about it a nobility at which even the most cynical of us may not sneer. *Ave, John Mapleson! Salutamus!*

What times the two had then! "Hah! th' play's the thing!" he'd cry, stirred, his face alight at some rousing scene that had depicted virtue victorious and villainy put to rout. "Hah, I told you so!" It made Bab smile to see him. On the other hand, if on the stage things went wrong with some poor girl or some noble fellow was in jeopardy, Mr. Mapy would sit almost breathless, silenced, waiting until all was well. Bab more than once had seen the tears steal down the little man's gray face. However, once the suspense had passed, once all was as it should be, Mr. Mapy, his spirits rising at a bound, would bubble with animation. "Great! Wasn't it great! Was ever anything so fine!" For a week he and Bab would talk it over, discussing every scene; then the Saturday half-holiday would come again, and there would be another matinée.

Little wonder Mr. Mapy so eagerly waited from week to week. It was his joy. It was the one great, true pleasure of that marred, broken life of his. And when heads began to turn, eyes to glance, lighting with admiration at the slim, tender girl, the young woman now, who went with him on these Saturdays, little Mr. Mapleson's heart fairly bounded, swelling with pride, with loving satisfaction.

Of all the days that's in the week
I dearly love but one day—

If he who wrote that ballad had only made it Saturday!

So thought John Mapleson at any rate. So, too, in the passage of all those years, never once had he let anything stand in the way of that holiday. There was Bab, hanging over the gate, waiting in her pigtailed to wave to him. Then there was the stilty-legged little Bab

riding the gilded carrousel, scream-ing with delight when she speared the treasured brass ring. And then, finally, there was Bab the blue-eyed and slender, the white-faced little old man's charming companion—the Bab whom people, smiling in admiration, turned their heads to see. All these, Mr. Mapy! Yes, but where was Bab now? It was a Saturday, yet she was not with him. He wondered with a rising terror what had happened. Where was she? What had befallen her?

He was still sitting there, his chin fallen on his breast, when he heard Varick's step upon the stair. A moment later there came his knock. With trembling knees the little man arose, and shambling across the room, he unlocked and opened the door.

"Well?" he asked monotonously.

In the week, the few days that had intervened since the night when he had dragged out of Mr. Mapleson his story, Varick's anger at the little man had drained itself away. For what good now could anger do? After all, too, if it were indeed forgery that Mr. Mapleson had set his hand to, there was no meanness in that fraud. It was merely the impulse of an unbalanced mind. Varick, after he had closed the door behind him, walked quietly across the room. Mr. Mapleson at his approach turned to him, trembling.

"What do you want?" he asked. "I have told you everything, haven't I?"

"Listen to me," said Varick. "There was a man here yesterday to see me, and I want to know why. You're not hiding anything, are you? Have these people uptown found out?"

"Found out?" repeated Mr. Mapleson. He gazed at Varick, his face dull, uncomprehending. "What do you mean?"

"Let me tell you something," said Varick, and he laid a hand on Mr. Mapleson's shoulder. "I see you don't know, but for ten days I have been followed—I, you understand! I have not told you before because I was not certain. Now I know. For ten days two men have been watching me!"

"Watching you?" echoed Mr. Mapleson. It was evident he still did not grasp what the fact conveyed. "Why should they watch you?" he faltered. "Why are they not watching me?"

Varick shrugged his shoulders indifferently.

"They probably are," he answered; "probably they are following all of us!" Then he added sharply: "But that's not the point! Don't you understand, they've found out! Uptown those people know!"

Mr. Mapleson was still staring at him as if bemused.

"Found out—they?" he faltered. "Why do you think so?" Then as Varick sternly gazed at him Mr. Mapleson put out an appealing hand.

"Please!" he said, and smiled wearily. "I am very tired and I cannot think. For her sake be a little kind. Won't you tell me now how you know?"

So Varick told him. The card David Lloyd had left could have had but one significance. David knew something. For that, for no other reason, would he have come there to Mrs. Tilney's. He had meant to ask Varick what he knew.

A sigh, a deep breath, escaped Mr. Mapleson.

"No, you are wrong," he said heavily. "I know why he came. She brought him here with her."

"Bab brought him!" repeated Varick, wondering.

Mr. Mapleson nodded slowly. She had brought David to see him, but the significance of this Varick could not see. It merely struck him as odd, yet why odd he could not have told. After all why shouldn't she? She knew nothing of the fraud. With equal propriety she might have brought any of her supposed relatives to see the little man.

"What are you going to do?" asked Mr. Mapleson.

He was gazing at Varick, his air intent. Again Varick looked at him with wonder.

"Do?" he repeated.

What was there to do? To him at any rate it was evident that those people either knew or suspected, so what could he do but wait? Bab could not be saved. He had tried and failed.

"You mean you'll do nothing?" persisted Mr. Mapleson. Once more his voice rose shrilly. "But you must!" he cried, adding: "It was for you I did what I did—because of you, Mr. Varick! I felt you cared

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for her; I thought you would be up there with her watching out for her! I told myself that with you near her I need have no fear! What is it now? Don't you love her? Are you going to stand by idle and let whatever happens happen? I cannot believe it, Mr. Varick!"

Varick waited until the outburst was at an end.

"I can do nothing," he said. "After what that man Beeston's done to me you know I can't go into that house! Besides that, you know I asked her to marry me, and you heard what she answered. When she comes back here I'll ask her again. That won't be long, I'm certain!"

Mr. Mapleson fairly bubbled over.

"Till she comes back!" he shrilled. "Till she comes back! I tell you she'll never come back. Don't you understand?"

Varick heard in sudden wonder. Before he could speak, though, Mr. Mapleson's voice rose to a shriller, keener pitch.

"I say she'll never come back! You've let her stay up there alone, never going near her, and now that fellow Lloyd wants her. That's why she brought him here—it was for me to see him. She'll marry him before you know it!" Then with a gesture of irrepressible misery and despair Mr. Mapleson seized him by the arm. "What are you going to do?" he demanded.

"I don't know," said Varick, "but I'll tell you this. If anything happens I'll be there with her!"

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XII

In that gay world of leisure that lies in and round the throbbing artery of uptown Fifth Avenue, time ordinarily flits by as if on hurrying wings; but with Bab, it happened, the fortnight that followed dragged as if every hour plodded on leaden feet.

April had come, and one afternoon early in the month half-past one had just struck when Hibberd, the Beestons' second man, padding softly up the stairs, knocked on the door of her sitting-room. In his discreet, deferent voice, the tone of the well-trained manservant, he announced, "Luncheon is served, please." Laying down the book in her hand, Bab arose. It would not do to say she had been reading; she hadn't. The thoughts running in her mind left little room for anything else. And in these thoughts there was little to comfort her. What had happened, she began to feel, was exactly what might have been expected. Had she not been warned? How, indeed, could the whole thing have been made plainer than in the way Beeston had put it to her! It was thus, feeding on itself, that the suspicion roused by Beeston's slurs had gone on growing, a condition that certain remembrances of her own had in no way improved.

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She saw it all now—or so she thought. She remembered, for example, that time now long past when she first had noted Varick's rising interest in her. If then he had not openly made love, still his attitude was next door to it! Had he ever lost a chance to be with her? Had he once omitted the opportunity to make himself singularly pleasant? Bab was sure, quite sure, he had not. He had, in short, amused himself at every occasion! For what else but amusement could it be called? Her good looks had always sufficed to interest him, but not until he knew one day she would have money had he ever taken her seriously.

Day by day her resentment had grown. Day by day, too, she had learned to find in it a kind of styptic balm, a bitter salve for the hurt she first had felt. However, that hurt was passing now; and as Bab arose to make ready for luncheon her spirits manifestly had improved. A new color had come to her cheeks, a new buoyancy to her step. It was as if the harvest of her thoughts this morning had at last brought to her a decision long debated, and that now, once she had reached this conclusion, the shadow had been swept resolutely from her mind.

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"Never mind my hat, Mawson," Bab told the angular, bony-faced Englishwoman Miss Elvira had provided to wait on her. "I'll run up for it after luncheon."

"Very good, miss," replied the maid; and her eyes alight with their new animation, perhaps just a little hard, too, Bab hurried down the stairs. Rarely had she looked so self-poised.

That afternoon she was to drive out in a new motor, a racing runabout David Lloyd had just bought; and as she passed swiftly down the long stairway Bab was humming under her breath a familiar bar of music. It was by chance an air that once she had heard someone she knew whistling gayly:

La Donna è mobile!

And singularly, at the remembrance, she smiled as if lightly amused. But then that is the way of it:

Quam plume mal vento!

She was, indeed, still singing it as she slipped into the living-room, on her way down, to help herself to a flower or two out of a big bunch that stood in a vase on the table. David that morning had sent them to her, and she knew how his face would light when he saw her wearing them. Of late she had begun to notice rather definitely how readily she could please him. And he, too, pleased her. She had not dreamed that one's own cousin—just a relative, you know—could seem always so charming. But then there was a gentleness, a kindliness and consideration about David that endeared him to everyone. Bab, by the time she had reached the dining-room, seemed much like her smiling, pleasant self again.

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At the foot of the luncheon table, ensconced behind a huge, hissing, silver tea-urn, sat Miss Elvira. Her turtle-like jaw was at the moment set squarely. Near by stood David's father, and with him

was Mrs. Lloyd. Bab, since that memorable Christmas morning when they'd plied her with their questions about Varick, had seen the two only occasionally, and always in Miss Elvira's presence. However, even thus guarded, the Lloyds somehow still had managed to convey to her a subtle sense of their dislike, so that Bab long had learned to watch for them with disquiet. What was it they had against her? Why were they not like David? Once or twice she had been tempted to appeal to Mrs. Lloyd herself. She was not only Bab's aunt, Bab told herself, she was David's mother too. And could not she see how fond David was of his cousin? But Bab had never made that appeal.

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As time progressed and her stay in the house turned into weeks, then months, Bab had seen the air of aloofness they displayed grow more marked. Not that they were ever openly rude. But their politeness, the man's especially, had in it something feline, so that gradually the impression grew on Bab that she was being played with, that beneath the velvety paws keen claws were hidden. She could not understand it. Why did they shrink so from her? As she entered the room Lloyd, starting awkwardly, gave his wife a quick, covert signal of warning. Evidently they had just been talking of her. Miss Elvira looked up, then smiled.

"Well, dear," she murmured aimlessly.

Lloyd, after glancing at the clock, drew out his watch and studied it. Things like this were as near as he came to being rude, but now, it happened, Bab had begun to notice the occurrences. "Four minutes, past!" remarked Lloyd, his tone suggestive; then as crisply he added: "The *soufflé* will be ruined!"

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Miss Elvira looked up swiftly.

"Then don't eat it!" she rejoined; whereat Mr. Lloyd, withdrawing his pale eyes from Bab, gave his wife's aunt a sudden inquiring stare. If he'd planned a retort, however, he instantly reconsidered it. Miss Elvira's mien at the moment did not encourage liberties. Bab all at once was aware something must have occurred. There was an air of tension evident.

At the head of the table old Beeston already had taken his place. Shrugged back in his seat, his gnarled, powerful hands clutching the arms of his chair, he stared fixedly in front of him. His son-in-law he did not seem to see, nor for that matter did he pay much heed to his daughter. It was as if alone and detached he absorbed himself in dour, dark reflection, his sullen, forceful eyes fixed on the vision, whatever it was, that drifted at the moment across the changeful mirror of his mind.

"Hello, dad," murmured Bab.

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She paused, bending over his chair, and with both hands patted him on either cheek. Una and the Lion! A grunt escaped him, a deepening rumble, and then the man's dark face, Indian in its swartness, lighted into one of its rare, grudging smiles.

"Hullo, you!" he returned.

Between the two, one saw, all was well again.

Across the room Lloyd had not missed this little by-play. As he seated himself, then picked up his napkin, he shot a covert look at his wife. Mrs. Lloyd, however, was engrossed with Aunt Elvira. It had been planned to give Bab a dance, her first, the week following, and Mrs. Lloyd seemed just to have heard of it. Possibly this accounted for the rather unusual interest she showed.

Beeston suddenly spoke.

"Where's Davy?" he demanded.

"E'll be down presently, sir. 'E's dressing," the butler informed him. With Hibberd, the second man, Crabbe stood at attention, and bending forward Beeston knocked abruptly on the table. At the signal all but Lloyd became silent.

"A dance?" he was saying. "You giving a dance?"

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Beeston, bent forward, had lowered his head; but as his son-in-law's voice raised itself he looked up, his slumberous eyes, in their dark, fierce latency, burning on the speaker. Lloyd in his affected, clipping tone still babbled on.

"Fancy giving a dance to people here!"

With a shock that made the glass and silver ring Beeston's fist struck upon the table.

"Silence!" he said.

He did not raise his voice; he did not need to. The word, spoken

with a slow, unhurried evenness, the man's usual rumbling monotone, seemed to crash down upon and obliterate Lloyd much as if he had been hit by a landslide. Shamed and conscious he tugged furiously at his pale mustaches, at the same time glancing guiltily at the two menservants. His eyes, when again they returned to his father-in-law, were hard, angry, resentful. But Beeston did not heed.

"Bless Thou, O Lord, this, food to our use; and make humble our hearts within us. Amen." Then, sitting back abruptly, he stretched out a hand to the glass in front of him. "Some of the '88 Canary, Crabbe; I'll have it with my soup."

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Bab raised her eyes. She had been aware of Beeston's opinion of his son-in-law; but behind his contemptuous disdain she detected now an impulse she had not known before—a vindictive wrath, a fury only half hidden. Of that tension in the room Bab from the first had been aware, and now she realized Lloyd must have been the cause of it. What had he been doing? Wondering, she was still sitting there, wrapped in silence, when Mrs. Lloyd broke the uncomfortable pause. About Mrs. Lloyd's bored, impassive voice there was often a sort of disdainful, purring inflection that Bab heard with disquiet. Ordinarily it signaled something disagreeable. Turning to Miss Elvira, Mrs. Lloyd smiled vaguely.

"You haven't told me yet—has that card been sent?"

"What card?" Miss Elvira looked up sharply. Then almost at the same instant she seemed to comprehend. "The card to—to— You mean the one we were talking about?" Her air was obviously uneasy. Beeston, too, seemed interested, for his eye lighted and he glanced sideways at his daughter. Mrs. Lloyd was still smiling vaguely.

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"Yes," she returned, "the card for that young man. I'm curious to learn whether he would accept."

Miss Elvira did not reply. In frosty silence she busied herself about the tea-urn; but as Bab sat listening, her interest mildly awakened, she saw Miss Elvira glance swiftly toward her, then away, a signal evidently for the benefit of Mrs. Lloyd. But Mrs. Lloyd, it seemed, had some purpose behind her veiled, vague speeches. She, too, cast a glance at Bab.

"I suggest we send the invitation. At the most he could only refuse. If he accepted we might by chance learn his true attitude toward us."

"Ethel!"

It was Miss Elvira that spoke. Like her brother, she did not raise her voice; neither did she much change its tone. But even so Miss Elvira managed to convey with it a significant something not to be overlooked. Mrs. Lloyd, who was just about to speak again, paused. However, after an inquiring look she began anew: "As I was saying —"

"One lump or two, Ethel?" Miss Elvira abruptly interrupted.

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"What? Oh, why two, please. As I was saying——"

"Cream?" asked Miss Elvira.

"Please. As I said——"

"Hibberd, hand me the toast," Miss Elvira again interposed.

In mild wonder Hibberd said there was no toast—should he order some sent up? No, it was not worth while; Miss Elvira did not need it so much as that.

"Cream and sugar, Barbara?" she inquired.

"Yes, please, Aunty Vi," returned Bab. Her aunt's strategy she had not missed. It added to her growing curiosity. Something was going on.

Mrs. Lloyd again glanced at her husband. The two having exchanged a look, Mrs. Lloyd once more applied herself to her aunt. Some strong resolution seemed now to have armed her with determination.

"Aunt Vira, I was just speaking to you," she announced.

Without looking up from the teacups Miss Elvira murmured, "Were you?"

"I asked you," returned Mrs. Lloyd, "whether you'd sent that invitation."

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"Yes, I heard you perfectly," Miss Elvira replied calmly.

"Well?"

"Well, what?" was the rejoinder.

An impasse evidently! Obviously the question Mrs. Lloyd seemed so determined to have answered Miss Elvira was just as determined she wouldn't answer. Bab's bewilderment grew. She had a curious feeling that somehow she had intimately to do with the matter, though what it was, so far she had not the slightest inkling. Why should anyone's presence at her dance disclose that person's motives? And the motives, what were they? She was still wondering, her face puckered into a frown, when she heard the thump of David's crutches in the hall, and a moment later David himself appeared at the door.

"Hello, everyone!" he greeted.

Passing toward his chair, he halted long enough to give his grandfather a friendly tap on the shoulder.

"Hello, you!" Beeston growled amiably.

Crabbe had pulled out the chair next to Bab's, and David, having handed the butler his crutches, skillfully sat himself down. Then, as soon as Crabbe had turned away, David reached over surreptitiously and gave Bab's hand an affectionate pat.

"Well, Babs," he remarked.

The color stole faintly into Bab's face and her eyes lighted, animated now that she had him there to talk to. Just as she was about to speak David seemed to divine the trouble in the air.

"I say, what's the row?" he asked abruptly.

There was a moment's pause. Then, as if determined to force matters to a finish, Mrs. Lloyd spoke.

"There's no row. I wish you wouldn't use such words! I merely asked your Aunt Vira a question. I wished to know whether she'd sent a card"—she glanced, as she spoke, at Bab—"an invitation to Bayard Varick!"

Varick? Bab heard the name in vague astonishment. So he was the man they'd been discussing? Yes, but why all Mrs. Lloyd's strange interest in him? Why all her curiosity concerning Varick's attitude? Did all this concern her—Bab? Was that it?

She sat there outwardly unmoved, her face inexpressive of the tumult that went on within her. Strangely, it was not of the motives she thought. In her mind ran rioting another thought—a thought that shouted clamorously, its mockery evident. A party and Varick at it? Her party too? With that vividly clear-cut minuteness of detail that mental conflict so often engenders, a memory, a vision leaped into her mind and stood there, graphic, boldly limned.

It was in Mrs. Tilney's dining-room that she saw herself. Dinner was at half-past six; it shortly would be served; and the table set, her task completed, Bab sat with her chin on her hands. Across on the hearthrug stood Varick. He was in evening clothes, and Bab had just tied his tie. "Tell me," she'd said, "if tonight things were changed, and I—I was up there— If you, you—" Ah, yes; if things were changed! If they were changed, indeed, and she could be there, uptown, with him, would he then not think her as pretty, as charming, as desirable as those other girls he knew? That was the question, the one she'd half asked, then had not dared to finish! A dance! A party with him there! At the thought then how her heart had leaped! To be there with him! To have him dance with her! She still could recall her first exhilaration. Yes, but that had been weeks ago! There was a difference now; and Bab, a queer look in her eyes, glanced swiftly, perhaps guiltily, at the man who sat beside her. It was the first acknowledgment to herself, that glance, of how far in the past had fallen that romance of hers at Mrs. Tilney's. Far indeed!

Still sitting there, her face inexpressive, she had looked away, when of a sudden she heard Beeston speak.

"Varick, eh?" he growled. "That fellow asked here!"

He stared about him, his dull eyes threatening, a deep color crowding into his face.

"Well, why don't you answer?" he demanded. "Who asked that fellow? I've told you, haven't I, I'll have no Varick in my house!"

It was David who replied.

"No one's asked him," he said quietly. "I've been trying to decide if I should."

"You?"

It would be difficult to give his inflection. It expressed doubt, incredulity, as if Beeston distrusted his own ears.

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"You trying?"

"Why, yes," said David, his air puzzled; "why not? Varick's a friend of mine, isn't he? I only wondered whether he'd care to come." Then with an unexpectedness that made her gasp David added: "Besides, I thought Bab might like to have him. They were friends at Mrs. Tilney's, you know."

Friends? Bab with difficulty managed to hide the conflict of her emotions. Again she glanced swiftly at David. She wondered, had he known all, whether he would even consider asking Varick. But this was the least of it. Did she herself want him? Was she ready to see him again? It was queer that though she had resolved to evict him from her mind the mere thought of him should so confuse her! Just then she was aware that Beeston shot a glance at her. Afterward he gazed at David briefly.

His air was absorbed. It was as if he debated something, as if some disclosure hovered on his lips. And what the disclosure was Bab had little doubt. She had not forgotten yet what had occurred the day she had driven with him alone. Was that what he meant to divulge? What indeed seemed curious was her hope that he would not blurt it out before David. Why that hope? Why her dislike to have David hear? After all he was only her cousin—nothing but a relative. Guardedly Bab watched old Beeston.

