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Mrs Parkington

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MRS PARKINGTON

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I

OUTSIDE the snow was falling, thickly in great wet flakes, so that the sound of the traffic on Park Avenue coming through the drawn curtains was muted and distant. Mrs Parkington, seated before her mirror with a half-pint of champagne by her side, thought how nice it was to have a Christmas this year which seemed like Christmas. True, to-morrow the snow would be turned to slush, discoloured by soot, and those great machines bought by the personable and bumptious mayor would be scooping it up and hauling it off to the North River; but snow – the mere idea of snow – was pleasant. Just the sight of it drifting down in soft white flakes through the bright auras of the street lights made you feel happy and content. And it summoned memories, very long memories, of the days when snow was not a nuisance in New York but brought out sleds and sleighs, and there was racing in the park, and the sound of sleigh-bells was heard everywhere in the city. Gus had loved the cutter racing; it suited his flamboyant nature. When one was eighty-four and in good health and spirits and had a half-pint of Lanson every evening just before dinner, one had a long memory. Long memories were perhaps common among widowed old ladies, but memories so crammed with romance and excitement as that of Mrs Parkington were rare.

She was doing her own hair, setting the waves exactly as they should be. She had always done her own hair and now, at eighty-four, she had no intention of giving it up. Ten years ago she had had it cut, not so much as a concession to fashion, as because it was simpler to do and less trouble to keep in order. She could not abide untidy women. Hair hanging down in strings at the nape of the neck implied some obscure weakness of character or an untidiness of mind.

She finished the last of the half-pint and suddenly called, 'Mattie! Mattie!'

At the sound of her voice there appeared out of the adjoining bedroom the stout figure of a woman in her late sixties. She had a curious figure, almost round, like the figures of those toys which return to an upright position no matter how often they are pushed over. In fact, Mattie resembled such a toy in a great many ways. Her face was plump and round and with a snub nose. Her grey hair was done severely in a knot at the nape of her neck. She was dressed neatly in a

grey dress with buttons down the front and a very full skirt. She was a Swede by birth, and she was altogether a remarkable woman. She was masseuse, hairdresser, secretary, and friend, and she knew with a devastating and intimate knowledge everything that had happened to Mrs Parkington during the forty-one years of close association.

'Yes, Mrs Parkington,' said Mattie.

'Tell Taylor to bring up another half-pint.'

Mattie looked at her silently for a moment. Then she said, 'Do you think it wise, Mrs Parkington? If you're having wine with dinner your acidity will be awful tomorrow. You'll be like a vinegar bottle.'

Mrs Parkington laughed, 'I won't have wine for dinner. Do as I say!'

'Very well, Mrs Parkington, only don't complain to me tomorrow. You know how you always feel after Christmas.'

The old woman did not answer her and Mattie went out and in a little while Mrs Parkington rose from the dressing-table and went into her own small sitting-room. She had a spare figure, very straight with very pretty hands and feet. She wore a black evening dress with a great deal of black lace to hide the thinness of her throat and shoulders and blue-veined wrists. Her eyes were remarkable, blue and very bright, like the surface of a mountain lake glittering in the sun.

The sitting-room was small and cluttered by a great deal of furniture, many books and photographs and *bibelots* on little tables. All the articles were obviously expensive, and a great many of them were ugly, but she was fond of each one of them. When she moved out of the great house on Fifth Avenue to make way for progress and a seventy-storey skyscraper, she had collected, for what Mattie described as the 'boodwar', the things which she wished to keep about her because of the happy or sentimental associations they had for her. This room was the result, cosy and cluttered but warm. There were objects out of the 'cosy corner' of the eighties and nineties, objects picked up during yachting expeditions in the Mediterranean and the Far East, two atrocious gilt chairs sold to her at a huge price as authentic sixty years ago before she learned about such things, a great many books, mostly obscure or forgotten novels in French and English, chosen not for their literary qualities but because they had attracted her by some character or incident; a chaise-longue, a long