"H'm!" he said presently. "Then you haven't asked him yet?"

David said no. He was waiting, he said, to decide, and again Beeston grunted.

"Decide? Decide what?" he asked. "Whether you want him? That's it, isn't it?" he mumbled.

David shook his head.

"No," he said, "it's whether Bab wants him."

She did not move, start; she merely raised her eyes. Bab could not have told, had her life depended on it, how she managed to keep back the color from her face. She decide? Deep down in his throat Beeston gave vent to a sudden chuckle, sardonic, mocking, a laugh stifled as swiftly as it was given. Then, his eye gleaming, he stared at her.

"Well, that seems to settle it! Do you want him asked, my girl?"

Bab smiled back at him quietly.

"Not if you don't," she replied.

There was a sudden movement. Beeston, again sitting back in his chair, stared before him, a lurking gleam of triumph in his eyes.

"That's good!" he said. "If that fellow ever sets foot in my house now I'll bundle him neck and crop out of doors!" Then he beckoned roughly to Crabbe, the butler. "You hear me, Crabbe? Don't you ever let him inside my door!"

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"Pass the relish, please!"

It was Miss Hultz who spoke. Attired in a smart spring poplin, indisputably *chic exquis* as advertised, the lady from Bimberg's flashed all her handsome front teeth in a smile directed across the napery of Mrs. Tilney's dinner table. Varick, plunged in a reverie, awoke abruptly.

"I beg pardon?" he inquired.

"The relish," repeated Miss Hultz.

Like others at the boarding house, the lady had of late begun to regard Varick with a new interest, a feeling of sympathy tinged deeply with regret. It was as if something in his aspect had aroused this, and that her heartstrings, touched by it, twanged in a responsive chord:

Why so pale and wan, fond lover?
Prithee, why so pale?

Not that Varick was either wan or pale, or that fortune had failed to smile on him. On the contrary, at the bank he recently had been promoted, his pay doubled as well. But Miss Hultz had her suspicions of what was in the air; and with her little finger elegantly extended, her manner nice, she was pronging into the relish jar when again she spoke. The pickles, it appeared, had been merely a pretext, a preface.

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"Seen the piece in the paper, Mr. Varick?" Varick said no, he hadn't read the evening paper; and hearing this Miss Hultz, her air now arch, impaled a pearly onion on her fork. The piece, she said, was in the society column; and she added: "It's all about a little friend of yours, Mr. V."

In brief it was an account of Bab's dance that absorbed Miss Hultz. Tonight was the night it was to be given.

"Indeed?" Varick remarked.

He sat listening idly, while with a great particularity of detail, as if nothing were too trivial, nothing too insignificant, Miss Hultz related all she had gleaned from the newspaper's account.

"It's to be a dinner dance!" she announced. "You get me, don't you!" Then having let the table grapple with this compelling fact, Miss Hultz leaped to the next illuminating detail. "Covers"—it was the reporter she quoted—"covers will be laid for twenty couples!"

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Nor was this all! As Varick sat there, his manner politely attentive but his wits far afield, there sounded dully in his ears all that plethora of sickly, silly inanities with which the society reporter embellishes his spindling effort. "Exclusive! Select! Our Younger Set! Gotham's Upper Tendom!" Bab, little Bab, was to have her dance; and with a growing sorrow at what it signified and in the end must inevitably involve, Varick listened, hardly hearing, while Miss Hultz buoyantly prattled on.

Since the afternoon when she had brought David Lloyd to see Mr. Mapleson, Varick had not heard from Bab, either through the little man or otherwise. Nor had Mr. Mapleson heard either. A fortnight since then had passed; but to the two, in their growing uneasiness, each hour of that time had seemed an age. Nor had Varick's reflections during the fortnight been exactly those of a lover. The condemned awaiting the hour of execution could not have felt more depressed.

It was not only what Bab had said to him, her denunciation, that had swept him off his feet, but it was Mr. Mapleson's revelation about David Lloyd. David a suitor? He had been quick to see what that involved; David, indeed, might be a cripple, but the appeal, the attraction of David's character would go far to obscure the one blemish, his infirmity. Varick knew that. He knew, too, the pity, the compassion, that would warm Bab toward David Lloyd, she with her warm-hearted, impulsive tenderness. He had but a single consolation. That was the thought, the grim reflection, that were ever the fraud found out David's family would at once effectually put an end to any romance. David's father was a perpetual guarantee of that! He let his son marry a nobody—an impostor into the bargain? And there was Beeston too! When Varick thought of him again he smiled grimly, a vision before him of what would happen once Beeston learned the imposture! Yes, but what if Beeston never

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learned?

Varick was in the midst of this reflection, his brow moist with it, when again Miss Hultz addressed him. About his *vis-à-vis* there was nothing mean, nothing malicious. Her curiosity for the moment had merely got the better of her. However, that did not in the least alter the awkwardness of the question that Miss Hultz now put to him.

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"I say, Mr. Varick," she said. "You're going tonight, of course, ain't you?"

Then, when Varick said no, that he was staying at home, Miss Hultz gave an exclamation.

"Not going?" she ejaculated.

It was so. Bab had not asked him, and if she had he would not have gone. However, Varick saw no reason why all this need be explained, and he was searching in his mind for some evasive answer when of a sudden there was an interruption. Jessup was its author.

"Varick!" said Jessup abruptly.

Having caught Varick's eye then, with a guarded glance he indicated the head of the table where Mr. Mapleson sat. Throughout the colloquy with Miss Hultz the little man had displayed every sign of distaste, not to say disquiet. Now, however, shrugged down in his chair, his face blank, he was staring at a scrap of pasteboard, a visiting card, that Lena, the waitress, had just handed him. Varick, as he looked, felt his heart knock fiercely.

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Many seconds passed while Mr. Mapleson sat huddled in silence, gazing at the card. Manifestly what it portended was momentous, for presently he gave vent to a stifled breath, a wheeze. Then with the same suddenness a change sped over him. It was as if some thought, some swift, compelling resolution, had sprung into his mind to steel him and, thrusting back his chair, he arose, his face molded into a look of unflinching determination. Heroic—that was his air! Mr. Mapleson for once looked noble. Walking to the dining-room door, he turned and beckoned to Varick.

"Let me speak to you," said Mr. Mapleson, his voice strongly composed; then passing out into the hall he stood waiting, his face still firm. His eyes, too, were gleaming resolutely. Varick joined him hurriedly. "Look!" said Mr. Mapleson.

His tone was dead, his air quite impassive, as he held out to Varick the visiting card. Varick glanced at it swiftly. Then with Mr. Mapleson at his heels he went up the stairs to see the man who waited in Mrs. Tilney's parlor. It was Lloyd, Beeston's son-in-law.

He was in evening dress, but in his air was nothing that accorded with that festive attire. Planted on the hearthrug, his hat in one hand, his other tugging at his pale mustache, he gave Varick and Mr. Mapleson as they entered a sudden, piercing look. In it was contempt, that and animosity mixed with satisfaction. Lloyd, Senior, one saw, felt triumph.

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"Good evening," said Varick quietly.

The gentleman did not even trouble himself to reply. Transferring his glance to Mr. Mapleson, he looked him up and down.

"Are you John Mapleson?" he inquired.

Then when Mr. Mapleson, after moistening his lips, had said yes, Lloyd, his manner brisk, wasted no time in coming to the point.

"I'll be brief with you, Mapleson!" he said brusquely, and as he spoke he turned to Varick. "Varick, I'll be brief with you as well. Unless tonight you two take that girl away from my father-in-law's house uptown I'll see to it myself that she's turned out, bag and baggage! What's more, tomorrow morning I'll turn you all over to the police!"

Then he strode toward the door.

"That's all!" said Mr. Lloyd.

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The dinner was at eight. At half-past seven, long before the first of the guests possibly could arrive, Bab, dressed and ready, came pitapatting down the broad stairway in her high-heeled little gold slippers. On each cheek a spot of color burned, and Bab's blue eyes, too, gleamed brightly, dancing with suppressed excitement. The house during the day had been transformed.

A huge bank of palms behind which the orchestra was to play half filled the hall, and everywhere there were flowers. Bab's breath came swiftly as she saw them. She had not expected anything like this, and, her hand on the stair rail, she halted, gazing about her, thrilled. Seeing her, Crabbe, the white-haired butler, came hurrying from the pantry. Like her, Crabbe, too, was filled with suppressed excitement.

"Mr. David's in the library, please," he announced; "he said I was to let you know." Then his taciturnity for once forgotten, Crabbe smiled broadly. "Wonderful, Miss Barbara, isn't it? The master's orders it was!"

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"My grandfather's!" Bab had cried out in astonishment.

All along, it had seemed to her, Beeston had regarded her first dance only in gloomy tolerance, as if he wished the confusion and stir in his household at an end. But apparently she had been mistaken. Of a sudden that evening Beeston had appeared upon the scene, and after a look about him had demanded where the florist was. Then when the man had come running, Beeston, his brows twitching, more than ever grim, had rumbled an order at him. After that for an hour confusion had piled on itself in the household. Then as hurriedly it had passed, while out of it the house had risen transformed, beautified into a bower.

Bab listened intently to what old Crabbe was telling her. In the months she had lived there in that house she had grasped how many-sided was Beeston's dark and formidable nature. And yet, grim as it was and uncompromising, the man had about him, somewhere buried in his half-starved soul, a streak of sentimentalism impulsive and surprising. Of this his orders for the night's decoration seemed an evidence, and Bab still was looking about her in wonder, her appreciation growing, when at the door of the library Beeston himself appeared. Crabbe, breaking off in the midst of a sentence, sought to efface himself, but Beeston had seen him.

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"Here, you, *Crabbe!*" he grunted.

Bearing on the arm of his young English valet, Cater, he came scuffling along the hall, his stick thwacking loudly on the floor, his brow darkened by an angry frown.

"Yes, sir," said Crabbe.

"My son-in-law, Mr. Lloyd—has he come in?" Beeston demanded abruptly.

Crabbe bent toward him deferentially.

"Mr. Lloyd was here, sir, and left. It was an hour ago."

Again a growl left Beeston.

"I know when he left! What I want to know is—has he come back?"

On being informed that Mr. Lloyd had not returned, Beeston struck the floor a vicious blow with his stick.

"He'll be back and I want to see him! You hear? You let me know the instant he comes in!"

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"Very good, sir," Crabbe replied and, dismissed with a brusque wave of the hand, withdrew to the pantry. Then, freeing his arm from Cater's, Beeston gave him, too, a knockdown scowl.

"Get out!" he ordered. Cater, as ordered, got out.

Bab was still there on the stairs. That raw, ill-mannered roughness so often Beeston's mood was too old a story now for her to give much heed to it, and she was moving off indifferently when he put a hand swiftly on her arm.

"Wait!" ordered Beeston. "You hear? Wait!" Bab gazed at him wide-eyed. "I want to have a look at you," said Beeston.

His mouth set, his lips protruding on themselves, he stamped up the hall a way, and, pushing a button set there in the wall, sent a flood of light pouring down from the chandelier. Then he came

pounding back.

"Now stand where you are!" directed Beeston.

Bab in wonder obeyed. To be inspected, to be looked over, appraised and then admired may perhaps be the object all women have when they array themselves in all the allurements of their dress. But what an inspection this was! Not even in her last survey before the mirror had she given herself a closer, a more critical scrutiny.

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"Turn round!" directed Beeston.

Bab turned.

"Now turn the other way!"

Again she turned. Her head poised, wondering, she watched him over her shoulder. Beeston had bent forward now, both his gnarled hands clasped upon his stick, and under their heavy lids his somber eyes pored over her. What his motive was in looking her over like that she had not the faintest notion. Then of a sudden Beeston spoke.

"Huh!" he said, his tone a half-contemptuous growl. "Good-looking, you are, aren't you! A handsome piece, and healthy and strong too! Yes, that's what you are!" Then with a sudden movement, surprising in its swiftness, he bent over and tapped her on the arm. "Lucky for you!" he said. "Lucky for you!" The words still on his lips, he indicated the library door. "Davy's in there. You go to him, you hear?" The next instant he was gone, calling as he stamped along the hall: "Crabbe, Crabbe, come give me an arm up the stairs!"

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David, too, had come down early. Since the beginning of the spring, the time when the Lloyds had moved out to their place on Long Island, he had had a room for himself at his grandfather's. Ordinarily the country appealed far more to David than the town, but of late, for various reasons, he seemed to have changed his preference. Bab found him now in the library, his chin upon his hands, a book opened on his knees. The scene with Beeston, an incident as astonishing as it was inexplicable, had left her uncomfortable; but at the sight of David all Bab's animation returned at a bound. Leaning over, she slipped the book away from him.

"Silly!"

"Oh, hello!"

His air as he looked up was bewildered, and again she laughed.

"You weren't reading; your book was upside down! A fine time to be dreaming!"

"Not dreaming; I was thinking," he answered, and though a smile went with the words there was a note in his tone that instantly caught her attention.

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"Why, David!" she murmured.

She came round in front of him as she spoke, and again, a second time that evening, her voice was slow with wonder.

"David, what's wrong?" asked Bab.

He shook his head.

"Nothing," he said. Then as he looked her over, from the crown of her soft brown hair to her little golden slippers, David's lips parted.

"Bab, you're lovely tonight!" he murmured. "That gown makes you more than ever lovely!"

Bab dropped him a curtsy.

"Recognize it? It's the same rose gown you liked the other night!"

His eyes leaped to hers, a sudden look. A swift speech hovered on his lips, but before he could utter it Bab spoke again.

"Look, Davy, see this too!"

She had bent her head, her hands raised to play with something at her throat—a slender platinum thread from which hung a single pearl, pear-shaped and heavy. Intent on it she did not see the light that leaped into his eyes.

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"Wonderful, isn't it!" she murmured, and held it out for him to see. Her face rapt, she looked down at the pearl again. In the hollow of her small pink palm the pearl lay like a dewdrop in the petal of a rose. Such a gem might well have graced a duchess.

"Grandfather gave it to me tonight," she said.

A little laugh, birdlike in its happiness, rippled from her. "What

dears you all are! You're all wonderful! All my relatives are!" Then, hardly aware of what she did or what it would mean to him, this new-found cousin, Bab bent above him and laid her hand upon his cheek. The effect was instantaneous.

Poor Bab! In the time, now weeks gone by, when wounded and resentful she had thrown herself in David's way, hoping David might help her to forget, she had not even dreamed the effort ever would lead to this. But it had! At her touch, the soft warmth of her fingers laid upon his cheek, the long smoldering fire pent up in David's heart burst into flame.

"Bab!" She felt him quiver beneath her touch. The next instant, with both his hands he trapped hers in his, the man's strong, slenderly shaped fingers twining themselves with hers. "Bab! Bab!" he whispered. Then he looked up at her, and in David's face was something she had not seen there before. His voice, when again he spoke, rang like a harp string with emotion.

"Not just a cousin, Bab! Not that—can't you see!"

He made no effort, though he still held her hand, to draw her nearer to him. The man's feeling indeed had rocked him to the core, but he was fiercely striving to master it. He was trying to be gentle! He fought himself that he might not frighten her!

"Bab, can't you see how I love you!" said David, his voice thick. "Can't you?"

Bab slowly drew in her breath. Her lips parting, her breast heaving with the tumult of emotion that the fire in his had roused, she gazed down at him in troubled bewilderment. No need to tell her what she had done. One look at him was enough.

"Oh, Davy, Davy!" she murmured. "I didn't know! I didn't know!"

The cry came from her eloquent of the distress, the doubt that filled her mind with its conflict. There were indeed many things Bab didn't know! David as a cousin she might love, but did she love him otherwise? Cousin or lover, which was it to be? The weeks, the months he had been with her had shown how perfectly he in his gentleness could be the one; could he now be the other, too? Her eyes grew more troubled!

"I didn't know," said Bab again, murmuring as if to herself. "I didn't think that cousins loved like that!"

She saw him stir, moving uncomfortably.

"Cousins?" he echoed.

"Yes," whispered Bab; "I didn't think——"

A strange look came into his eyes.

"Look at me, Bab," he ordered; and as ordered Bab looked at him. "Now tell me," said David; "tell me the truth! If I—if I were not your cousin, then—then——"

He abruptly broke off. In his tone, too, was now something that filled her with disquiet.

"Then what?" she asked, her brow clouding.

David for a moment did not reply. It was as if he pondered something, as if he debated telling her what hovered on his lips. His dark eyes, turbulent with the feeling that still raised its storm within him, clung to hers as if to search out from her inner consciousness the real truth of what she felt for him.

"You love me, don't you?" he asked suddenly.

She did not answer.

"Bab, tell me you do," he pleaded.

Still she didn't answer.

"Won't you?" he asked.

It was not until he'd asked a third time that she replied.

"I don't know," she faltered then. "I care for you, David, but how I care I can't tell. Don't ask me now. Give me a little time."

His hand she felt suddenly tighten. Outside the doorbell had just rung; then the footsteps of Hibberd, the second man, could be heard squeaking discreetly along the hall.

"Will you tell me tonight?" demanded David.

"I don't know; I'll think," answered Bab.

David slowly drew in his breath.

"Promise me this then," he said laboriously. "Whether it's yes or no, if tonight my father tries to say anything to you promise me you'll not listen to him till you've sent for me! Will you promise?"

"Why, David!" Bab murmured, astonished.

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"Have I your promise?"

"Why, yes, but——"

She broke off abruptly. The library door was opening and now Hibberd entered.

"Beg pardon, Miss Barbara, the guests will be arriving."

And so it stood. Her answer she was to let David have that night. She had promised it. As Bab, the promise given, slipped from the library and made her way swiftly toward the drawing-room at the front, one needed only a glance to guess the ferment already working in her mind. Her eyes glowed. On each cheek again the color burned, now with a newer, more feverish brightness. Marry him? Her breath, at the thought, came fast!

The drawing-room, by the time she got there, was filling rapidly, and instilled with an animation that momentarily increased, she gayly greeted these arrivals, the first of the evening's guests. Her heart she could feel throb. A sense of exhilaration roused her. It was as if wine ran coursing through her veins; and her eyes dancing, her little head cocked sidewise like a bird's, she laughed and chatted, filled with a quick coquetry as new to her as it was charming. Bab never had looked more alluring.

She was in the midst of this, her face radiant, when she felt a hand touch her suddenly on the arm. The hand was Miss Elvira's; and as Bab looked up she found Miss Elvira gazing at her with an eye as dull and accusing as a haddock's. Her voice, when she spoke, was correspondingly morose.

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"What's happened?" asked Miss Elvira guardedly in an aside.

Bab stared.

"Happened?" she echoed.

"Look at David!" rejoined Miss Elvira significantly.

Bab looked. In a corner across the drawing-room he sat, a figure of silence, nibbling his finger tips. A frown ruffled his brow; and though he was surrounded by half a dozen of the guests, young men and young women together, it was manifest that he was deaf to their laughter and talk. Miss Elvira gave Bab a swift, searching look.

"Have you two been up to anything?"

"I? David?"

"You two haven't had a tiff, have you?"

A tiff! Of course not! But Bab needed no second look at him to guess the cause of David's disquiet. She, too, felt that selfsame disturbance, that same tumult of the mind; but she, with a woman's art to aid her, had managed better to hide it. But now as Miss Elvira's eye, fishlike in its gloom, probed hers, Bab felt the color pour suddenly over her face and neck. A half-stifled "Humph!" escaped Miss Elvira, a mumble the significance of which was evident. Then, turning about abruptly, Miss Elvira resumed the task of greeting the last of the arrivals. That David should thus disclose his feelings, Bab saw, would never do. At the first opportunity, therefore, she hurried across the room. Bending swiftly over him, she touched him lightly on the shoulder.

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"Spunk up!" whispered Bab. A flashing smile went with the words.

David, as it was evident, spunked up instantly. Bab returned to the other guests she had left. When again she looked across the room at him, he, too, was laughing and chatting, his mood now as exhilarant as hers. As her glance wandered away from him a pair of eyes encountered hers. Mrs. Lloyd stood gazing at her intently. Bab in spite of herself colored faintly.

Early that afternoon, long indeed before they'd been expected, the two Lloyds had motored in from their country place on Long Island. Evidently they had come in no little haste; and Lloyd, after a brief interview with David, had as hastily dashed off in the motor again. As for Mrs. Lloyd, almost at once she had retreated to her room, vouchsafing to Bab only a brief, not too exuberant greeting, a word or so purred indolently, as if with great effort. Bab by now owned to herself that she did not like the Lloyds. True, for David's sake she had tried to, but not even this had availed. Against the stone wall of their indifference she had only bruised herself.

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The look that she had just surprised in her aunt's eyes, however, was not just indifferent. Mrs. Lloyd, after a quick stare at her son, had shot an equally swift glance at Bab, and there was in it something so searching that Bab felt herself start. Why should she be looked at like that? It was as if Mrs. Lloyd knew something. It was as if in that look she revealed the disdain that this knowledge gave her. What was it she knew? Had David told? At the thought a

little chill touched her. If she should say yes to David, what then? What of their antagonism? But Bab, the thought once digested, at once rid herself of it. The Lloyds, to be sure, were David's parents, but why need she feel fear of them? Even if they were opposed to her, David wasn't! And that he wasn't was after all the main thing. Buoyant again, her animation reviving swiftly, Bab freed her mind of that passing shadow. A moment later Crabbe appeared at the drawing-room door and bent deferentially toward Miss Elvira.

"Madam is served!" announced Crabbe.

Her face aglow, Bab shot a glance at David. How splendid it all was! From then on it seemed to Bab that the events of that evening arranged and rearranged themselves with kaleidoscopic swiftness and confusion. The dinner slipped by as if hurried feverishly. Too much was happening, she felt. It seemed as though her mind could not encompass it all. Her glance, roving about the huge, dark dining-room, now transformed, dwelt on the flowers, the gleaming silver, the cut glass and snowy linen. All this for her! Already she had been asked for a dozen dances! Already, in evidence of what yet was to come, the music hidden behind the palms struck into a swaying, seductive measure. Her dance indeed! And then of a sudden came remembrance.

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The huge room, splendid with its profusion of costly flowers, glittering and brilliant with all its appurtenances of silver, glass and linen—all this with its lights, with the gay luster and coloring of the gowns, for an instant faded dimly. On an afternoon, a day now long past and almost forgotten, she saw herself in Mrs. Tilney's kitchen; and all by herself, and in pigtails and pinafore, she danced, pirouetting to the music of an unseen, far-off orchestra heard only in her fancy. With what stateliness she had trod that measure! With what delicious solemnity she had bowed and balanced to and fro! And now to think, here was the reality!

The thought was followed swiftly by another. Would David, had he seen her then, have been allured? Probably not! Stilty, scrubby little girls with spindling legs were scarcely what anyone would find alluring. Her thought went further. At any stage of her life at Mrs. Tilney's would David have been allured? She wondered indeed! Would he? Would his family have let him be? At the thought a queer smile dawned in Bab's blue eyes. It was not the Lloyds she thought about; it was the rest of David's family too. What, marry a boarding-house waif? Peter Beeston's grandson marry anyone like that! The idea! A nameless nobody?

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But why think now of such things? Why let any cloud obscure her happiness? Her face once more radiant, she was glancing about her, her eyes dancing like elfin fires, when at the table adjoining a ripple of laughter arose. David sat there. Her lips parted as she looked at him.

Tonight the big table that usually filled the room had been carried out and its place filled with smaller tables. There were ten of these, six of the guests seated at each, but at none of the ten had the merriment been more evident, more spontaneous, than at David's. He had bent forward, his face alight with its animation; and the others, their eyes dancing, their lips parted as they listened, hung intently on what he was saying. Bab swiftly took in the scene. Opposite David sat Linda Blair, that bronze-haired, bizarre, attractive creature, among the first David had introduced to Bab. Her chin on her hands now, and her eyes veiled behind their long lashes, she was gazing, as if idly, at David. Behind that idleness, though, Bab at the first glance had seen something else. Linda Blair was a perfect example of the highly cultivated New York type. The life, the game that surrounded her she had been taught to play from the cradle up. From the days of bib and tucker to the time of her coming out she had been trained with a Spartan rigor to throttle every impulse. Her feelings she must hide. She must at no moment disclose herself. Bab, though she liked Linda Blair, often had thought her too impenetrable, too cold and self-contained.

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But not so now! Her frail, high-bred features had for a moment fallen into repose; and off her guard now, the world might have read in Linda's face exactly what she felt. Her eyes alone were eloquent. They hung upon David, inexpressibly friendly and admiring; they were, indeed, even kindlier than that.

Bab looked at her in misty wonder. She had heard much about Linda Blair. David and she since childhood had been playmates—intimates, in fact. However, that either had felt for the other

anything deeper than friendliness Bab had not even dreamed. She wondered now that David never had responded, for Linda was beautiful! More than that, Linda had all that birth and cultivation can give. The fact that David should seem to Linda desirable made him all the more so in Bab's eyes. And he had asked Bab to marry him! Would she? Indeed, why should she not? Cousins before this had married.

She was still looking on, still gazing with a discreet but rising interest at what unwittingly she had seen, when across the dining-room, framed in the background of the doorway, Bab beheld a figure, now well known to her, emerge abruptly into view. David's father had returned.

The dinner, after all but a preliminary to the night's real entertainment, was nearly over. Already, with the informality of such affairs, many of the guests had risen and were drifting about, visiting from table to table; and Lloyd, after a swift glance at Bab, then at his son, beckoned to Mrs. Lloyd. Evidently the signal was expected. She arose instantly, and disregarding a look of inquiry Miss Elvira gave her, made her way toward the hall. A moment later, conversing hurriedly, the two Lloyds disappeared. But Bab, though she saw them go, felt small concern.

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Outside the orchestra again had struck up, and this time the music instantly had effect. It was a dance that was being played, a lively measure, and round the room heads began to nod, feet to tap, beating time to it. Bab no longer could wait.

"Come along, everyone," she cried, and pushing back her chair she arose.

David, too, had risen. After teetering uncertainly for an instant, he got his crutches tucked beneath his arms and started slowly toward the hall. Linda Blair was beside him. Her pace matched to his slow progress, she sauntered through the doorway and toward the drawing-room, her lithe, long-limbed grace queerly contrasted by his slow, cumbrous effort. Indeed she herself must have been conscious of it—she could not have helped being so; but if she was her look gave no hint of it. Her attitude toward him and his crutches was as if the crutches did not exist. Bab's eyes grew misty. Filled with pity, she was still gazing at him when her escort, the young man who had taken her in to dinner, faced her smilingly.

"Shall we try this?" he asked.

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A nod was her answer. She dared not trust herself to speak. Then a moment later she found herself carried away on the orchestra's enlivening strains. By now nearly all in the room were dancing. Already, too, the guests asked in for the dance were beginning to arrive in little parties. Bab's dinner was not the only festivity that had preceded the dance; and as the newcomers, all in high spirits, rolled up to the door in their motors, the once grim, dark Beeston house awoke anew. Bab had circled the drawing-room not more than once when she was obliged to pause to greet the new arrivals. Then when they, partner and partner, had whirled off to the music, there were still others who must be greeted. But the time came when at last she was free; and the music again thrumming in her ears, she had turned to smile up at her escort, that patient, smiling young man, when she saw across the room, sitting alone and, as she thought, forgotten, her cousin, David.

Miss Elvira for the moment had withdrawn. The Lloyds, too, since the dinner had not reappeared. Nor was Linda Blair to be seen. David indeed had been deserted; and escaping from her partner with a brief apology, Bab sped across the drawing-room.

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"Why, David," she murmured; "they've all left you! I didn't know!"

He looked up, smiling quietly.

"Why, I'm all right," he returned. "Linda's been with me, but just now I made her go dance. You go, too, won't you?"

But Bab said no; she meant to sit with him a while, and in spite of his protests she drew up a chair to the corner where he sat. It would be like David, she knew, to see that all the others enjoyed themselves while he was left to look on. Presently when he began to protest, "But this is your dance, dear, yours!" Bab gently laid a hand on his.

"Yes, but I wish to be with you, don't you see?"

She heard him catch softly at his breath.

"With me?"

His fingers closed on the hand that still touched his, but Bab

made no effort to withdraw it.

"Babs," he said, and again, as if he feared to frighten her, his voice grew gentle—"Babs, I can make you happy; I can do everything in the world for you. Give me your answer now, won't you? You've got to give it tonight, you know, so why wait? The sooner the better, Babs."

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She did not answer. Beneath the filmy chiffon of her dress she could feel her heart flutter like the wings of a captive moth. She dared not look at him. She knew that if she did she would betray herself to that throng of gay, careless dancers, these guests of hers, intent though they were on their gayety. But troubled, agitated at what he asked, she could not but wonder at his insistence on haste. Why was it so imperative that she should answer now? It all seemed so swift, so breathlessly unexpected too. His hands tightened on hers.

"Babs."

She still did not answer.

"Babs, dearest," he whispered.

Though his voice broke, deep with its entreaty, she still steeled herself. Then his fingers released hers slowly and he drew in a breath, a sigh.

"Well, if you won't even look at me," he said, and at that the walls of the city gave.

"Oh, David, David!" and she looked at him, her eyes suffused. "If only I can make you happy!"

"Happy?" he echoed hoarsely. His face was transfigured.

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"Yes, if only I can," she said.

The music went on. Alone then, forgotten as it seemed in the midst of that rising gayety, the man and the girl sat silent, their faces tortured into an air of bland, conventional impassivity. Of the storm that racked them inwardly who saw or who in that room could have known? It was for them, for one of them at least, the greatest, the most potential moment that life can bring; but life—the life they led, that is—ordered that they must hide every hint of their emotion. Finally David, summoning his courage, looked at her. His voice when he spoke broke again. His face, too, in that moment had grown heavy and lined with care.

"You must go dance now, Babs," he said fixedly. "This mustn't spoil your party. Come!"

She tried weakly to protest.

"I'd rather not, David."

But David shook his head determinedly.

"Tonight's your night," he said; and giving in she arose.

"Very well, Davy," she was saying when, her eyes widening and her lips parting in slow wonder, she paused. Then the color crept slowly up into Bab's face, a suffusing crimson tide, and, her breath held, she stood like one in a trance. Across the room was Varick. And as he saw Bab he turned and came swiftly toward her.

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XVI

As in a dream, the tides of confusion coming and going in her face, Bab watched him as he crossed the room, threading his way among the dancers. Varick, she saw, had many friends in that throng. On every side the men called him a greeting as he passed; the girls, their partners, waving him a gay, friendly welcome. In spite of this, however, Varick's air was hardly what one would call festive.

A smile, half grim, half disdainful, lurked in his eyes. It was as if his presence there somehow grotesquely seemed amusing, and about him, too, was a look of stubborn purpose she had never seen before. If Bab, after their last encounter, had thought to find him ill at ease she was doomed to disappointment. However, the thoughts in her mind were of quite a different nature. What was he doing there, she was asking herself. How came he to be in that house? Her mind working swiftly even in its bewilderment, she recalled that moment, only a few days past, when she herself had heard Beeston say Varick should not set foot inside his door. And yet here he was! That David had not asked him was evident. She was standing there, her mind still a maze, when she heard David speak. Obviously his astonishment was as great as hers.

"Varick!" he exclaimed.

Varick's air had not altered. But for all its grimness he returned the greeting cheerfully.

"Hello, Davy!"

Then he turned to Bab. As Bab looked at him she saw the hardness fade from his face. A look of sadness, of regret took its place, as if in that glimpse of her, his first for days, his resolution, whatever it may have been, had died.

"Why, Bab," he said, his eyes eloquent now; "you are lovely!"

Bab offered a limp hand to him.

"How do you do, Mr. Varick?" she returned.

A hobbledehoy could not have done worse. Self-conscious, nettled that she had been so awkward, she snatched away her hand. Varick, however, seemed too absorbed to notice. Then to her relief she again heard David speak. "It's good of you to have come, Bayard," he said hesitatingly. "I didn't know you would."

Varick looked at him queerly.

"I suppose you know I wasn't asked," he returned slowly, his tone deliberate.

"Not asked?"

A low murmur of embarrassment escaped David, and Bab, watching, saw his eyes flutter uncomfortably.

"Then my aunt didn't send you a card?"

Varick shook his head.

"No, Davy; it's as I say, I just came."

She looked on in wonder. So he had come uninvited then. After that she saw Varick and David exchange a long, steady look. In it comprehension seemed to pass from one to the other, for, his eyes uneasy, his brow clouded with its growing shadow of disquiet, David slowly nodded.

"I understand," he said. "You've seen my father then?"

"Yes, I've seen him," assented Varick; and Bab moved restlessly, her lips parting in dull wonder.

However, if the riddle, the mystery, were still a mystery to her, it was all clear now to Varick. Downtown that night, there in Mrs. Tilney's parlor, Lloyd's visit had in a flash laid it all bare to him. It was, of course, Lloyd who first had suspected the fraud. It was Lloyd, too, of course, who had set those detectives on the trail. In his gnawing self-interest, incensed that another now would share in the Beeston money, he had been quick to seize on, to nourish the smallest seed of suspicion. The lawyers Mr. Mapleson might delude; Mr. Mapleson might even cozen Mrs. Tilney. Envy and greed, though, boast a sharper eye than goodwill. In not more than a few days after Lloyd had set out sniffing suspiciously along the trail he struck the scent of Mr. Mapleson's early downfall, that first forgery that had sent him off to jail. After that the rest was simple.

Lloyd's presence at Mrs. Tilney's was easily explained. For one thing, he wished no scandal; he sought merely to rid himself of Bab. The reason, however, for his tempestuous haste was not so evident.

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"You go get that girl tonight!" directed Lloyd; though why, he did not say.

But Varick had asked no explanations. Neither had he let Mr. Mapleson ask them. His face tortured, his frightened eyes turned to Lloyd in doglike entreaty, the little man had sought to appeal to Lloyd's tender mercies. It was for Bab, however, not himself, that he supplicated.

"Don't be cruel!" cried Mr. Mapleson. "Don't turn her out like that! Can't you see she had no hand in it!"

Varick with a contemptuous gesture silenced him. The contempt, though, was not for the little man.

"Hush!" he ordered. "You waste your breath!" Then he turned sternly to Lloyd. "Now what is it we're to do?" he demanded.

"Just what I say," Lloyd retorted. "Unless that girl's taken away tonight I'll see that you all regret it."

And now Varick was there to get her.

Bab, still plunged in hazy bewilderment, gazed at them with troubled eyes. Why had David's father gone to Varick? What was the significance of that fact? Then in its perplexity her mind of a sudden stumbled on a memory. It was the remembrance, a vivid one, of the first morning she had spent there in that house, the Christmas morning when Lloyd had put to her a dozen questions, each searching into Varick's life at Mrs. Tilney's. Yes, but why? What was Lloyd's interest in Varick? Bab did not dream the truth. She had no hint that she was the one concerned. Varick was gazing at David fixedly.

"Then you know?" he asked.

"Yes," answered David, "I know."

"And the others," persisted Varick; "do they know?"

"Upstairs? You mean them?"

"Yes, all of them."

"No," assured David, his voice weary; "but tonight they'll know. He means to tell them everything."

Bab could stand no more. She had as yet no inkling of what the meaning was of this veiled, guarded colloquy of theirs, but by now she had dully lost interest. Just as Varick was about to speak she interrupted.

"If you don't mind," she said abruptly, "I think I'll find Aunt Vira."

Anything to escape! By now the emotion Varick's presence had roused in her had become unbearable, and she feared her agitation would betray itself. Too much had happened that night. There was, first, that interview with Beeston, itself distracting. Then had followed her talk with David, the words that turned him, a cousin, into a lover. And this was but a part. There was the dinner, the dance with it, her first party! Finally, as if all this by itself had not been enough, unasked and unexpected, like a wraith risen from the past, here had come Varick!

How she had once dreamed of an occasion like this one! To dance with him, to have him there—that was why she had so longed to have her party. It had been for him then—just for him alone. That, too, was why, until she had them, she had longed so for possessions, the things that would make her attractive in his eyes—the wealth and the position it would bring that would lift her to his level. But now he had come to her party, that dance she so long had dreamed about, and his coming had only troubled her. Strange! Strange, indeed, the reality! It was not at all the dream as Bab had dreamed it.

"Wait!" said Varick as she turned to go. There was in his voice a note of authority, abrupt and peremptory, that Bab never before had heard; and as she paused she saw him glance hurriedly toward the drawing-room door. "I'm going with you! I've something to tell you!" he said; then he turned to David. "Your father—has he come back?" he asked; and when David said that his father had returned Varick added: "I'll have to hurry then!"

A moment later Bab found herself walking with him toward the ballroom door. David, his mouth set fixedly, had made no protest. Silently he watched them go.

The orchestra still was playing. The air, a waltz, rose and fell, throbbing seductively, its swinging measure alluring to Bab in every beat; and as she heard it the shadow in her eyes grew deeper. Her pique had left her, and somehow she had lost as well her one-time

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scorn of Varick. Incensed once that he had sought to marry her, not for herself but, as she had thought, for what she had, she no longer felt that anger. All that her mind now could dwell upon was the music and the fact that he was with her. That they were together again! Bab's eyes grew misty, and she bit her trembling lip. A moment later Varick felt her touch him impulsively on the arm.

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"Bayard," said Bab, and her voice broke tremulously, "won't you ask me to dance just once?"

"I?"

She was conscious that he turned swiftly, staring down at her. Then all the hardness in his face died out, the scowl, the trouble in his eyes; and the Varick she knew best stood there, the real Varick, smiling, friendly, kind. Indeed in his pity for her Varick's heart could have melted, for no one more than he knew what hung over Bab's innocent head. She saw his eyes flash then. Dance with her? There was nothing at the instant he rather would have done, and yet Varick hesitated. Again he glanced swiftly toward the drawing-room door.

"Please," pleaded Bab.

She looked up at him then, her eyes wistful and entreating, her lips parted in that old, familiar, twisted little smile of hers—the one that to him was so amusing in the way it wrinkled the tip of her little nose.

"You're not angry at me?" she pleaded. "Don't you want to dance?"

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"Angry?" he echoed. His voice, filled with sudden feeling, startled her. "Do you think I could be angry with you?"

Bab didn't know. As he took her hand, his arm about her as they waited momentarily to catch the music's beat, she felt herself tremble at his nearness. She dared not speak, she dared not look at him. Her head low, her face against his sleeve, she breathed faintly, borne away by him, the music, half-heard, drumming distantly in her ears. She was not conscious that she danced. It was as if she clung to him and was carried on, drifting like a cloud. Then in her maze of vague, bewildering emotions she heard him speak, his voice coming to her distantly, small and penetrating like a bell's silver note.

"Bab!" he whispered. "Bab!"

The arm about her tightened then. She did not resent it. She had the feeling that after all somehow he was hers. Numbly the thought came to her of how long she had waited for this. From the first her dream had been of such a moment. She would be in his arms and he looking down at her; and then like that, too, he would whisper to her.

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"Bab," he said again. "Bab, dear!"

His voice, though he had lowered it until it could barely be heard, rang to her like a trumpet. His face, she knew, too, was so close that it touched the soft stray filaments of her hair. She felt her heart throb ponderously.

"Happy, Bab?" he asked.

A quick breath, half a sob, escaped her. Happy? Varick gave no heed. A laugh, a small, joyous echo of contentment, rippled from his lips, and again she felt his arm tighten about her, possessive, confident. Round them were a hundred others, all elbow to elbow with them, all dancing to the strains of that same languorous, alluring music. But of this neither seemed aware. All Bab knew or cared was that he and she were there; that for this one moment, whatever else might befall, they two were together. What if it were only for her money that he wanted her? What if he had once asked her to marry him for that? It made little difference now. This was her night. This was what she had wanted. For it was of him she had dreamed. It was Varick, after all, she had wanted at her dance. Happy?

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Bab's mouth quivered as she pressed it against his sleeve. Varick was still whispering to her softly.

"Bab, you remember the night, don't you, the Christmas Eve when you went away from Mrs. Tilney's? You remember you told me then when you were a little girl, a kid in pigtailed and pinafores, you used to dance by yourself to the music of an unseen orchestra there all alone in Mrs. Tilney's kitchen. Remember, Bab?"

Yes, she remembered. She remembered, too, what else she had said that night. An inarticulate murmur escaped her.

"Bab, tell me now, is this like it?" he asked. "Is this the dream

come true?"

Was it, indeed? She knew that in her dreams at Mrs. Tilney's a night like this would have seemed veritably a dream. Place, possessions, a name! All these she had now. She was sought after and desired as she had dreamed! Yet was it all as in her dreams she had seen it?

"Well?" asked Varick.

Her face against his sleeve, Bab debated.

"I don't know. Why?"

"I wondered, Bab. I wondered if anything could make you happier; if there were anything for which you'd give it up."