'pier-glass' with an ornate frame, and countless photographs of yachting parties and picnics at Newport, and shooting parties in Scotland and Austria. Nearly all of them were group photographs, as if all her life had been spent among crowds. Scattered among them were a few portrait photographs – one of 'Major' Parkington, her deceased husband, one each of her two dead sons, William and Herbert, one of her daughter, the Duchess, a signed portrait of Edward VII as Prince of Wales, and one of the Princess, a daguerreotype, very yellowed and dimmed by age, of a sturdy-faced man standing with his hand on the shoulder of a small, pretty woman clad in a severe black dress with a collar of white lace. The daguerreotype stood on her desk, framed like a valuable miniature, in onyx and diamonds. It bore in a faded gold script across the bottom the legend, Forsythe and Wicks, portraits, Leaping Rock, Nevada. And there was a small old-fashioned photograph, which in its own onyx-and-diamond frame seemed to have a special importance, of a rather ugly but very chic woman sitting up very straight. Across the face of it, written in fading ink, was the inscription: *à ma Chère Amie Susie – Aspasia*.

Her granddaughter Madeleine – the one who chose a cowboy as her fourth husband – said the sitting-room looked like the nest of a pack-rat, but Mrs Parkington only laughed because very few people ever saw it, and in any case it had been a very long time since mockery or disapproval had had any power to touch her. Her sitting-room was her own, where she went when she wanted to be alone, in those moments when she felt impelled to withdraw from all the crumbling world about her and retire into the warmth of memories of the days when everything was pleasant and there seemed to be no trouble in the world.

As she came into the room she went straight to the old pier-glass and faced it to look at herself. The glass had long ago begun to show streaks and splotches from age, but she had never troubled to have it re-silvered. Now there was scarcely any reason to go to the trouble; it would last out her time, and afterwards no one would want it. It wasn't the sort of mirror which gained value with age; it was merely ugly, and no one would ever buy it save as a freak, the way people now bought ugly Victorian things because they were becoming smart.

It was an odd thing about fashion. She had lived to see countless fashions in furniture, in architecture, in dress. Some of the changes

she regretted, but on the whole it seemed to her that the taste of Americans had improved immensely and that the present fashions were not only beautiful but simple and practical as well.

She stood for a moment looking at herself in the streaked mirror, thinking: You are old and withered, but you've stood time better than the mirror. Both of you have seen a good deal. And that is something for which both of you should be thankful.

The face was indeed immensely wrinkled, with many fine lines which had come of living, sometimes recklessly, sometimes sensibly, always extravagantly; but the extravagance, she thought, was not her fault. There had always been money, so much of it that it had ceased to have any value. She had always had whatever she wanted simply for the asking. Nowadays they said this person or that one was rich, but they no longer knew what it was to be rich in the sense the Major had been rich. It had been an immense, almost incalculable wealth, with no income taxes to devour it before it ever reached you, no reason to calculate here and there how you were to pay taxes and still have what you wanted.

She was still a very rich old woman, and as she had grown older she had wanted less and less of luxury and show, and so in a way she was still as rich as she had always been. In some ways it was good to have less money; for one thing it gave her an excuse to get rid of that vast absurd château, set among shops and skyscrapers on Fifth Avenue without trees or parks or even a blade of grass near it. The Major had wanted her to live there until she died, and the children after her death, but he himself died before he knew what was happening to the world. He didn't live long enough to see this new America, with laws which would have put him in jail for life for the very acts which in his day had been called 'developing the resources of the country'. She had no illusions about her husband. He had built up a vast fortune, but at heart he had always been a bandit. She did even concede that perhaps, in his day, when there were so many of his kind in America, it had never occurred to him that he was a thief, a swindler, and a super confidence man.