"Give it up?"

"Yes, Bab."

She looked up at him, a startled glance. Why should she give it up? Then, the thought leaping into her mind, she guessed—or thought she guessed—what he meant; and the color swept into her face. Conscious then, quivering, too, she dropped her eyes confusedly. Give it up for him?

The music still played. They still drifted in and out among the other dancers. She wondered whether, pressed tightly against his shoulder, he could not feel her heart. It was throbbing like a bird's.

"Bab, listen! A while ago I asked you to marry me, and you said no. You scorned me, you remember. You said that if I'd really loved you I'd have asked you when you were poor. But what if marrying me made you poor? What if by doing that you lost all this? Bab, would you take me then?"

She listened in dumb silence.

"Well, Bab?" he asked.

She still did not answer. She dared neither to speak nor to look at him. If she did she knew there would not be a soul in that ballroom who wouldn't guess what he was saying to her. He was pleading now, his voice urging her.

"Come with me, Bab! Marry me tonight! I want just you, don't you understand? I want you now!"

Tonight? Marry him like that? Run away with him? Varick could feel her tremble.

"It's not running away, Bab. Say yes, now! Say you'll marry me!" Even in her emotion, the distress that tore her now, Bab could not help but wonder at his haste, his persistency. "Don't be frightened, will you? Trust in me; I have everything ready, dear! And you won't have to go alone; I'll tell you something; it's all been fixed, Bab—I've brought Mr. Mapleson with me too."

"Mr. Mapy?" The name, the exclamation, burst from her, stifled, a startled cry. "You brought him?"

Again Varick's arm tightened itself about her, protecting, reassuring.

"Steady, dear!" he whispered. "They've begun to look at you."

She hardly heard him.

"You brought Mr. Mapy?" she repeated.

"Yes, Bab; he knows why I've come tonight. He's outside there, waiting in the cab." Then, careless of any eye that might see him, Varick pressed his cheek softly against the brown head that so long had been turned away from his. "Bab, will you say yes? Say you will, Bab! Come with me and we'll be married now!" He heard her catch her breath. The face against his sleeve pressed tighter to it. For an instant he felt her cling to him. "Will you come, Bab?"

Then she answered him.

"Bayard! Bayard!" whispered Bab. "I can't. Don't you understand how it was? I thought you hated me. I thought after what I'd said to you I'd never see you again. It was all my fault; I believed what they said of you. Forgive me, won't you? Oh, don't look at me like that!"

"Bab, what have you done?" he asked.

She looked up at him dully, her face filled with weary helplessness. Then she told him.

"I'm going to marry David. You didn't come and I didn't think you would, so a while ago I told him yes."

"You said you'd marry him?"

"Yes, Bayard. You don't know how kind and dear he's been. Then, too, you didn't come. So I said yes."

Again Varick had tried to save her, and again he had failed. Then,

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as he glanced toward the ballroom door, his face a study of bewilderment, he saw there what he had been expecting. Beeston had just entered and he had seen Varick and Bab.

XVII

The music had ended. In the stir that followed, the momentary confusion as the dancers, separating, strayed toward their seats, Varick glanced irresolutely about him. If he were to do anything he must do it quickly, he saw.

Beeston, his face menacing, was already halfway across the ballroom floor. The jig was up—that was evident. One needed but a look to see this, and Varick, as he caught the look on Beeston's face, felt his heart sink. It was not of himself, though, that Varick thought.

Bab stood there, gay in her borrowed plumes, the pearl, the great gem Beeston had given her, nestling on the snowy whiteness of her breast; and in spite of the cloud, the troubled bewilderment that still clung darkly to her eyes, Varick thought he had never seen her more brilliant, more bewitching. But now, it happened, not even her charm, her witchery, were to avail her.

Varick pondered swiftly. Should he tell her? It would be a mercy, he felt, however he told it, to forestall the brutal way he was sure Beeston would blurt it out. And that, too, was why he had come there, an unbidden guest, forcing his way into the house. It was to save Bab, it was to rescue her from just some such scene as this. But the instant Varick looked at her the words flocking to his lips died there. His heart failed him. He hadn't the courage to do it.

Tell her she was a fraud! Tell her she was a cheat, an impostor! He groaned to himself at the thought. Still irresolute, he had turned to glance apprehensively across the ballroom, when he felt a hand touch him quietly on the arm. David stood beside him.

From his place in the corner David, too, had seen Beeston enter the ballroom; and he too, it seemed, had divined instantly what brought his grandfather. Lloyd, David's father, had carried out his promise; he had told Beeston of the fraud. And David, knowing Beeston, knew too what they might expect of him now that he had learned. Surprisingly, however, it was for Varick, not Bab, that David was concerned. Bab he did not even seem to consider. As he touched Varick on the arm he spoke, and his voice was grave with warning.

"You'd better go," said David.

No need to tell Varick that. He had been convinced of this the instant he had glimpsed Beeston. Even so, however, this was not the question. It was, instead, how he could get Bab out of that ballroom, the house itself, too, so there should be no scene.

David interrupted his thoughts.

"There'll be no scene, don't worry—not with her," he said; and Varick, astonished, turned to him swiftly. No scene with her? Why, Bab would be the first of all Beeston would denounce. More than that, it would be like Beeston to denounce her publicly, there before her guests. However, there was no time now for explanations.

"Do as I tell you," said David sharply. "If you'll go there'll be no trouble. I'll look out for Bab."

Bab was still standing there, her eyes and her drawn brows filled with bewildered wonderment.

"Come, Bab," said David.

Then when as in a dream she moved away with him David looked back across his shoulder. Once again he signed imperatively to Varick; once more he waved to him to go. But Varick did not move. He stood there as if debating, as if in that brief moment something had dawned within his mind. Bab and David, slowly threading their way amid the throng on the ballroom floor, drifted toward the door. On the way there they passed close to Beeston, but Beeston did not so much as give the two a look. His eyes on Varick, he stamped swiftly toward him. A moment later the two stood face to face. A thick growl escaped Beeston, a rumble of rancorous dislike.

"Huh!" he said roughly. "What are you doing here?"

Outside, huddled in a cab, Mr. Mapleson sat waiting. A long line of motors thronged the street—huge limousines or smaller, equally smart landaulets, their chauffeurs and footmen clustered along the curb in groups. Beyond from the open windows of the Beeston house the strains of an orchestra poured forth; and through the hangings one had a glimpse of the crowded ballroom, the dancers gliding to

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and fro. Absorbed in his thoughts, however, Mr. Mapleson could not have been more solitary had he been plunged into the heart of the Sahara.

He had lost; he knew that now. His crime, the fraud and forgery he had committed, all had been in vain. However, it was not just of this failure that the little man sat thinking, not altogether of this downfall of his dreams. Curiously, neither did his mind dwell at the moment on its consequences to himself. Jail yawned for Mr. Mapleson, and yet he did not give it a thought. The thought of Bab was what filled him with despair. He began to see now what he had done to her.

"Diamonds and pearls! Diamonds and pearls!" A groan escaped him. How he had tried, how he had striven, sacrificing everything, his own honor included, to make her happy, to give her what she wanted! And how he had failed! It was not only that he had failed, however; he withered at the thought of what he'd brought upon her. For the diamonds and pearls, these symbols of the vaunted riches he so long had prated about, were not all that would be stripped from her now. Bab not only had lost all this, she not only would be shamed and branded, but she would in all probability lose the man she loved!

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"O God!" said Mapleson; and as the groan escaped him he bent forward swiftly and buried his face in his hands.

It was of Varick he thought. Varick he knew loved Bab. But even though he did, would Varick care now to marry her? Would anyone, in fact, care to take for his wife a woman who had been the central figure in a crime, a shameful fraud? Or even if he did, would his friends, his family, let him? Nor was that all. There was a nearer, more poignant shame that the fraud would fasten on her. Before his mind's eye arose a vision, a picture of Beeston, now that he knew the fraud, denouncing Bab before her guests. Mr. Mapleson quivered at the thought.

Varick, when he had left, had warned him he must not leave the cab. He must stay there until Varick came back with Bab. But this was too much. At this thought, this picture of Beeston, Mr. Mapleson struggled swiftly to his feet. There was still time. If he hurried he still could get to her before Beeston did. So, his hands fumbling with the catch, Mr. Mapleson had thrown open the cab door and was stepping out when, with a quick exclamation, he halted. There, hurrying toward him, came Varick!

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Not above half an hour had passed since he and Mr. Mapleson had parted, but to the little man a lifetime might as well have intervened. Unnerved, in a sort of stupor, he stared blankly. Varick was alone! Outside, his hand on the cab door, he stood giving an order to the driver. Then as Varick, entering the cab, slammed the door behind him Mr. Mapleson awoke.

"Bab—where's Bab?" he cried.

For a moment Varick did not speak. His face was set, and a smile, grim and sardonic, played about the corners of his mouth.

"She's not coming," he said abruptly then.

Mr. Mapleson did not seem to comprehend.

"You left her?" he exclaimed.

"Yes," answered Varick grimly, "I left her."

Mr. Mapleson could stand no more. His voice suddenly rose.

"Tell me what has happened!" he cried. "Don't they know? Haven't they found it out?"

The taxicab, gathering speed, had already reached the Avenue, turning southward on its way, and with a jerk of his head Varick indicated the house they had left behind them.

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"They know everything," he said; "all of them. Beeston has known it for weeks. He knew long before Lloyd took the trouble to tell him."

Mr. Mapleson heard him dumbfounded.

"Beeston knows?"

Varick nodded.

"And he didn't turn her out?" gasped Mr. Mapleson.

It was so, and the little man's eyes rounded themselves like marbles. Beeston had let her stay? Incredible!

"I'll tell you something else," drawled Varick. His air dull, his speech, too, as if what had happened had left him stupefied, he turned to Mr. Mapleson. "Beeston said he didn't give a damn what

Bab was, whether she was a fraud or not. Understand? Lloyd was there, and I heard Beeston say to him: 'You tell her a word—her or anyone else, mind you—and your wife'll get no more money from me. You'll go to work!'"

XVIII

The guests had gone, the musicians had followed them, and in the huge Beeston house, its lower floors once more shadowy and dim, Crabbe and the other servants yawned their way about, locking up for the night. It was striking two when the old servant, after a final round about him, slowly climbed the stairs. Stillness fell then. Bab's dance was done.

Upstairs, alone in her dressing room, she sat with her chin upon her hand, plunged in a train of thought. The night, in spite of the fact that May drew near, had come on cold, and Mawson had lit the fire in the grate. Bab, after her dress had been removed, had slipped a wrapper over her bare arms and shoulders, then drifted to the hearth.

"You may go, Mawson," she said to the drowsy maid; and Mawson departing, Bab slipped to her knees on the big fur rug before the fire.

The warmth of the glowing cannel allured her. Downstairs in the last hour of the dance a chill had seemed to steal upon her, a sensation that had been as much mental, perhaps, as it was physical. She felt dull, numbly troubled, and in addition a shadow of apprehension was now creeping upon her. Why, she could not have told. Filled with all that had happened that night, she sat staring at the coals, conscious only of the burden that had begun to weigh upon her.

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A feeling of sadness and longing
That is not akin to pain,
And resembles sorrow only
As the mist resembles the rain.

After all, what was it that had happened? As her mind, harking back over the night's occurrences, dwelt on each event, her vision of what had taken place grew more and more confused. It was not just of Varick she thought, for Varick, she knew now, she had lost. Of that she was sure. The instant she had told him the truth, that she had given her promise to David Lloyd, the look on his face had been enough. This look and the exclamation that had gone with it had shown doubt, first, and with it dismay, consternation. Then she had seen, she felt sure, a look of repugnance follow. But there was something besides that, something Varick seemed to know and that was causing him deep concern. What could it be?

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Of the real facts regarding her presence in the Beeston house Bab as yet knew nothing. However, though ignorant of the truth, her mind was by no means at rest. Already back in her brain a dim something was at work. One hardly could call it a suspicion—not yet, at any rate. Suspicion, for one thing, involves some suggestion of the truth. It was more bewilderment, a sense of confused, growing wonder.

As she sat there staring at the fire in the grate, her mind groping round for some explanation of the evening's experiences, a quick remembrance came to her. It was like a ray of light—a sudden, illuminating gleam stabbing swiftly through the darkness. Her thoughts turned back to the first morning she had spent in that house, the Christmas day when she encountered the Lloyds, David's cold, unresponsive parents.

Bit by bit she recalled the scene: first, Mrs. Lloyd's air of aloofness, her chilly reception to her new-found niece; then in train with this Lloyd's keen, curious interest in her life at Mrs. Tilney's, her acquaintance especially with Varick. Of course by now Bab had learned why Varick was no longer welcome at her grandfather's house. It was because of Beeston's hatred of Varick's father. But, even this hardly could be reason enough for the Lloyds' deep-rooted interest in the matter; at any rate, not for their concern in Bab's early friendship with Varick. She remembered also the climax of that scene, the moment when, grim of face, flying the signals of war, Miss Elvira had swooped down upon the Lloyds. At sight of her they suddenly had been stricken silent. Why? And then Miss Elvira had flung those few tart words at the pair. They had contained a warning, a threat, too. But why was that threat necessary? Was it to keep them from revealing something to her?

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Gradually the conviction that this was the real explanation began to grow upon her. In this case the revelation, the secret they knew,

must have something to do with Varick. But how was he involved? Was it something shady they had to tell? If so, why didn't they tell it? Why didn't they give him a chance to defend himself? Mulling this over, she recalled, too, with sudden vividness something that had occurred on that eventful afternoon when she had driven alone with Beeston, the day when in his rage he had denounced Varick as a fortune hunter. Varick's father, as Beeston had told her, had tried to trim him, and instead had himself been trimmed. That the man Varick, Senior, had been dishonest was manifest. Had he perhaps handed down this trait? Was Varick dishonest too? But if this were true, why didn't they say so? That she herself might be the one concerned did not enter Bab's mind by even so much as a suggestion.

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An hour passed. The cannel, crackling and snapping in the hearth, began presently to burn low. It grew gray about the edges, its glow subsiding, the ashes turning cold. As three o'clock struck out in the hall Bab heard a sound upon the stair. Startled, for an instant she held her breath. Then, the sound passing on, she recognized it—or so she thought. It was old Crabbe, she told herself. Having locked up, he now must be going to bed. She did not know he had been there an hour already. Her alarm gone, she reached over to the grate, and with the poker stirred up the waning blaze. Again the coals began to snap and crackle, their light dancing on the ceiling of the half-darkened room. And Bab once more resumed her thoughts.

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It was not only Lloyd and his wife who were hiding something; it was David, and Miss Elvira, and even Varick. However, though she recalled Varick's quick question addressed to David, "Does she know?" its significance did not dawn on her. To her it was merely a part of the tangle, the mystery, a mere repetition.

Suddenly irritation swept over her. They were treating her like a child. A child—yes, that was it! They were all of them trying to hoodwink, to cozen her. Why?

Again and again, as Bab knelt there, her thoughts returned to the queer, distracting events that had marked her presence in that house. And still the truth evaded her. She arose presently and, going to the glass, unwound the coils of brown, wavy hair piled on her slender head, which by this time had begun to throb painfully. In all the dreary confusion in her mind one thought stood out above the others—she had lost Varick!



"One thought stood out ... she had lost Varick."

A half-hour passed, and she was again in her place before the dying coals. She could not sleep. Late as it was she felt she would rather sit with the fire for company than lie wide-eyed in bed, staring sleeplessly at the walls. More memories swam before her now. This time they were of that evening, the Christmas Eve, now months gone by, when in Mrs. Tilney's dowdy dining-room she had dreamed of herself as an heiress sought after and fortunate. The dream, still vivid, rose mockingly before her.

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She would have a party, a dance. She would have music, flowers, lights. A gay figure, she would dance, her happiness complete. But little had she dreamed then, there at Mrs. Tilney's, that not one lover but two, the old love and the new, would be present, striving together to win her. And least of all had she dreamed it would be the old love that lost, the new love that won. But so it had been. Drearily staring into the grate, she was thinking how different the

reality had been from her dream when, on the stairs outside, she again heard the muffled sound. This time, however, she did not mistake it.

Her heart thumping a swift tattoo of alarm, Bab struggled to her feet. Down the stairs, along the hall now and straight toward her door came the slow, painful footfalls. Then, after a pause—a vital moment in which the blood poured tumultuously into her face, her bare neck and shoulders—a hand tapped on her door, a guarded, secret signal. When she opened the door David stood before her, and at her look of inquiry he signaled her with a finger on his lips.

"Hush!" he whispered. Then without further ado he swayed into the room upon his crutches and, turning, shut the door behind him.

Bab gazed at him in silent wonder. The impropriety of his coming to her room at that hour did not occur to her. What struck her to silence was his look, the expression of his eyes and mouth. His face was drawn and haggard. A light like fever burned in his eyes. She stood before him, her hair tumbling about her shoulders, and waited expectantly for him to speak. When he did his voice was low and broken.

"I couldn't wait; I had to see you," he said. He paused, and gazed at her for a moment. "I've not frightened you, have I?" he asked. Bab could see he was trembling.

To her astonishment, when she answered her voice was quite composed.

"No, I'm not frightened; it's only—why, what is it? What has happened, David?" Vaguely she began to guess what had brought him there.

His eyes, dull, still darkly burning, had fixed themselves on hers. "I saw your light," he said slowly, "and I couldn't wait. I wanted to know whether what you told me tonight you meant—whether you still mean it, that is." Then, his mouth contracting sharply, he paused, steadying himself on his crutches. "You know," he said slowly, the effort manifest, "tonight I saw you with him. I hadn't realized it before. I didn't know there was someone else."

It was as Bab had guessed. She had surmised, indeed, the reason for his coming. But though she had, she made no effort of evasion. She merely wondered that in all her talks with David she had not long before divulged her real feeling for Varick. In mocking iteration, through her mind jingled the words of that hackneyed saying: "It's well to be off with the old love before you're on with the new!" Well, indeed! It happened, too, that she was!

"You mean Bayard, I suppose," she returned.

David did not give her a direct answer, but she could see the conflict that was raging within him. Again his mouth twitched, and he swayed perilously on his crutches. Then, as swiftly as it had come, the storm passed.

"I don't suppose you'll understand; I don't suppose anyone would," he said thickly, his face set, "but it's not fair, not just. Because I'm like this, maimed and twisted, why must I always be made to pay for it? Don't mistake me," he interrupted as Bab sought to speak; "this is not self-pity. Pity is the thing that hurts me worst of all. I want a chance—that's all I ask! I want just for once to be like other men. I could stand it before. All my life, at school, at college, afterward, too—all that time when I saw other boys, other men at their play, at their sports, their good times—I could stand it. I wanted to do what they did, but I couldn't. I knew, too, that I couldn't, that I never could. I knew that I had to grin and bear it. Yes," he said with a fierce vehemence she had never seen before; "and no one can say I didn't grin, that I didn't bear it! Even he will say that for me—you know who I mean. Ask him if you like."

Bab, wondering more now, spoke again.

"I'm sure he would," she said quietly.

He gave her a quick glance; but the hurt in his eyes, his drawn and haggard mouth, went far to obscure the resentment he put into the look. He did not dislike Varick, she knew; they had been friends, and still would have been so had David had his way. What had roused him now was the bitterness of all he'd had to stand.

"Oh, but what's the use!" continued David with a shrug of hopeless misery. "What's the use! I could stand that—seeing men do the things I wanted to do. I've stood it for years. Tonight, though, when I saw him with you—when I saw, too, the look he gave you—that was too much! I'd thought after all I'd had to give up all my life

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that perhaps I might have you! And then I saw I couldn't!"

Bab was watching him fixedly. His eyes on the floor, he did not see the color fade suddenly in her face.

"Well?" she said abruptly. David at her tone looked up. For a moment his face was vacant. Bab steeled herself to speak again. "What has Varick to do with it?" she demanded. "Why do you dwell on him?"

There was an instant's pause.

"Bab, what do you mean?"

She did not answer directly. Then because she would not hold him in suspense, and hurt him more than he had already been hurt: "You haven't lost me," she said. "I told you I'd marry you, and I'll keep my promise, dear!"

A moment later, swaying on his crutches, he had laid both hands on her shoulders and, his eyes alight, was gazing deeply into hers.

"Oh, Bab, do you mean it?"

"Yes, dear," she returned courageously. "I'll marry you when you want."

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XIX

April now was drawing on toward May; and after the dance, the first within its walls for years, life in the Beeston house resumed itself much as it had been before. The family, at the end of a fortnight, was to go out to the Beeston place on Long Island and once they were there settled for the summer, David meant to announce the engagement. Meanwhile Bab's mind was so full of it that there was little room there for anything else.

Her decision to marry David had changed her mental attitude entirely. With the past and its events she was determined she would not distress herself. In this she included Varick. She no longer pondered, either, those happenings, still unexplained, that so long had bewildered her. It was to the future she looked. Varick had gone out of her life. David was the one she must think about.

The days slipped by, every one, it seemed to Bab, fuller for her than the one before. And it was to David that all this was due. There was not an hour when his every thought, every consideration, was not directed toward her. Bab vividly perceived the depth of his feeling for her. [228]

In the time that preceded the departure for Long Island a feverish happiness seemed to animate him. He hovered about her as if he resented the loss even of a single moment of her company, and Bab was far from objecting to this. David's companionship always had allured her; his thoughtfulness, his consideration must have endeared him to anyone. Besides, David's happiness somehow was infectious. When she was with him her spirits leaped contagiously. More and more in those few days Bab learned to appreciate how companionable he really was.

There was about him, too, a gentleness and understanding that were in themselves subtly comforting to her. David, in spite of his deep-rooted feeling for her, seemed ever fearful of alarming her. In the same way, though eager to have every moment with her, he was careful never to obtrude himself.

"I mustn't bore you," he said once.

"Bore me? Why, you never do," Bab returned; and with a quick comprehension she laid her hand on his. A light at the touch leaped into David's eyes. Instantly, however, he controlled it. [229]

"I'm glad," he answered simply.

Day by day he hovered about her. Even when Bab was alone, she had but to call, or dispatch a servant for him, to have him instantly respond. It was as if he were constantly on guard, watching over her. David might be a cripple; but the woman he loved could not have asked for a more able knight, nor one more generous. Bab eventually had to call a halt to his prodigality. There were flowers every morning, books, candies, what not. Then one night—it was just a week after the dance—David, his face radiant, tapped on the door of her sitting-room. He had one hand held behind him.

"Guess what's in it," he proposed.

The day before he had suggested giving her a motor, a small, smart landaulet of a type she had casually admired; but this plan instantly had been squelched. What need had she of a motor when her "grandfather" had at least five? However, what David now held behind him was manifestly not a town landaulet. But it might be the order for one.

"Look here," said Bab; "have you been silly enough——" [230]

With a shake of his head, his eyes glowing, he interrupted her.

"Guess, can't you?" he persisted.

Then when she couldn't he came a step closer to her.

"Look," he said, and suddenly opened his hand.

In it lay a ring, a single diamond set on a platinum band. It was not a huge stone, ostentatious and vulgar; but one whose water was as translucent as a drop of dew. As she beheld it Bab caught her breath.

"For me!" she cried.

David nodded. In his hand was a chain, too, a finely woven thread of gold. "Till we've told them," he said, his voice low, "wear it round your neck, Bab."

Her breath came swiftly through parted lips. Beeston's pearl, worth five times David's gift, had not begun to thrill her so. It was

the significance of the ring, all it conveyed, that now made her heart leap and the color pour into her face.

The following Saturday the family, bag and baggage, moved to Long Island. Half the servants, Crabbe in charge, already were established there; and Saturday afternoon, sometime after luncheon, Beeston and Miss Elvira were to follow. The run to Eastbourne was short—not more than an hour; and they were to take the limousine. Bab and David, however, elected to leave earlier. Just after breakfast David's roadster was brought round to the door.

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The morning was brilliant, a burst of sunlight glorifying even that ugly neighborhood, the street lined with its rows of brownstone fronts. The air, too, was animating. May was at hand, but the morning in spite of that had a tang like October. Bab wisely had tucked herself in furs, a muff and scarf of silver fox. At the curb she found David already waiting in his motor.

The roadster, a powerful machine, glittered with varnish and brightly polished metal. David never looked better than when he was seated at its wheel. As Bab came down the steps, smart in her furs and her fetching little toque and fashionably cut tweeds, a quick smile lighted his face. Certainly his features were attractive. Though he was not handsome, there was about him a look of high-bred, clean-cut manliness—an expression thoroughly appealing to women. As the chauffeur, having tucked a rug about Bab, climbed to his seat in the rumble, David bent swiftly toward her.

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"Bab, you're beautiful!" he whispered.

The arm pressed against hers she could feel tremble with his feeling. Then, its engine purring softly, the car shot forward. Their way lay eastward. Taking to a cross-town bystreet, they were soon at the bridge, the broad reach of river below leaping in the crisp sunlight like silver. In the distance far below a long, narrow power yacht slipped past like a missile. "Look!" cried Bab. Her animation grew bubbling. Bending forward, her muff tucked beneath her chin, she looked about her with eyes glowing. Everything interested her. After the yacht it was a tug shrouded in steam and buffeting its way along that caught her exuberant notice. How delightful was the morning air! How the sunlight got into one's spirits! Bab laughed and chattered exhilarantly. David, too, laughed and chatted with her.

Before long they left the river behind them; and rolling out of the last dingy street that lay upon the way, they came presently to the country. In the lush, fresh coloring of its fields and of the low hills that lay hazy in the distance they found a new exhilaration. Time sped forgotten. Engrossed in one another, they considered little else.

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The morning by now was well advanced, and as they forged along the broad, level highroad they began to meet the stream of motors that every day heads cityward from the big Long Island country places. David, as the roadster neared Eastbourne, began nodding to the occupants of the big limousines, the big touring cars and the smart, powerful motors like theirs that passed them. Each time he did so he was at pains to mention their names to Bab. And they were names, too, that would have thrilled the ordinary mortal, the man in the street. Bab herself was thrilled that David knew many of them. It pleased her that some of them, a few, she knew too. Most gratifying of all, though, was the interest with which David's acquaintances gazed at her. She wondered that often these looks were pointed. Was it because she was the Beeston heiress? Was it that alone, or had they guessed the truth about her and David? Plunged in this reverie, delightful to her with all the fancies it evoked, its dreams of place and power, she did not notice that as her chatter had subsided David's animation had risen correspondingly. All his life Long Island had been his playground, and hereabout there was hardly a stone, a tree, a hedge that was not familiar to him, filled with reminiscence. Then all at once his animation waned. As they topped the rise that led down to the Eastbourne plains he brought the car to a standstill.

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"Look!" he said.

Bab had never seen Byewolde, the Beeston summer place. In the rush of life during the few months she had been a member of the household there had been no opportunity. Now, however, as she looked across the open lowland to the wooded slope it crowned, she knew the house instantly.

Ten minutes later the roadster, after a burst of speed that gave

Bab the impression that she was being borne through the air on rushing wings, came to a halt under Byewolde's high Doris porch.

"Sit still, Bab," said David; then he turned to the chauffeur. "That's all, Gaffney," he directed; "I won't need you now." To Crabbe who, deferent, all eagerness, had come hurrying to the door, David bade a pleasant good morning. "Luncheon at one, Crabbe—just for us two, you understand. We'll be back."

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Then he threw in the clutch, and the car shot out again from under the tall white porch. Bab said nothing. Awakened abruptly from the pensive reverie in which she had been plunged, she had seen instantly that there was some purpose behind David's quick, energetic manner. What the purpose was, though, she did not know or particularly care. His plans might be anything, she would be lazily in accord with them. The day, the leaping sunshine, the swift exhilaration of the ride and David's deferent, tender attention—all had been to her a subtle balm. She sat back in her cushioned seat, her chin tucked luxuriously in the soft deep pelage of her muff, indolent mentally and physically, her eyes lazily wandering over the view. It was the first time in days she had felt at peace with herself and her surroundings. It mattered little to her that inertness really was the reason for that peace. She was content not to think.

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Byewolde, as such places go, was not vast perhaps. Its charm, instead, lay in its well-planned variety. The house, Colonial in type, stood facing a wide sweep of lawn, a stretch of rolling turf as soft and closely cropped as velvet. At one side of the house was a terrace hedged with box and evergreen; beyond that a sunken garden. A deep, dimpling pool lay at the garden's end, the depth sapphire with the reflection of the skies; and before it was a Roman marble garden seat, its snowy whiteness standing out against the carpet of turf, the bronze green background of the hedges. Bab's eyes lighted as the motor, turning out of the drive, headed down a byroad that led along the garden's side. Over the hedge she got a swift glimpse of its quiet, secluded charm. Then the road plunged of a sudden into a wood. Oaks, maples, elms, some of them huge, wove the lacelike tracery of their leaves and branches in a close network overhead, so that for a space the motor rolled onward through a tunnel of greenery. In its close, cloistered quiet one might have been miles from any habitation. The sunlight trickling through the latticed foliage overhead lit the wood's dim vistas with a mellow gleam, like light from a cathedral glass; and a hush fell upon Bab and David.

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The motor, slowing down, purred softly, like some huge insect—a denizen of the wood. David touched Bab upon the arm. Along a sunlit opening a herd of deer slipped silently into view. Almost instantly they were gone, like wraiths dissolving into the wall of the foliage that enframed them. A thrush, somewhere hidden in that dim, bosky depth, of a sudden burst into a throb of song.

"Like it?" asked David, and Bab drew in her breath.

"It's wonderful!" she exclaimed.

He was silent for a moment, looking about him. Then, his tone deliberate, he said to her: "Grandfather's given me this. Before we owned it I used to come here. Then one day he bought it and gave me the deed. It was a birthday present."

Bab looked about her again. All this a birthday present! She would perhaps have been even more impressed had she known something of Long Island values. There were a thousand acres in that wood.

Of the Byewolde estate, however, the wood was but a minor part. The Beeston town house gave to the uninitiated no indication of the wealth of the owner, for it differed little from a hundred others in the neighborhood. Here, however, not even the most ignorant could err as to the money required to maintain such an establishment. As the motor, rolling on, threaded the roads that led from one quarter of Byewolde to the other, Bab herself grew impressed with it.

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David was particular that she should see it all. There was not a view he did not point out to her; there was not a nook, a corner in all that domain he was not eager to have her discover. And it was all well worth seeing. A show place even in that countryside where wealth is a commonplace, Byewolde was the envy of its neighbors. Nothing mediocre, one saw clearly, would do for Beeston. The cattle standing knee-deep in the lush pasturage were prize stock; the horses gazing over the fences at the passing motor were blooded animals; the gardens and greenhouses, these last under their acreage of glass, were splendid with their array of exotic flowers

and foliage. David, alighting, led the way among them. The orchids, the roses, the long beds of lilies, violets, carnations—all these he showed her in turn. There was one house filled entirely with palms and ferns; there was a grapery, too, where at any season great clusters of grapes, deep with their purple bloom, were forced into luscious ripeness.

As he led her from one to another of Byewolde's wonders, Bab again grew conscious that behind his animation, the exhilarant eagerness he showed, David had some purpose. His air again grew feverish. The gardener, an elderly Scotchman, hobbled along after them, dilating proudly on these flowers to which his life had been devoted. David and he long had been cronies, Bab discovered. It was "Maister Davvy" this and "Maister Davvy" that. He seemed hardly aware of Bab; all his attention he devoted to the young man, his master. On one occasion, though, there came near to being a misunderstanding between those two—on one side David, gay, animated; on the other the Scotchman, old and dour, his soul wrapped in the flowers that had been his life. Bab's attention was called by a sudden exclamation from the old man.

"Oh, Maister Davvy!" he cried in consternation.

They had been standing before one of the orchids, a bronzelike exotic on which a single bloom, a flower with strange pale lilac and green petals, had just burst forth. Bab, filled with admiration, had exclaimed at its beauty, and David had plucked it from the plant.

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At the old gardener's evident dismay he laughed lightly.

"What's the difference, McNare? Here, Bab," he said, and handed her the flower. "Pin it on your waist."

McNare's distress still persisted.

"Ye've pluckit it, my orchid!" he cried. "Yon's the Sanctu, Maister Davvy; 'twull be the prize of a'!"

But David only laughed again. If a prize it would be fit, then, for a lady to wear. It was fortunate McNare had it ready to pick. At this point, however, with quick understanding he detected something in the old gardener's expression, and his bantering ceased. The ancient face had grown grayer, more furrowed.

"It was my bairn!" said McNare. "It was the apple o' my eye! I'd gi'ed it a year and more's care." He drew the back of one horny hand across his eyes.

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"McNare!" cried David contritely.

Bab turned away as David impulsively put a hand on the old gardener's shoulder. That was like David. He would not for the world have hurt another.

A shadow seemed to have fallen on his spirit when he rejoined her. He was repressed, less eager, less animatedly talkative. He pointed to the flower in her hand.

"You don't want that, Bab," he said suddenly. "Throw it away."

Throw away the blossom which before the calamity McNare had said was priceless! Bab hesitated, but David insisted on it.

"It's blighted, Bab. You mustn't have about you anything that isn't all suggestive of happiness. Not today certainly, and never if I can help it."

She gazed at him with softened, thoughtful eyes. It was some time before David regained his spirits. From the greenhouses he took her through Byewolde's stables, past rows of stalls and boxes where a dozen or more tenants lived in pampered luxury. The coachman, a ruddy-faced, beefy gentleman of the old school, kicked a foot out behind him as he touched his hat to David and Bab. He, too, like McNare, was an old-time servitor in that house; and with a bustling anxiety to serve and to please he kept the three stable grooms on the jump, parading his charges before the visitors. The sleek, satiny-coated animals—cobs, coach horses, and finally a pair of thoroughbred hunters—Bab could have admired interminably. Just then, however, a bell in the near-by farm began to clang.

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"One o'clock," David announced. "Crabbe will worry unless we make haste!"

So Bab regretfully climbed back into the motor. A moment later they dashed up under the high Doric portico again. She and David lunched alone. In the big, low-ceiled dining-room, rich with its hangings and its paneling of mahogany, bright with the array of silver and cut glass on table and sideboard, Crabbe served them with soft-footed, silent deference. At the end of the room the French windows stood open, and from her place at the head of the table,

ensconced behind the massive Beeston tea service, Bab looked out, first on a long stretch of velvety lawn, then at its background, the wall of evergreens that guarded the sunken garden. The sunlight of that perfect day still shone upon it. Allured by all this, she sat gazing on the prospect dreamy-eyed. How delightful it all was! How splendid! And to think that once, a few months before, she had been a nobody, a little waif in a boarding house! Bab herself hardly could believe it. A deep breath escaped her.

"David, isn't it wonderful!" she murmured.

David, as she spoke, awoke abruptly from a reverie.

"Wonderful!" he agreed as he looked up at her. Then he comprehended. "You mean all this, don't you?" he asked.

Bab nodded and, his eyes fixed on hers, David for a moment sat silent. The luncheon had been served, and Crabbe at a signal from him had left the room. In the brief interval that David sat gazing at her, Bab saw a change come over him. Again his eyes brightened, deepening with animation. Again she saw dawn in them the look of purpose she had seen there that morning. Pushing back his chair, he arose, and with a hand on the table to support him he came slowly toward her. Bab's eyes fell. Never before had she felt herself so alone with him—with anyone, for that matter. Had this been their wedding day, their first few moments together, she could not have felt more conscious. The color crowded into her face. She dared not look up now. Then as she sat there, her eyes lowered, she felt David's hand slip beneath her chin.

"Look up, Bab!" he whispered. She obeyed awkwardly. His eyes, she noticed, had grown very serious. "Listen, dear," said David. "All that I've shown you I showed you with a purpose. I wanted you to know that some day it all will be mine—you understand, don't you—ours, Bab, yours and mine! That's why I showed it to you!" Then she felt the hand that held her face up to his tighten. "Remember," he added, "it's yours—ours—Bab, no matter what happens! What's mine will always be yours. You understand?"

Bab was looking up at him with parted lips.

"Yes," she murmured wonderingly.

"Yours and mine! That's why I showed it to you, Bab!" And then, "I love you! I love you!" he whispered.

It was a week after this that one afternoon Crabbe brought up to the pretty chintz-hung bedroom, now Bab's, the card of a visitor who was waiting in a pony cart outside. Bab, as she read the name, exclaimed with pleasure.

"Linda Blair!"

"And begging pardon, please," added Crabbe, "the young lady asks particular if you'll see her."

Bab directed him to ask Miss Blair upstairs at once. The Beestons by now were settled for the summer at Byewolde. Beeston himself, entirely recovered from the illness that earlier in the year had threatened to lay him low, every day was to be seen walking or driving about the place. Bab was his constant companion. After his queer behavior the evening of the dance Beeston had resumed toward her his former air of gruff indulgence. To all appearances he might have been the most doting of grandfathers, Bab the most beloved of grandchildren. Miss Elvira, too, was as natural. All that one could descry in the least unusual about her was a smile, grim and covert, that off and on lighted her craggy features.

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The week had been a full one for Bab. The engagement David had not yet revealed, but had it been openly known the countryside could not have done more in the way of making Bab's days at Byewolde memorable. Here in the country she had been accepted, been taken for herself, far more than had been the case in the city. One reason for this was that in town the people were engrossed with their own affairs; there time sped too swiftly for them to give much thought to a newcomer. At Eastbourne, however, where the pace was less swift, the various households more closely associated, more of an opportunity was afforded to make Bab feel she was really welcome.

She was left little time to herself. This was as she wished it; for all the new life, new scenes, new activities, thoroughly entertained her. Life in town, brilliant as it had been, had not appealed to her as this did. The reason, perhaps, was that in New York her surroundings had been too new to seem real. She had been a little staggered by her first acquaintance with luxury. The money everything cost had especially bewildered her. Now, however, she had begun to grow accustomed to it all. Money and the luxury it brings had become a commonplace. Already she had begun to lean upon it as a necessity. The animation of her new life, too, had become a second nature. She was rarely unoccupied. Every night she dined out; mornings and afternoons she either rode or drove with her new friends, now not so new either; or, alone with David, the two rambled in his roadster up and down the many unfrequented byroads of the island. Polo practice had begun at the country club; occasionally there was a drag hunt too; and at these events, where the neighborhood turned out in force, David seemed anxious to have her seen.

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"You don't mind being dragged round like this, do you?" David asked one day. "I want you to meet everyone, you know."

Bab didn't mind in the least. Now that she had got over her first feeling of strangeness there was nothing she liked more. However, in all this new life, among all her new friends, there was one person who from the first had filled her with a subtle feeling of disquiet. And this person was Linda Blair. Was Linda her friend? Bab wished she knew. She liked the girl; more than that, she admired her. Linda, besides, had been a playmate of David's since childhood. But of late, it seemed to Bab, she had begun to notice about Linda an air of chilly, growing reserve. There was in her expression, too, a veiled disapproval. Bab wondered what she had done to offend her. She was still debating the question when Crabbe ushered in the caller.

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"How do you do, Bab?" said Linda, and with a quick smile Bab put out her hand.

"How nice of you to come!" she returned. Determined not to be stiff, or show that she had noticed Linda's air of reserve, Bab tried to make her welcome very real, and she succeeded in this. But Linda's call she soon saw was not merely social. The girl crossed the room hesitantly, a slender, quiet creature, more womanly than girlish; and, having taken the chair by the window that Bab indicated, she sat waiting for Crabbe to withdraw. Obviously there was some special reason for her visit.

"You'll have tea, won't you?" asked Bab.

"Thanks, no," murmured Linda; "I can stay only a minute. I must be going on directly."

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Bab dismissed the butler, and with a growing interest seated herself in a chair opposite her visitor. There was a formality about Miss Blair's manner that did not escape her. Though pleasant enough, she had something in her manner that held Bab effectually at a distance.

The conversation at the outset was aimless. To Linda manifestly it was an effort, and at times she came perilously near to rambling. There was to be a luncheon at the country club the week following, and she talked of that. Then, apropos of nothing, she remarked on a picture show she had seen in town, veering from that to a projected run of the drag hounds the following Saturday, the last meet of the season. Bab, in the pauses, led on the talk as best she could. But it was a difficult matter. Suddenly, in the midst of a sentence—something or other about a race meet the month following at the country club—Linda broke off with awkward abruptness. A faint frown of irritation swept across her brows.

"Let's be frank," she said bluntly; "I didn't come here for this. I've something I'd like to ask you." Her dark eyes on the girl opposite her, for a moment she paused. "Bab," she then asked quietly, "what are you doing to David?"

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Blunt as the question was, and disconcerting, Bab already had guessed this was the purpose that had brought Linda to see her. She saw now, too, that it must have been her affair with David that had caused Linda's chilly reserve. Linda must have guessed what was happening. The color rushed into her face, which only added to her anger, for she resented showing her feelings.

"What do you mean?" she asked coldly.