There was a knock at the door and Mattie came in. In and out of her skirts, like animated bundles of silken feathers, ran Bijou and Mignon, the Pekingese, yapping and barking. Directly behind her came Taylor carrying on a silver tray another half-pint of champagne and a glass. He looked as he always did, dignified to the point of grim-

ness. He too had been with her for a long time, so long that his grimness and dignity sometimes filled her with a wild desire to laugh at him, considering how well they knew each other and how long they had been together. But she never did laugh because she knew that it would hurt him far more than any rebuke or sarcasm she might utter. Taylor had a frame and it was possible for him to live only so long as he kept within it. He was English, but even in England frames were beginning at last to be smashed.

He put down the tray on the table beside the chaise-longue and she said, 'Thank you, Taylor.'

He stood very stiffly, as if he, like Mattie, disapproved of the second small bottle. 'Is that all, madame?'

'That's all. No one has come yet?'

'No, madame.'

'I'll be down directly to look at the flowers.'

'I think they look very well, madame.'

'I'm sure they do, but the florists' men always make them too stiff and perfect.'

'Very well, madame.'

It was an old story – this business of the flowers. The florist, like Taylor, had a frame and he always wanted to stay within it. And his flowers looked that way. You knew by the way he arranged them that he was a vulgar man. He had no feeling for flowers. He liked a 'rich effect'. Taylor was the same way. Taylor had never become reconciled to giving up the pomp and importance of the big house. Vulgarly, Mrs Parkington reflected, was a strange thing, at once very simple and very complex. A few people were born with it. A great many learned by experience what it was and lost it. But most people were born vulgar and remained so to the end of their lives. And again there were so many varieties of vulgarity, not only ostentation, but hypocrisy and false simplicity, and pretentiousness ... well, she would think about all that another time. Commonness she liked. People who were common never suffered from the unforgivable sin of pretentiousness.

They would begin arriving for dinner soon and she wanted to be there to receive them. All her life she had been punctual, standing before the fire to welcome them as they came in. It was very important to have good manners and to be punctual; that was one of the things she had learned. If you had great beauty or genius you could afford to

be slack, but there was really no other excuse. And even that excuse was not a very good one.

She seated herself by the tray where Mattie was pouring out the champagne, skilfully as a waiter at the Paris Ritz. Mattie was really a remarkable woman. She knew how to do everything.

The two Pekingese jumped into Mrs Parkington's lap and licked her hands and she caressed them for a second, her wrinkled face softening with affection. A great many people didn't like Pekingese, especially men, but that was because they did not understand them ... that their courage and dignity and self-importance were too great for their small bodies and so they, like little men suffering the same lack of proportion, sometimes appeared to be merely boisterous and annoying.

She looked up at Mattie and said, 'You take that glass, Mattie, and fetch me my own out of the dressing-room.'

Mattie looked at her directly out of her blue, ageless Swedish eyes, a look of reproof.

'You know I never drink champagne, madame.'

The old woman laughed. 'Well, tonight you're going to drink it. It's Christmas night. We're going to drink as old friends and I want no nonsense.'

Mattie did not answer her but went quietly to fetch the other glass. Probably, thought Mrs Parkington, she thinks I'm growing childish, and perhaps I am. But no matter. She could accept that too, as she had accepted many things.

When Mattie returned they raised their glasses and Mrs Parkington said, 'Merry Christmas and Happy New Year.' And as she drank she thought – without fear or regret: I may not be here next year. She was no more alarmed at the thought of death than she was now of the tragedies she had encountered in her long life. She had had more than her share of them, so many tragedies and such violent ones that people sometimes said that she must be a woman with no heart to have endured and survived them. That was only because they did not understand; they did not know that through sorrow she had acquired peace and wisdom. Tonight, on Christmas night, she was quite ready to die, but she had a curious feeling that she must go on living because there was some new tragedy impending. It was not a new feeling – this sense of foreboding. She had had it before, many times, since that first occasion long ago when she knew that there was no use in searching

for her father and mother because they were already dead. The feeling of presentiment was very nearly infallible.

She put down her glass quickly and said, 'Well, there we are, Mattie. Another Christmas nearly over.' She crossed to the table and opened the jewel-case and took out her diamond necklace. 'Here Mattie, fasten it,' she said; 'it will make me feel brighter tonight.'