"Don't be angry," Linda begged; "I don't mean to offend you. David, you know, has been my friend, my playmate, all my life. It's not just you that I question; I would have asked any girl. Don't you understand? David's a man, of course; but then, too, David's different. I can't stand by and see him hurt. Think how much he's had to bear already."

Bab looked at her in undisguised amazement.

"Hurt?" she repeated. "Why should you think I would hurt him?"

Linda smiled at her gently.

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"You know perfectly, Bab."

"I do not," Bab returned crisply; "I know what you suggest, of course—that I am—well, leading him on, to put it vulgarly. Isn't that what you mean by hurting him?"

"Precisely!"

"And you really think I am doing that?"

"No; I only asked whether you are."

Bab with an effort got rid of the note of irritation in her tone. If she must fence she would at least fence with art. So she returned Linda's quiet smile.

"You've known David, as you say, all your life. Why, then, did you come to me? Why didn't you ask him?"

A quick change swept into the other's expressive eyes, and Bab beheld it with surprise. It seemed to Bab almost as if she winced.

"Stop and think! You don't for a moment believe I'd let him know, do you? I at least don't mean to hurt him!"

Bab waited until she had finished.

"Yes," she said, "but that doesn't prevent your hurting me. You still suggest that I am amusing myself at his expense!"

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Linda shook her head.

"No; I merely beg you not to! That's why I came here to see you."

"I dare say," said Bab quietly; "but there's one thing you overlook. You seem to forget, Linda, that what in another girl might seem significant, on my part would be harmless. Have you thought of that?"

"Harmless?" interrogated Linda.

"Exactly," smiled Bab. "David, you remember, is my cousin."

It was a clincher. Bab, as she delivered the thrust, rather complimented herself on her cleverness. Somehow, though, the riposte fell short of its expected result. Linda's expression did not alter. Concern was still deeply written in her eyes. Her mouth

quivered, setting itself as if again she had winced.

"David doesn't think so," she said.

The retort fairly took Bab's breath away. It was as Linda said. David indeed did not think so; and there dawned on Bab then what she had been guilty of in hiding the truth. David she was to marry, yet virtually she had denied it. What was more, in her denial she had displayed an attitude of defiance that might easily be construed as shame. Again she colored, irritation uppermost in her feelings. She was incensed as much at herself as at Linda. She was angered, besides, that she had agreed to conceal her engagement. Why had she done it? But what annoyed her most was her own clumsiness in handling the present situation.

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"David," said Linda slowly, "thinks you love him."

Bab had been seated in a low chair, her head negligently thrown back and her fingers laced together in her lap. Now she got suddenly to her feet.

"I don't see any reason why we should go on like this. I know David loves me, Linda, and I'm going to marry him."

For a brief moment Linda stared at her with every indication of amazement and incredulity. "You marry David!" she gasped. But when Bab assured her this was so, Linda looked neither relieved nor gratified. "Marry David?" she again repeated; and then in her eyes once more rose that vague cloud, a shadow of inward trouble. "Don't think me rude, Bab," said Linda hesitantly, "but will you tell me why you are going to marry him?"

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"Why?" echoed Bab. Her discomfort, her righteous indignation perhaps at this point got the better of her. Linda, had she been David's own sister, could not have been more insistent. A sister, indeed, would have thought twice before she'd have ventured to go so far.

"Look here, Linda," said Bab, her voice matching in tone the angry glint in her eye; "I've been frank with you; now you be frank with me. Why do you wish to know all this? Is it because you'd like to marry David yourself?"

The shot went straight to its mark. Bab saw her visitor catch swiftly at her breath.

"I—marry David?" In Linda's air, however, was pain, not discomfiture. The shadow in her eyes darkened perceptibly. "You don't understand, Bab; David and I were brought up together. We've been playmates since I was a baby. If he were my own kin, my own brother, I could not love him more. But that doesn't mean I could marry him. I don't love him that way."

The words, each freighted with significance, thundered their accusation in Bab's startled mind. Linda did not love him that way! Bab, as she sat staring at the speaker, recalled her own reflections in the matter. She, too, had loved David as if bound to him by some tie of blood. She, too, had felt for him that same companionship. Beyond that, though, how else had she felt for him? How else had she loved the man she was to marry? She was still staring at her visitor, the question in her mind still unanswered, when Linda suddenly spoke.

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"Why are you marrying him, Bab? Don't you know?"

Bab found her tongue then.

"Because I—I—" She did not finish the sentence, but began another instead. "Why shouldn't I marry him?" she demanded, her voice strong with indignation. "Why shouldn't I marry David? I know he loves me; isn't that enough? I know he isn't marrying me for my money; he's marrying me for myself. That's why I'm marrying David."

Linda still was steadily eyeing her.

"And is that really the reason?"

"It's one reason," returned Bab.

Again Linda studied her with curious intentness.

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"Bab," she said finally, her tone as grave as her air, "if there were someone else you loved, really loved, and you could assure yourself he was not marrying you for your money, then would you still marry David?"

Bab's breath in her amazement came swiftly.

"Someone else?" she repeated. Then she demanded: "Why do you ask?"

Linda quietly arose, as she did so picking up the driving gloves

she had laid on a table near her. She began now deliberately to put them on. Changing the topic abruptly and ignoring Bab's question, she drifted toward the door. In the hall downstairs she turned with a smile and held out her hand.

"Bayard Varick will be at Eastbourne tomorrow, Bab. He's coming to us for the week-end."

Linda had said she did not love David that way! Bab's mind still clung to that speech, wrestling with it dully. Five o'clock had struck from the spire of Eastbourne church as the pony cart, with a smart cob clinking in the shafts, drifted along a shady byway in the Beeston woods. They were the same woods in which Bab had spent that first morning at Byewolde with David, but she was alone now. There was not even a groom beside her on the seat of the Hempstead cart in which she was jogging along.

She had wanted to be alone. Ever since that moment when Linda had uttered those memorable words Bab had felt she must get off by herself and think things over. Then, too, Linda had said Varick was to visit Eastbourne. He was to spend the week-end at the Blairs' place near by. As the clock in the church tower struck, Bab mechanically counted the strokes. Five! He must be there now!

In view of Bab's firm resolve to marry David, her reflections concerning Varick seemed rather disconcerting. Varick, she'd told herself, had gone out of her life. She was done with him. But Bab somehow had not foreseen that Varick, like a ghost, would not down. She had not reflected that his life and hers must of a necessity cross continually. Left to herself, to the resolve she had made, she could have married David with perhaps no more than a qualm or so. She loved him, she knew. She might not love him, perhaps, as a wife should love her husband, but then what matter was that? Round her in the life she now was leading, countless women were married with much less right. They did not love at all. It was for convenience they married—for place, for power. Rarely, it seemed to her, did they marry just for love. And the marriages, after all, did not turn out so badly. Some of the women—quite a few, in fact—even learned to love their men. Of course a good many didn't, but then why dwell on that? She already loved David as a companion; in time she might learn to love him in another way. Probably she would.

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The cob, hacking along at his own free will, now all at once pricked up his ears. Over the treetops from the near-by side of the wood the breeze brought a quick burst of sound. Bab heard it dully. It was a hunt day at the country club, the season's last, and the hounds were out. Clucking aimlessly to the cob, she again plunged into her reverie.

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The scene with Linda the day before had helped to clarify Bab's impressions. She began now to see things in their actual light. She saw even the truth concerning herself and Varick. What if he had sought to marry her once he learned she had money? He loved her, didn't he? She knew he did. She knew, too, he would marry no one he did not love, no matter how much money they had. Then in the midst of this reflection, her mind in its ferment going over and over it again, a new realization came to her. Of her love for Varick there could be no question! She knew how she loved him, this man who had gone out of her life. She loved him as she wished to God she could love David, the man she was going to marry. But she had given her promise to David, and she could not break it.

The cob again pricked up his ears. Bab aimlessly fingering the lines, felt him bear all at once against the bit. Just then in an open field beside the wood the hounds swept past in full cry.

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"Steady, boy!"

Full of life, vigorously skittish, the cob had begun to prance. Bab pulled it down to its four feet presently, and sat waiting for the chase to go on. Hard after the racing hounds came the vanguard of the field, the riders who followed, three men and a girl out far ahead. The men were strangers, but the girl Bab knew. She was the daughter of one of the Beestons' neighbors, an elfish, harum-scarum creature, whose chief delight seemed to be a reckless disregard of life and limb—her own, however. Perched on a big, raw-boned roan thoroughbred she took the in-and-out, the jump into the road and over into the field beyond with the aplomb of a veteran. The next instant she was gone, flashing out of view.

Bab was still gazing after her when there was a crash and crackling of brush close beside her. A fourth rider, topping the roadside fence, flew into view. His horse instantly she recognized. It was one from the Blairs' stable, a thoroughbred that Bab often had seen Linda riding. The next instant she had recognized its rider. It

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was Varick!

Bab's heart beneath her trim linen jacket gave a thump, and she sat staring at him in wonder. The color, a moment later, poured into her face. Already, before he saw her, Varick's mount had bucked into the road and, crossing it at a stride, was gathering himself to take the fence beyond. Varick pulled him up sharply. The horse, his eyes rolling with excitement, fought at the bit, and for a moment his rider had difficulty in getting him in hand. Then, quivering, the animal trotted toward the cart.

"Hello!" Varick hailed cheerfully. "I didn't expect to see you." Sliding from the saddle, he slipped the reins over his arm. "Nice to see you, Bab," and he held out a hand to her.

She had never before seen him in riding things. The things themselves she had seen, and she remembered them, the boots especially. Slim and slender, neat on their wooden trees, they'd stood in a corner of his room at Mrs. Tilney's. What visions they'd created. And now in the boots, in his smart, well-cut riding clothes, how well he looked, how pleasant, smiling and well-bred! In contrast Bab felt herself *gauche* and uncomfortable. It did not make it any easier for her that he seemed in no way awkward or constrained. He stood beside the cart looking up at her, and with an effort Bab murmured a response to his greeting. As she finished, her air confused, he smiled faintly.

"I've been hearing about you," he announced.

Hearing about her? Bab sharply pulled herself together. In Varick's tone was something more than the mere raillery the speech conveyed. She thought, too, she knew where it was he had been hearing of her.

"I dare say," returned Bab; "you're at Linda Blair's."

The subtle innuendo of this he did not seem to heed. A quick light came into his eyes.

"Linda told you I was coming, did she?" He smiled brightly. "Linda's a dear, isn't she?" he exclaimed.

Bab long had heard of Varick's friendliness with Linda. His admiration of her, too, was evident. It was not from Linda, though, that Varick had heard of Bab. Of that his next speech assured her.

"Where's the happy man, Bab? I heard the news at the country club, you know. Why are you alone?"

The happy man—and Varick had heard the news! Speech for the moment left her. That day her engagement had been announced. David, deciding to wait no more, had given the news to his intimates. Tomorrow every newspaper in the city would have it. What should she say to Varick now in answer to his question? Was she to tell him that the happy man she had left at home? Was she to tell him, too, why she had left him there? The fact that David was announcing the engagement had caused her to seek solitude. She wanted time. She needed the opportunity to face herself before she must face Beeston, Miss Elvira and, last of all, David's parents. Yes, but what about Varick? She had not dreamed of facing him!

The night of her dance—that moment when first she had told him of the promise she'd given David—the revelation had not been nearly so trying. Emotion had dulled her. She had been excited, overwrought, the pang of it had been blunted. She had found no time to ruminate, to taste its bitterness. Now, however, in the cold, everyday light of the fact as it was, as it ever would be, there was no soothing opiate of emotion to dull the pain. She had indeed not counted on facing him. She would almost rather have faced the truth itself. Varick all the time was looking at her.

"Bab," he asked, "tell me just one thing. Are you happy?"

Her eyes drifted hazily away. Happy? The word somehow seemed an affront. Why was it that happiness had always to be dragged in? Linda had asked would David be happy? Here Varick was asking would Bab herself be happy? Why must everything so depend on her? She wished devoutly she could for once be freed of the responsibility. If only things could be made happy for her!

"Won't you answer?" asked Varick.

She had sat looking at him in silence. Of the storm, the ferment that was seething in her mind, Varick had no hint. Her face was set. Outwardly, with her lips tightly compressed, her mouth rigid, she looked reserved, affronted, if anything, at what he asked. The question was not one that could lightly be asked of any woman, least of all a woman who had just promised herself. Varick saw her eyes,

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as he thought, harden. Then she looked away. He did not know, however, that why she did so was that of a sudden the eyes had clouded mistily. Their mistiness she would not have him see. But he was not dissuaded. As he gazed at her Varick's own face grew set.

"Look at me, Bab! Be angry if you like, but you've got to answer. If you're happy, say so, and I won't bother you. But I want you to tell me."

Reaching up, he took in his the small gloved hand that clung to the rail of the Hempstead cart. She made no effort to release it. They were quite alone. The hunt, swinging westward over the open fields, had carried with it the first of the field; the others, with the onlookers following in traps and motors, had streamed away down a near-by road. Round these two was the wood, its leafy walls a haven of cloistered, quiet privacy.

"I want you to tell me, little girl," said Varick. His hold on the hand under his tightened reassuringly. "I just want to be sure you're glad, contented. If you are, then it's all right; I won't say a word. If you're not glad, though, not happy, then I want to help you. Don't you understand, Bab?" She still did not reply, but sat perched on the cart's high pad staring straight ahead of her. The effort to answer him was beyond her. Then for the first time he seemed to see her misery.

"Why, Bab!" he cried.

His air changed instantly, awakening to quick activity. He bade her sit as she was and, flinging the reins of his mount over a fence post handy, he took the cob by the bit. The cart he turned in the road. This accomplished, he returned to the tethered thoroughbred and, gathering the reins in hand, climbed into the saddle.

"Drive along, Bab," he directed; "I'll follow."

There was another byroad, a turn-off from the main drive, a short way beyond; and there, as if of his own accord, the cob swung on. Tunneled in that aisle of greenery Varick and Bab were alone, alone indeed. Reaching over as his mount cantered on beside the cob, he touched the hand that held the reins.

"Pull up, Bab," he said, adding then: "You must not feel like that. Now tell me what's wrong." Her mouth was quivering. She had been sitting there all the time with the tears brimming in her eyes. "You know," Varick added quietly, "I want to help you."

That fixed it.

"Oh, Bayard, Bayard!" cried Bab brokenly. He did not speak, but he again slipped from the saddle and, with the reins looped over his arm, came and stood beside the wheel.

"How can I tell you!" she went on. "The other night, the time when you danced with me, I knew what I ought to do, but I couldn't. It was all so strange, all so sudden. I'd been blinded by it. All the new life I'd lived, that and all it had brought me, seemed to have blurred everything. It wasn't just what they'd said to me that made me turn from you; all along, from the very first, from the time at Mrs. Tilney's, I'd felt you didn't think I was as good as you were. When the money came I thought it would change things. Then the more I thought the more I knew it wouldn't. I was still as I'd always been; if you married me I'd still be the same. And then my grandfather told me it would be like you to want to marry me now, to want me for my—my money. And David didn't. He wanted me for myself, just that. I could be sure of that; he'd have his own money, you know. He'll be as rich as I'll be some day."

"As rich as you'll be, Bab?"

"Yes," Bab answered—"when grandfather dies, that is."

Varick dared not meet her eyes. In his heart he could have wept for her. Presently his glance returned to her.

"Then it wasn't just David's money, David's position, that tempted you? That's not why you took him, is it?"

"David's money—tempt me?" Her astonishment was genuine. "Why should it?"

Varick did not pursue the question. Again he laid his hand on hers, and again she let it lie there.

"Some day you'll understand," he said quietly; "you'll see, too, that neither has your money made any difference with me."

Bab's voice at this broke again. She knew now, she protested, that it hadn't. It made Varick smile whimsically to hear her.

"And you don't think me dreadful?" she pleaded.

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"Dreadful?" He laughed. "Of course not!"

"You said you'd help me. Bayard, what am I to do?"

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Varick was still smiling. In the smile, though, was now nothing whimsical.

"I don't know, Bab."

"You don't know!" Varick slowly shook his head. "Do you mean that?" asked Bab, her eyes wondering.

He stirred uncomfortably.

"I'm afraid so. Don't you see you're the one who must help yourself there? I can't decide that for you; it wouldn't be right."

Her wonder grew. What wouldn't be right? Hadn't he voluntarily offered to help her?

"You don't understand," said Varick; "I'll help you any way I can, Bab, but not that way. I can't tell you whether you must marry David. Your conscience will have to decide that. It's hardly right for me even to comfort you. Can't you see it?"

"Don't you love me?" she asked slowly. "Is that it?"

Varick smiled anew.

"You know I do," he answered. "But if you'd think, you'd see, too, I have no right even to tell you that."

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The fine ethics of this, however, Bab was in no mood to comprehend. Love is woman's one fierce, common right. She wages it as man wages war—instinctively. And as in war, in love—as she often sees it—all things are fair.

"It's just this, Bab," said Varick; "you've given your word to David Lloyd. You're his woman, the one he's going to marry. With that promise still standing, you're as much his as if you were his wife. I can't tell you anything, Bab; I mustn't even tell you that I love you." Trying to keep his feelings from showing in his face, he fastened his eyes on hers. "I was a friend of his once. I can't stab him in the back like that. If you love him, Bab, marry him. If you don't, then decide whatever way you can. But don't ask me to decide for you. I can't! I never can!"

"You mean that you won't?"

"I'm afraid so," he responded gently.

"You won't help me at all?"

"Not that way, Bab. It's a question I wouldn't help any woman decide. What's more, I'd not marry a woman who wouldn't or who couldn't decide it for herself. If you love David Lloyd, your course lies open. If you don't love him, it lies equally open. You'll have to do the choosing."

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He released the hand he held in his and began fumbling with the reins looped across his arm. The thoroughbred, busily cropping the roadside grass, lifted its shapely head, its muzzle nuzzling Varick's shoulder. Varick's lips were firmly pressed together. He did not look at Bab. "I must be going; we can't stay on here," he murmured. "Shall I see you again?"

With what composure she could command she turned toward him. Inwardly now the turmoil of her emotions rose to concert pitch. Of its fierceness, however, evidently he saw nothing. Bab's eyes again had in them that look of hardness that had been there at first. "Good-by," she said methodically. She did not bother to say whether they should meet or not. She felt within her shame a fierce self-condemnation. The fact she did not blink—she had flung herself at Varick's head, and Varick virtually had refused her! She had cheapened herself! With a fierce struggle to hold back the flood of tears, the hurt that flung its signals in her eyes, she gathered up the reins, then spoke to the waiting cob. The cart rolled swiftly up the road. Speeding along, it turned a bend in the wood's tunneled greenery. Behind it in the road the thoroughbred and its rider were left standing.

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But had Bab looked back before it was too late she would have seen something that perhaps would have stilled the tempest of resentment, of bitter hurt, that raged within her. Varick still stood there in the road, the reins dangling from his hand, looking after her. Then, when he could no longer see the slim figure perched swaying in the high cart, his eyes dropped, and he stood on, his shoulders drooping, his hands thrust deep in his pockets. Forgotten, the thoroughbred once more fell to cropping the grass.

"Poor little girl!" whispered Varick. "My poor, poor little Bab!"

It was long after six when the cob, its flanks white with lather, came stepping swiftly up the drive to the portico at Byewolde. A groom from the stable was waiting. He gave one look at the horse, then glanced sideways at his mistress. Ordinarily she was not one to push an animal to its limit. But Bab gave no heed. Her bedroom was where she longed to be. Above all she wished to get there before any of the household should see her. The fates willed otherwise, it seemed.

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"Begging pardon, please," said Crabbe as he opened the door for her; "Mrs. Lloyd will be in your sitting-room. She'll wish to see you."

Bab's heart clanged with sudden apprehension.

"Mrs. Lloyd?"

"Yes, miss; she's been waiting above an hour now. She said you were please to go to her immediately."

Bab slowly made her way up the stairs. It was the engagement, of course, that had brought Mrs. Lloyd hurrying to Byewolde. She had heard the announcement that afternoon. Bab opened the sitting-room door and stepped inside. Not above five minutes later the door again opened and Mrs. Lloyd emerged. She came quietly, discreetly, as if not to disturb others in that household. Her pale, usually expressionless face was lighted now with an ironic smile. She had just seen Bab. And, from A to izzard, she had divulged to her the story of Mr. Mapleson's forgery.

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Dinner at Byewolde always was at eight; and downstairs in the big hall the corner clock sonorously boomed that hour. There followed a knock at the sitting-room door; and as she heard it Bab stirred restlessly. Listening, she held her breath. It was only Hibberd, however.

"Dinner is served, please. Thank you."

Bab made no reply. Waiting until she heard the manservant's footfalls retreat along the hall, she again returned to her hurried preparations. Mrs. Lloyd's interview had been brief—hurried, in fact. Her father and Miss Elvira were driving, she knew; but at any moment they might return. Consequently time was precious.

Once Bab had grasped all that her aunt's disclosures conveyed, Mrs. Lloyd's other remarks fell on her ears unheeded. Dazed, she sat staring in front of her. She awoke finally to the fact that Mrs. Lloyd was still addressing her.

"Under the circumstances," David's mother was saying, "we cannot sanction, of course, any further intimacy with our son." They had never sanctioned it, Bab told herself bitterly. "Do you understand?" continued Mrs. Lloyd; and at the same time she laid her hand on Bab's arm. [276]

Bab shrank as if an iron had seared her.

"Don't touch me!" she whispered.

It was more than physical aversion that Mrs. Lloyd had instilled in Bab. She wondered how she could ever have planned so blandly to marry David in spite of his parents. Now, of course, it was quite out of the question. That Bab, as a Beeston and an heiress, should defy them was one thing; but it was quite another that Bab, the boarding-house waif, should attempt such a thing. Her end achieved, Mrs. Lloyd had not lingered. She departed conscious she had done her duty.

Bab, still half-dazed, sat on where her aunt had left her. She had no tears. The relief they would have afforded she was denied. Presently, however, the fire raging within her soul seemed to rouse her to a feverish animation. She felt she must do something! Below, under the portico, a grinding of wheels along the gravel of the driveway warned her that Beeston and Miss Elvira had returned. A glance at the mantel told her she had a little more than an hour to herself. Before dinner they would nap, then dress. She had until eight to make her preparations. After that there would be inquiries. She must hurry! [277]

There was David, too. She had not seen him since early in the day; and he might come in at any moment. The thought of him was a swift reminder of something else.

Her fingers clumsy, she began fumbling at the bosom of her dress. David that morning had begged her to slip the ring, his diamond, on her finger. But Bab had shaken her head. There had been reasons in her mind even then why she had not cared to wear it before the people about her. Now, with fingers that were bungling in their haste, she dragged open the clasp of the chain. The gem, like a drop of dew, rested in her hand; but without a look at it she dropped it on a near-by table. There it lay, blazing star-like as the light fell upon it. What to do with it she would decide later. Meanwhile she hurried.

She was engrossed in her preparations when a footfall sounded suddenly in the hall. It was her maid, Mawson. As a precaution Bab had locked both the bedroom door and the door of the sitting-room adjoining. Having knocked, and Bab making no response, Mawson tried first one door, then the other. Her breath held, Bab stood in the middle of the room waiting. Mawson, she hoped, would depart. After a moment, however, the woman again tapped on the door. It was the hour when, every evening, she was required to help dress her young mistress for dinner. [278]

"Half-past seven, please!" she called apologetically. It was evident that she thought Bab asleep.

Bab went to the door. She did not open it, for she did not wish Mawson to see within.

"I won't need you, Mawson," she directed.

The maid still remained.

"Shan't I lay out your things, miss?"

"Thank you, no," Bab returned.

Mawson went away after that; but her footfalls were slow and lagging, as though she were uncertain what to do. She was probably puzzling over the two locked doors. Bab, her ear to the door panel, waited until she had made sure of the woman's departure. [279]

A glance at the clock caused her to start with apprehension. Half-past seven! Only half an hour was left her. If she hurried, however, in that half-hour she might accomplish much. With feverish animation she darted through the doorway that led to the sitting-room. There, standing on a chair, was a black leather traveling bag. With this she returned to the bedroom. Every drawer of her dressing table had been pulled out. Scattered on the bed was a haphazard assortment of the things she had selected from the dressing table's contents.

Bab was going away. In a few minutes now she would have turned her back on that house for good. Her dream, like the thin veiling of a cloud, had dissipated, vanishing into the thinness of the air! As her fingers picked swiftly among the things spread out before her, Bab glanced again at the clock. Twenty minutes now! In twenty minutes everything would be ended.

To leave this place at once had been her first impulse the instant she had come to her wits again after Mrs. Lloyd's departure. She did not quibble. She had perhaps backed and filled, been uncertain and weak over the other problems that had confronted her; in this, though, she had clearly seen the way. Now that she knew the truth about herself, there was no question in her mind as to what she should do. She had loved her new home. She had loved, too, the life, the surroundings that went with it. But, much as it allured her, she meant to pay for it no such price as would now be necessary. Mrs. Lloyd had not deceived her. Bab knew she need only appeal to David to remain there, fixed indefinitely among those surroundings. But she wanted the real thing, or else nothing. Her one thought now was to get away. She had not begun yet to think of the future. [280]

All at once out in the hall she heard a sound. Bab caught at her breath. Along the corridor, straight toward her door, came the measured slow tread now so familiar to her. There followed a knock on her door. She did not answer. Outside she could hear David as he propped himself on his crutches.

"Bab," he called. She still did not answer. "Bab!" he called again.

In the tense stillness of the room the thick, hurried ticking of the clock upon the mantel beat on her ears like sledge strokes. She did not move. She dared hardly breathe. Beside the door she could hear him as he moved restlessly, one hand on the panels to support him. Then through the woodwork came to her a sigh—a deep and painful inspiration. [281]

"David," she said. "Oh, don't!"

A stifled exclamation came from the hall without. Bab, however, did not open the door.

"Let me in," pleaded David. His voice, in its thickness, she hardly knew. As he spoke he rattled the doorknob.

"You can't come in," Bab said wearily. "I can't see you."

He was silent for a moment. She could hear him move again, shifting on his crutches.

"Where have you been, Bab? All the afternoon I've been hunting you. I tried to get to you first."

To get to her first? She knew at once what he meant.

"You've seen your mother then?"

"Yes, Bab." His voice was toneless, its depth of weariedness abysmal. After another pause, while apparently he waited for her reply, David spoke again: "Bab, it makes no difference to me. The other day when I told you nothing would, I meant it. Open the door, won't you?" [282]

As gently as she could Bab answered him:

"I can't, David—not now. I'll let you know when I can."

Over her shoulder she threw a swift glance at the clock. Ten minutes to eight. At eight Beeston, as was his wont, would come stamping down the stair. It was he whom she dreaded meeting. Now that she realized he knew everything, she dared not face him.

"You're not coming down then?" David finally asked.

Go down to dinner and face again that grim, indomitable figure at the head of the table? Bab quailed at the thought.

"No. And you must go now, please," she said.

"Can't I see you just a moment?" he begged.

"Not tonight," Bab answered. There was a moment's silence, then she heard David heavily and painfully plod his way along the hall, and the thump! thump! of his crutches finally died away. When she turned from the door Bab's eyes were filled with tears. Even David had left her now. [283]

Five minutes more! At half-past eight, only a short half-hour now, the train for the city would leave Eastbourne, and after that there would be no train until well along toward midnight. The station was a mile away. She remembered, too, she would have her bag to carry. She must hurry.

She had no plans further than that she would go to New York. Mrs. Tilney's, however, was not her destination. She could never return to the boarding house so long as Varick was there.

To him she had so far hardly given a thought, but now she wondered vaguely whether he had known of the fraud all along. Probably he had. The significance of this, however, she did not debate. To her dazed mind it seemed long ages since she had met him in the wood, and she herself must have grown years older and wiser since then. All at once she was overwhelmed by a terrible loneliness. If she only had someone to whom she could appeal! If even Mr. Mapy were only with her!

At first Bab had thought that she never again would care to see the little man, that the bitter memory of what his act had cost her would remain between them always. Now she no longer felt that way. Her mind in its loneliness dwelt on the fact of how Mr. Mapy had loved her. It was this love after all that had led him to attempt that ridiculous fraud. And at the thought of the sorrowful, solitary little man, a sudden longing filled her to see him again. She would go to him, and perhaps in some new place they might begin life over again happily. [284]

A startled exclamation here escaped Bab. A glance at the clock had shown her it wanted only a minute or two of eight. Spurred now to a new activity, she began tumbling into the bag the last of the things she had laid out on the bed. She could take little with her, of course; she saw that. The door of the closet near-by stood open and showed long rows of dresses—all the daintiest, the most costly. There were on the floor of the closet, too, double rows of little boots and shoes, and in the highboy against the wall were gloves, silk stockings, ribbons, scarfs. She must leave all these behind her. Only the smallest, the most personal, of belongings she was taking along. She did not own the others. They had been given to Barbara Beeston, the heiress—not to Bab, the boarding-house waif. With a wistful, brave little smile she was bending over to sort out a few handkerchiefs to take with her when out from among them fell a small morocco case. It was Beeston's pearl! The gem lay in its velvet bed gleaming up at her like a conjuring eye. In its exquisite beauty it seemed to symbolize all the refinement of that life of wealth and splendor she was now renouncing. For the first time she really grasped what she was giving up. [285]

Just then the mantle clock struck eight. As the chime's silvery notes cried the hour a step on the stair again startled Bab. She paused, once more breathless. It was only Hibberd, however.

"Dinner is served, please. Thank you," said the servant.

Bab did not answer. Presently, the man's footfalls having died away, she turned back again to her packing. Nothing of all these things round her was hers. She could not lay claim even to the clothes she stood in. What she took, therefore, must be such things as afterward she would be able to replace. She had a grim satisfaction in this. A minute or so later Bab stealthily unlocked the bedroom door and stepped out into the hall. [286]

The house was silent. The Beestons, brother and sister, either had not yet come down or were already in the dining-room. It seemed to Bab she heard remotely in that stillness a sustained murmur of voices. It was as if somewhere behind the closed doors of that house someone spoke, his speech broken and disjointed. But the important thing for the moment was that the way was clear. One last swift look Bab threw about her; then, her hand on the rail, she darted swiftly, silently, down the stairway. A moment later she had almost reached the door.

"Where are you going?" asked a voice.

It was Beeston. He had been sitting there all the time on watch. As Bab, a gasp escaping her, shrank back guiltily, the man's gnarled hands tightened themselves on the arms of the chair in which he sat, and he lurched heavily to his feet. She had never seen his face so menacing. His brows twitched as he gleamed at her from under them, and she saw his jaws work dryly together. His voice had not raised itself when he spoke, but low, restrained, it rang like a trumpet.

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"Going, were you—running away! Is that it?" A mirthless laugh, a sneer, left him. "Well, you're not going!"

His stick thumping the hardwood floor like a pavior's maul, he hobbled swiftly toward the door. Then, when he had interposed himself between it and Bab, he halted. His face, she saw, had no kindness for her, but in it, instead, was a look of fierce determination—the will of a remorseless, masterful man.

"I've heard what happened this evening," he snarled as Bab stared at him in silence. "I learned it a while ago. The business got away from me. That fellow Lloyd, my son-in-law, I warned long ago not to interfere with you; but I didn't think my daughter would dare oppose me. Never mind about that! What do I care who you are? You could be a drab out of the gutter for all I'm concerned. There's only one person in the world I care about—that's David! What he wants I want. That's what I'm here for; that's what my money's for! Listen, my girl; David wants you! D'ye hear me? It's you he wants and you he's going to have! You're going to marry him—do you understand?"

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He had drawn close to her, his murky eyes staring into the depths of hers, and Bab felt herself grow cold. But she did not give in. Now that she had made up her mind, in her resolution she might indeed have been a Beeston.

"No, I can't do that," she said.

Beeston threw her a thunderous look.

"What's that you say?"

"I said I couldn't marry him."

Again the fire flamed in his eyes.

"We'll see about that—can't, eh? Who says you can't?"

"I shall never marry him," she said doggedly. "Never!"

She saw then, as in a dream, the man's huge face draw near to hers, and his eyes, fastened on hers, narrowed each to a pinpoint of light, like sparks glowing among the dead gray embers of a hearth.

"Oh, that's it, is it?" he sneered, mocking her. "You're not going to marry him, eh? Do you think I'd have kept you here, a fraud like you, if I hadn't meant you should? I knew what you were long ago. I knew, too, that David loved you. That's why I didn't turn you into the street. Now listen! You know the man that did this forgery—that fellow Mapleson. He's been like a father to you, hasn't he?"



"It's you he wants and you he's going to have!"

"Yes, he's been a father to me," Bab answered. "Why do you wish to know?"

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"You think a heap of him, too, I shouldn't wonder?" Beeston continued, ignoring her question. "Come, speak up now; isn't that so?" As Bab nodded her assent a gleam of satisfaction leaped again into the old man's eyes.

"All right!" he growled. "That's what I wanted to know!" He bent nearer, his expression grim but triumphant. "You take your choice now, young woman! Marry David, or if you don't I'll put that fellow Mapleson in jail! Now make up your mind, my girl. I'll give you five minutes to decide."

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Dinner at Mrs. Tilney's was at half-past six. At half-past seven the last of the guests would be served and Lena, the waitress, slipslopping wearily from pantry to dining-room, would begin clearing away for the night. The clatter of dishes precariously piled upon her tray was an intimation to those who lingered that they had better hurry.

On a Monday night, a week after his visit to the Blairs' summer place at Eastbourne, half-past seven was striking when Varick pushed back his chair from the table and arose. Only Miss Hultz, the Jessups, and Mr. Backus, the Wall Street gentleman, remained. The others, having finished, had sought either the parlor or Mrs. Tilney's front steps. Miss Hultz arose with Varick. She and Mr. Backus planned that evening to take in a moving-picture show near-by on Eighth Avenue.

The lady from Bimberg's wore a smartly cut polka-dotted voile that set off well her abundant charms. Delicately brushing the crumbs from her lap, she bestowed on Varick a flashing smile. [291]

"I fancy we won't see much of you any more, Mr. V. Sorry to hear you're leaving us."

Varick looked astonished.

"I?"

"Why, yes," returned Miss Hultz, puzzled; "I heard you'd been promoted at the bank."

Varick had indeed again been promoted, the bank having made him assistant cashier of its uptown branch; but, as he explained to Miss Hultz, that didn't mean he was leaving Mrs. Tilney's.

"Well, it'd mean it with me," she rejoined with conviction. "I ain't saying anything against Mrs. Tilney's, of course; only you know"—a sapient smile accompanied this—"socially, boarding ain't to my idea. Give me something select—an apartment hotel, say; or, if you'd be real swagger, Riverside Drive with your own bath and kitchenette. I always wanted to be a bachelor girl," Miss Hultz concluded.

Varick agreed with her. Nothing, he assured her, could be sweller. Miss Hultz, having gathered up her key, her handkerchief, her handbag and her evening newspaper, favored him with another flashing smile, then departed. [292]

"The tray's ready, Mr. Varick," called Lena from the pantry door.

Varick thanked her, and was starting toward the pantry when Jessup, rising from his chair, touched him on the arm.

"How's the patient?" asked the bookkeeper. "Mapleson any better?"

Varick shook his head. Mr. Mapleson, he said, was still in bed. For a week now the little man had kept to his room. Either Lena or Mrs. Tilney carried up his meals during the day, and at night Varick volunteered. They none of them knew just what was wrong with Mr. Mapleson. He had refused to let a doctor see him.

Jessup frowned gravely.

"Any news?" he asked guardedly.

Guessing what he meant, Varick shook his head. Jessup ruminated. Since that night, now months ago, when he had divulged to Varick Mr. Mapleson's history, the bookkeeper had felt thoroughly uncomfortable about it. Never in his life had he willingly harmed a fellow-creature; and with a deep human understanding of the circumstances he pitied Mr. Mapleson with all his heart. It was for Bab, not for himself, Jessup knew, that the little man had done what he had. And for that very reason, too, Bab now was on the bookkeeper's mind. [293]

"She hasn't been here then?" he asked.

"No," returned Varick, "not yet."

Jessup, grunting, said no more. It was evident, though, that he had his own opinion of Bab. Hardly a flattering one apparently.

Varick, taking the tray from Lena, climbed the stairs to Mrs. Tilney's top floor. In the week that had passed since the afternoon when he had met Bab in the road at Eastbourne he had not seen her again, nor had he heard from her. But Mr. Mapleson had. The day Varick returned from Long Island a letter had come to him. It was after that that Mr. Mapleson had taken to his bed. It was a brief note, but brief though it was it had seemed to stun Mr. Mapleson.

Even Varick had been dismayed.

"Good-by," Bab had written. "They tell me I must never see you again. I know everything and I forgive you. Good-by."

That same morning, on his way downtown in the subway, Varick had read in his paper an announcement that to him seemed to make everything clear. [294]

The wedding of Miss Barbara Beeston and David Lloyd, it is announced, will take place at noon, June the twelfth, at Byewolde, the Beeston estate, Eastbourne, Long Island. Miss Beeston is a granddaughter of Peter Beeston, the financier. She and Mr. Lloyd are cousins. Only members of the immediate families will be present.

So she had taken him after all! All the days and the days that followed, through every moment of the passing hours, Varick had debated the matter. He was still debating it as he tapped on Mr. Mapleson's door. Bab had taken his advice, that was evident—his suggestion that she must decide for herself. But that she had not taken it in the way he hoped she would, Varick's air made evident. He did not blame her. He would not let himself even criticize what she had done. But he was disappointed bitterly—disappointed and surprised at the choice she had made.

Rich man, poor man,
Beggard man, thief;
Doctor, lawyer,
Merchant, chief!

Rich man the buttons had counted, that was all! At any rate, so Varick thought. [295]

Mr. Mapy never had looked more frail, more fragile than he did now lying in the white enameled iron bed on which for seventeen years he had slept. His eyes, deep sunk within their sockets, were bright with an unwonted fire; his face was drawn and peaked. So gaunt were his features and waxy white that, as he lay among the pillows, he had the semblance of a ghost. At Varick's entrance he looked up expectantly. The morning newspaper lay upon his bed. As Varick saw, it was opened at the page devoted to social news. Mr. Mapleson was twittering with excitement.

"Have you seen this?" he piped.

Varick set down the tray. In response to Mr. Mapleson's remark he nodded.

"She is to be married Wednesday," the little man cried, drawing in a sudden breath; "my little Bab's to be married!" Then, as if at a sudden thought, he propped himself up among the pillows. The exertion, slight as it was, had obviously tried his strength, and for a moment he could not speak. "I see it now," he cried when he caught his breath again. "That's why they kept her, isn't it? They wanted her to marry Lloyd!" [296]

Varick smiled.

"Oh, yes," he answered dryly, "that was why."

Mr. Mapleson seemed overwhelmed.

"Does she love him?" he exclaimed.

Varick busied himself with rearranging the dishes on the tray. Love David Lloyd? What had that to do with it? Wasn't she marrying him? He did not say this, however, to Mr. Mapleson. He did not say anything, in fact. But Mr. Mapleson was too occupied with his own thoughts to notice this.

"She'll be happy, don't you think?" he chirped.

"Happy?" echoed Varick.

"Why, you think so, don't you?" cried Mr. Mapleson, alarm in his voice. "Why shouldn't she be happy?" [297]

A faint color mounted into his peaked face. It was evident that a rising excitement fired the little man. Oblivious of how all this must hurt Varick, the man Bab once had loved, Mr. Mapleson gave vent to a sudden chuckle.

"Never mind the tray; I can't eat anything," he said feverishly; then he darted a glance at Varick. "Say!" he cried, his eyes unnaturally bright. "They won't turn her out now; they won't turn her out at all! Yes, and that ain't all either! If she marries that fellow she'll still have all that money! It's great, ain't it? Just think of it—she's going to have everything after all!"

Then with a deep sigh, his face radiant with a smile, he lay back among the pillows, his eyes closed. After an interval he spoke again.

"Well," he said, "even if I can't see her again, I'm happy, happy!" A long while afterward he spoke again.

"I'm happy," he whispered; "very happy!"

Late that night Varick came down the stairs and tapped at the door of Mrs. Tilney's bedroom. She arose hurriedly and, donning a dressing gown, went to open the door. Varick had his hat in his hand.

"We'll have to have a doctor, and a nurse too—I'll pay for them," he said. "Mr Mapleson's very ill, I'm afraid. And Mrs, Tilney," he added awkwardly, "send word to Bab again, won't you? Maybe she'll come if she knows how ill he is."

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The wedding was set for noon, Wednesday. Only two days remained now before the event, and already in the big Beeston house the preparations drew toward completion. The ceremony was to be performed in the library, a spacious, well-lighted room with tall French windows overlooking the terraced garden and the pool beneath the evergreens. Only the family and two or three of their most intimate friends were to be present; and the ceremony had at one time threatened to be even smaller. Incensed at the turn affairs had taken, David's parents had at first declined to lend their presence. Beeston, however, had attended to this. He had, indeed, attended to almost every detail. Meanwhile, with Miss Elvira to aid, Bab made ready.

It would be difficult to describe her sensations. After her interview in the hall with Beeston a dull apathy seemed to have settled over her. Beeston's threat had proved efficacious. Bab had given in to him, for there had seemed nothing else to do. She had not, however, struck her colors weakly. The conflict with Beeston had been a long one, and it was only when she had no strength left to fight on that she capitulated. Beeston's triumph was complete.

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His had been a clever stroke of diplomacy. Machiavelli himself could not have done better. Bab he might have threatened until doomsday, and she would have scoffed at him. For herself she had no fear of him, and Beeston knew it. Therefore, with an ingenious understanding of the situation, he had used the one possible means to bring her to her knees. Her heart like lead, she had gone back to her room upstairs. There the things still lay helter-skelter on her bed. Among them was Beeston's pearl. David's ring also was there. She was gazing at it hollow-eyed when a sound at the door came to her. Beeston had followed her. He stood for a moment in the doorway, gazing at the room's disorder, and then a lurking smile had lighted up his eyes. He had seen the ring, and that he knew who had given it to her was evident. Pointing to it with his stick, he grunted, and the grunt was almost friendly. The victor, it proved, meant to be kindly with the vanquished.

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"You put that ring on again," he begged rather than directed. Then he had stared at her, his eyes softening. "You understand, don't you?" he appealed. "You won't say anything to David to kill his happiness!"

Bab understood, and she gave Beeston her promise. Then she put on David's ring. It seemed to her to symbolize her submission. David, the morning after, cried out as he saw it on her finger. Then he had tried impulsively to draw Bab into his arms; but she quietly released herself.

"Wait, David—not now," she begged. Then she had looked up at him with a brave little smile. "I'm very tired. Let me have these next few days to myself, won't you?"

Humbly he had withdrawn, his face clouded sensitively. Again he had been too rough, too clumsy, he told himself.

How swiftly the next few days sped by only Bab could have said. Two days only now were left—forty-eight hours in all. This knowledge, even in her apathy, gave her a creeping dread. Her mind dwelt on the women she knew—girls, some of them—whom she had seen marry, not for love but for money. Had they, too, felt that dread? Or had the jingling of the coin stilled the hurt their honor felt? Bab often wondered.

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The Beeston motors were busy vehicles those last few days at Byewolde. Promptly at nine every morning, if it were fair, Beeston's big imported touring car rolled round to the door. If it rained, as once or twice it did, the limousine was there. Then, whatever the weather, Bab and Miss Elvira appeared promptly, and an hour later they were in town.

Bab had *carte blanche* to select what she wished for her trousseau. She was to spend what she liked. Miss Elvira in this assisted ably. Said she one morning: "I've never had a trousseau—which is no fault of mine! But there's this about it; if ever you're going to have your fling, have it now. I've never got over thinking how much I must have missed!"

Whether Miss Elvira knew what had occurred between Bab and her brother, Bab had no way of telling. That she knew of the fraud, however, was evident, though it seemed to make scant change in

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her demeanor. She was fond of Bab; and once fond of anyone, Miss Elvira was not the sort to change easily. Once, as they drove home through the dusk, Miss Elvira of a sudden had laid a hand on Bab's. Her craggy features for a moment were transfigured with a light Bab never before had seen there.

"I understand; I know, my child," she said, her voice suddenly thick. "Take courage, can't you?" Then she had gazed at Bab with a look of timid appeal. "Love him," she whispered. "Oh, my child, love David, won't you?" Though she did not answer, Bab's eyes had grown moist.

Laces, linens, embroideries—all by the dozen, by the box—that week came pouring into Byewolde. With conflicting, curious emotions Bab bought things and had them sent home. There were dresses, too, and wraps of all sorts. There were boxes of gloves, boxes of silk stockings, dainty bundles of lingerie. With all these things added to what she had already, her rooms were filled to overflowing. Bab, in spite of herself, felt her interest reawaken. The things were charming, the daintiest and the finest that could be bought. The result was that before long she began to have a pride in these fast-accumulating possessions. What interested her most of all was the linen, much of which there had even been time to embroider with her monogram. She saw herself, in the years to come, established in the life she already had learned to love. Money, luxury, power—all these had come to make their insidious appeal. The balm of dollars! The healing hyssop of ease! She did not love David, but some day he would have millions! Again she heard that inner, unacknowledged voice whisper to her conscience. She must live the life she'd accepted! There was no escape from it. So why not take David and all David offered, and be happy? To be sure, she was marrying neither for wealth nor for place, but because she had to. Just the same, if wealth, if place, were offered with the marriage, why not take them?

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Ten o'clock had just struck. A half-hour before this, Bab, pleading fatigue, had excused herself downstairs and, slipping up to her bedroom, had exchanged her dinner dress for a dressing gown. Her animation had for the moment revived. Humming lightly to herself, she was occupying her leisure by going over and rearranging the day's batch of purchases when her maid entered the room.

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"What is it, Mawson?" Bab asked.

"Another parcel, miss."

Bab glanced at the clock. She was astonished to receive anything at that hour.

"For me?" she exclaimed.

"It's a present, I think," volunteered the maid. "A man from Mr. Blair's just left it."

At the name Bab colored faintly. She knew, she thought, from whom that present had come. Since she had last seen Linda Blair a week had passed, yet Bab in that time had not forgotten a word of their interview. Silently she took the parcel from the maid. Mawson lingered, busying herself with the litter of paper, string and cardboard boxes on the floor. Bab gazed at the parcel in her hand, then as irresolutely she glanced at the Englishwoman.

"Never mind that, Mawson," she directed. "I'll ring when I need you."

When the maid had departed Bab slowly undid the wrappings. For years Linda had been the intimate companion, the playmate, of David, and Bab was curious to see now what sort of a wedding gift Linda would make the girl her friend was to marry. Linda she had always liked. In her loneliness now she wished she had been able to make Linda her friend. There was something substantial about her. She was a person, Bab knew, one could rely upon in a crisis.

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There was a cardboard box inside the paper. Bab opened it. Then, as her eyes fell on what was within, her face underwent a curious transformation. She could have laughed, but in her heart was no merriment. It had needed but a glance at the gift she had received to show her clearly the attitude of the sender. Indifference Linda could not have expressed more clearly. She had sent Bab a small silver bonbon dish and, considering all the means at her disposal, she could hardly have selected anything less personal, less friendly and intimate. The gift was costly enough. It was its significance that hurt Bab—the evident apathy it showed on the part

of the giver.

The reason for that apathy Bab knew only too well.

"Why are you marrying David?" Linda had inquired. Why, indeed? And if Linda were to hear the whole truth, what would she think then? What would she say were she able to read Bab's mind—to see that David's wealth had become a balm to cure Bab's wounded spirit?

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The silver bonbon dish slid unheeded to the floor, and for a long time she sat looking straight before her with eyes that now saw nothing of all the beautiful things that a few moments before had filled her thoughts. Then slowly she rose to her feet and began pacing the bedroom to and fro. She herself had once called Varick a fortune hunter; to think how the tables had now been turned on her. It wasn't true, of course, that she was marrying for money; but how would the world know that? She could not tell people she had married to save Mr. Mapleson from jail. If she did she would have to tell also the truth about herself. Her tongue was tied. She could not even defend herself. She must let the world think that she was like all those other women who had taken men just for their money. And Varick would think that too!

Here a dry sob broke from her. Flinging herself upon the piled-up mass of finery on her bed she lay, her face hidden among the pillows. If only he could know! If only once before her marriage she could see him, tell him the truth. She could not bear to have him think she had given herself for the money. But it was too late now. That afternoon, there in the road when she had left him, she knew he had finished with her. The look in his face had been enough to tell her that. At the thought a new despair came to her and the unutterable loneliness of her plight came over her anew. Everyone had left her, it seemed—everyone! Part of her bargain with Beeston was that she should renounce even those who had loved her. Varick was not the only one. She must not even see poor little Mr. Mapleson.

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Then, surging over her again and drowning out all other thoughts, came the remembrance that in two days now she was to marry a man she did not love!

Her mistress not having rung for her, at half-past eleven Mawson of her own accord tapped at the sitting-room door. There being no answer, she tapped at the bedroom door. Still getting no response, she opened the door and stepped in. The room was vacant, and in the center of the floor Bab's dressing gown lay in a heap. Beside it, too, were the mauve silk stockings and satin slippers that she had worn down to dinner. But Bab, it seemed, had vanished.

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It was after midnight; and at Mrs. Tilney's the household, at this hour usually plunged in slumber, had awakened to a hushed, subdued activity. Mr. Mapleson was dying.

It was about ten when Varick first had noted a change in him. For two hours Mr. Mapleson had lain among the pillows, his face passive, peaceful with a smile, and Varick had thought he slept. Then, as he looked up from the book he had brought to keep him company, he had seen Mr. Mapleson's eyelids flutter. His lips, too, moved as if he spoke.

"Anything I can get you?" asked Varick.

Mr. Mapleson did not appear to hear him. He seemed to be looking at something in the distance, and again his lips parted. Putting down his book, Varick bent over him.

"What is it, Mr. Mapleson?"

From a long way off came the little man's voice: "Keep step, John Mapleson. Keep step!"

Varick was puzzled. He laid a hand on Mr. Mapy's shoulder, and the little man quivered as if he had been struck. [311]

"Mr. Mapleson!" said Varick. "What is it?"

The slight figure on the bed stirred restlessly.

"Yes, that's me, John Mapleson, number 556, sir. Keeping step, ain't I? One, two! One, two!" Again he moved slightly.

Then Varick understood. In his dream, whatever it was, John Mapleson lived over again his life in prison. And Varick now realized, too, that he would not live it over very much longer. He gave the little man one more glance, then went hurrying down the stairs to Mrs. Tilney's door. The doctor had come immediately. One look at Mr. Mapleson told him the story, and in haste a nurse was summoned. Before midnight she was installed—a young, pleasant-faced girl, pretty in her crisp blue gingham dress and white cap and apron.

For two hours now Mrs. Tilney had been running up and down the stairs to Mr. Mapleson's door. She did not enter, however, until she had made sure the nurse had all she needed. Then she came in quietly and, with both hands resting on the foot piece of the little man's bed, Mrs. Tilney looked down at him. He was still unconscious. Varick, after a single glance at her, turned away. [312]

"Good-by, John," said Mrs. Tilney and that was all. The words came from her like a croak. One had only to glance at the gaunt, unlovely face to read in it all that went with that farewell. Godspeed she gave Mr. Mapleson, and God, one can be very sure, heard her. Varick followed her into the hall.

"Just what did that woman say—the one that came to the telephone?" he asked.

A single tear, the solitary expression of her feeling, stood in Mrs. Tilney's eye, and as she answered him she dried it with a corner of her sleeve.

"A servant answered," she replied—"a woman. What she said was that Bab couldn't come to the phone."

"Couldn't?" echoed Varick. "Do you think she really got the message?"

"I don't know," Mrs. Tilney answered. She gazed at Varick fixedly through her spectacles, then, as if she guessed the question in his mind, she added: "If Bab got that message Bab will come."

Varick did not venture to reply. He knew the circumstances, he thought. Bab, almost a Beeston now, would stick to Beeston's bargain. [313]

"She'll come," said Mrs. Tilney doggedly.

She turned toward the stairs, her shoulders drooping, her slippered feet slipslopping a muffled tattoo along the thinly carpeted hall. Just as she reached the stairhead she turned.

"If John Mapleson wants me," said Mrs. Tilney, "send down to the kitchen, Mr. Varick. I'm going down there to wait. If she comes I mean to be on hand to let her in."

Jessup was the next to climb the stairs. At Varick's behest the bookkeeper had gone to the drugstore near by on the Avenue for the things the nurse had wanted. Jessup, as he handed the package through the door, beckoned Varick into the hall.

"What do you think, Mr. Varick?" With a jerk of his thumb he indicated the street outside. "They're back again, those two fellows," he said; "they're watching from a doorway across the street."

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Varick frowned. It was the detectives whom Jessup meant, he knew. Why Beeston should send them now to watch John Mapleson, Varick could not guess. Was Mapleson, after all, to be sent to prison? Varick smiled. If so, Beeston came too late. He said this to Jessup.

"Yes, that's right," the latter assented. "Any news from her yet?" he asked then.

"No news."

Jessup's only response was a grunt. He had his own opinion of the affair. Mr. Mapleson, having risked everything for Bab, must bear now the brunt of it, dying dishonored and alone. Naturally Bab would not come. She was a Beeston now.

Time after that passed on laggard feet with Varick. Midnight had struck, and under the coverlid the small figure of Mr. Mapleson lay very still. Since that moment when he'd lived over once more his life in prison he had not spoken. Varick had remained with him. After Jessup went he stood beside the bed, looking down at the little man who lay upon it. The small, peaked face looked somehow peaceful. It seemed as if Mr. Mapleson had already suffered himself to rest.

"He's going very fast," said the young nurse quietly. "He must have been wasting away a long while now."

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Varick did not respond. A quick change, as fleeting as the blur of breath on a mirror, had crept all at once into Mr. Mapleson's expression. He strove as if to raise his head. Then Varick saw his lips faintly flutter. He bent over him. Manifestly the little man had something to say.

"What is it, Mr. Mapleson?" he asked.

The sick man's eyes still lay closed, but again the lips fluttered. His face was rapt.

"Spell *cat—c-a-t*," said Mr. Mapleson; and then: "Diamonds and pearls, Babbie! If you're going to be a lady Mr. Mapy must teach you to spell!" He smiled weakly.

The nurse looked at Varick inquiringly. Varick laid a finger on his lips.

"Oh, see the ox!" continued Mr. Mapleson. "Do you see the ox?"

Just then the door opened and Varick's heart leaped, filled in an instant to brimming with a passionate thankfulness and relief. Bab stood there. One instant she gazed at the picture before her. The next she was on her knees beside the bed. Varick signaled silently to the nurse to follow him into the hall.

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It was daylight when the lamp burned out. As the pink dawn of that bright June morning came lifting over the city roofs John Mapleson's soul was led from its cell, and for his crimes and misdemeanors was arraigned before that higher court—the final judgment seat. No need for him to plead "Guilty, my Lord!" for his crimes and misdemeanors were already known. And who can doubt that it was a lenient Judge he faced.

The light was rising, and the shrill sparrows under the eaves had begun to twitter volubly with the day when Bab came out into the hall and closed the door behind her. She had just crossed Mr. Mapy's pipelike arms upon his breast, but she did not weep. Instead, a smile like the morning hovered dreamily on her face. Her hand on the knob, she stood for a moment, then opened the door again.

"Good-by, dear!" she whispered. That was her parting with Mr. Mapleson.

Seeing Varick waiting in the hall, she went toward him unflinching.

"Bayard!" she said. "Oh, Bayard!"

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The next instant, his conscience dumb, all his good resolutions forgotten, Varick had her in his arms—was holding her to him.

"Bab, dearest!" he said.

Her eyes, through the mist that dimmed them, shone up at him like stars.

"You thought I'd come, didn't you?" she said. "You knew, didn't you, I'd never marry for money?"

Varick tried to reassure her.

"No, no, I want you to hear!" she said. "Don't you understand? I had to come!"

"Yes, I know," he murmured. "I knew you'd come if they'd let you."

"Oh, but you don't understand!" Bab protested. "That isn't it! I got to thinking of it all. I thought of you, and I knew what you'd think of me. I couldn't stand it any more. I had to see you and tell you, Bayard. I didn't know Mr. Mapy was dying and I was coming to get him. Then he and I were going away."

The cloud of wonder in Varick's eyes gave way to a sudden light.

"You mean you've given up David then? That you're not going to marry him?"

"Why, no!" said Bab. "That's why I ran away."

It was Lena, the waitress, disheveled and unkempt, who brought the situation to a climax.

"Oh, excuse me!" she exclaimed in conscious confusion at the tableau before her.

"What is it?" asked Varick.

"There'll be a couple of gentlemen in the parlor, sir," answered the blushing Lena. "They're asking for you."

At once Varick guessed who those callers were. He signaled Lena to silence and, opening the door of his room, gently pushed Bab inside. When he had closed the door again he turned to the astonished waitress.

"Who are they, Lena?" he asked, and Lena told him.

The men waiting downstairs were Beeston and David Lloyd.

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"You've come too late, Mr. Beeston," said Varick grimly as he closed the parlor door behind him. "John Mapleson is dead."

Facing him on the chair across the room Beeston sat with both his gnarled, knotted hands gripping the handle of his stick. His face was a mask, but from under his shaggy brows his eyes glinted like balefires. Varick could see, too, his jaws work dryly together. David stood beside him. Propped up on his crutches, he bent forward to peer at Varick, and never had he looked more frail, more sensitive. Varick's speech he had not seemed to hear. If he had he did not heed it.

"Bab—is she here?" he demanded eagerly.

She was upstairs, Varick told him; and at this statement he saw David gasp. Then David and his grandfather exchanged glances. A growl escaped Beeston.

"Well, I might have known!" he rumbled. "Trust to a woman to make a fool of herself! You go up and tell her we're ready now to go home." [320]

"Wait!" said David sharply. Varick, however, had had no intention of departing. He knew Bab never would return to that house down there on Long Island, but he was hardly prepared for what followed. "Don't call her—not yet," continued David thickly. Then he turned to his grandfather, smiling wearily. "That's all over," he said. "You know already what I've told you."

Another growl escaped Beeston's lips.

"Then the more fool you, that's all!" he grunted.

"Perhaps," David answered. He was still smiling as again he turned to Varick.

"We didn't come to get Bab, Bayard; I just came to make sure she was safe. She left no word when she went away last night from Eastbourne; but something told me she'd come here. I was too worried to wait. They wouldn't let me go at first, then I persuaded them. Grandfather said he'd come with me."

"Yes," said Beeston, and his lip curled; "I meant she should go back with us. She'd have gone, too, if I'd have had my way!"

One could not doubt it. His face told that. David laid a hand upon the old man's arm. [321]

"You mustn't speak of that," said he. "It was a cruel thing you did to her. It was cruel not to let me know too."

Varick guessed what he meant. He turned to look at Beeston; but Beeston, even at David's speech, had not flinched.

"Bayard," said David, "when I came here it was as I said—not to get Bab but to give her up. I'd begun to see things right. She didn't love me; I realize now she never did. It was her pity first, and because of that pity she was going to marry me. And then love, real love, got the better of her. It was only my grandfather's threat that made her stick to the bargain. She didn't want me; she didn't want me even with all my money. She couldn't help herself; that was what it was! She wanted the man she loved!"

Varick waited in silence, not knowing what to say. Beeston, his face a mask, sat opposite him with his eyes still fixed on Varick. He was not the kind to show emotion; but what his feelings must have been as he sat there hearkening to David's outpoured, frank admissions, one might well understand. David's eyes had sought the floor. Presently he raised them, and with an attempt at a laugh he shrugged his shoulders. "Well," he said, "I suppose I should have learned by now to take what's coming to me. I can't have things like other men—that's all there is to it. I'll just have to grin and bear it." In earnest of that he smiled now rather wistfully. "I'm just what I am, you know," he concluded. [322]

Varick, as he listened to his friend, forgot that the old man who sat opposite him, his lips curled now into a sneer, was his enemy. Beeston, it was evident, was a good hater. He was equally a softhearted, valorous partisan. It must have hurt him indeed to sit there and hear one of his blood cry peace. All this Varick realized. "Davy, don't!" he cried, and held out his hand to him. "I'm so sorry!" He stood there, one hand on the cripple's shoulder, the other clasping his hand. "Can't we still be friends?" he asked.

"Why, always," David answered; "why not?" He turned then to

Beeston. "Come, grandfather," he said. "It's time we were going."

Settling his crutches under his arms, he smiled at Varick, then plied his way out into the hall. Upstairs, with a premonition of what was happening below, Bab opened her door. She heard the murmur of their voices, and in them detected a familiar tone. She went swiftly to the stair. A moment later down the hall she heard the familiar thump! thump! of David's crutches. The sound grew fainter and finally died away as the door closed downstairs. Out of her hearing and out of her life David Lloyd had gone, thumping on his way alone.

A few minutes later Varick found her in her room, her head buried in her arms.

"Bab," he said, "look up at me." Obediently she raised her face. "It isn't the best man who's got you, dear; but I love you. I always have!"

She did not speak, but she raised her two hands and drew his face down to hers.

TRANSCRIBER'S NOTE:

- Obvious errors were corrected.
- A Table of Contents was not in the original work; one has been produced and added by Transcriber.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK RICH MAN, POOR MAN ***

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