She needed the necklace just as she needed the extra glass of champagne. The prospect of meeting all the family wearied her. She could endure them separately but together they appalled her, all save her great-granddaughter Jane. The rest were dull, dull, dull. Oh, God, they were dull. Her granddaughter, Madeleine, it was true, sometimes made her laugh; Madeleine, with all her husbands and now her cowboy, was common and sexy, as if the Major had been born again in woman's clothing.

Now she would have to face them all again at the annual Christmas party which had been going on for thirty years. She was tired of her offspring and their offspring and their offspring's offspring. She had felt very detached from them for a long time now, as if they were connected to her only by a slender thread which might be snipped off at any time, leaving her free.

When Mattie had fastened the diamond necklace she said, 'Keep the dogs up here, Mattie. They make the Duchess nervous.'

Mattie said, 'Very good, madame.' And then suddenly, 'How is the Duchess, madame? It's been a long time since I've seen her.'

'Not much changed.'

It was odd how, although her daughter Alice had been married twice since her divorce from the Duke, she and Mattie and the whole family still called her the Duchess ... probably because Alice, even when she had had too much to drink, had dignity ... a kind of blank and meaningless tragic dignity. She was a period piece out of the nineties when rich American girls had married impecunious peers.

With a sigh Mrs Parkington went through the door Mattie held open for her. The servant did not close the door at once but stood in the open doorway watching until her mistress reached the lift and went inside, closing the door behind her. She still remained standing there, in an attitude of intense listening until she heard the elevator stop two floors below and heard Taylor open the door. Then she went inside the door of the boudoir to turn down the bed and put the dressing-table in order. Once during her work she paused and stood

looking at the photographs in the 'boodwar', and at last she picked up a small photograph of Mrs Parkington's two sons as boys. William must have been about seventeen at the time and Herbert about nineteen. They stood in front of the stables at Newport, each holding the bridle of a saddle-horse, dressed in the funny old-fashioned clothes of the opening of the century.

After a long time Mattie put down the photograph, sighed, and, turning, said, 'Come, Mignon! Come, Bijou! We'll go and have some supper.' But clearly she wasn't thinking of the dogs. Her round, well-polished face wore a look of pity and abstraction, as if she had lost herself in the maze of the long distant past.

In the small drawing-room, Mrs Parkington went from vase to vase of flowers, setting them right, giving each great luxurious bouquet a touch or pat, just enough to disarrange the florist's rigid pattern and restore to the blossoms their right to existence as flowers. She loved flowers, not only as things of beauty but as symbols of the country and the open air and nature itself, from which she had been shut away all too much by the very circumstances of her life.

This room was quite different from the 'pack-rat's nest' upstairs. It was a beautiful room, and she knew it was beautiful and secretly was proud of it as a kind of symbol of her own achievement – that she had begun life in a boarding-house in Leaping Rock, Nevada, passed through period after period of monstrous taste, and finally emerged with an extraordinary knowledge of periods and architecture and the history of painting and decoration. She had never had any education at all beyond learning to read and write and do sums, but all her life she had been clever and God had endowed her with a memory which never forgot anything. Now, at eighty-four, she spoke French and German and English and was an authority on many subjects. It was not schools which educated people: it was something inside themselves.

And it was not money alone which had made the beauty of this room, but knowledge and taste, things which could not, despite the Major's ideas to the contrary, be bought.

When she had finished with the flowers she went to the fireplace and stood beneath the Romney with her back to it enjoying the gentle warmth of the fire. The room before her seemed to her to have a kind of glow about it, of mahogany and jade and crystal and flowers.

Standing there she wondered who would be the first to arrive. She hoped it would not be 'the Duchess'. She felt ill at ease with her own daughter, as if the girl, who was herself now over sixty, were a stranger. And the sight of her was always distressing because Alice was a kind of symbol of a something which, even now, after forty-five years, still had the power of making her blush and feel ashamed.

She was disappointed, for in a moment Taylor opened the tall mahogany door and in his English statesman's voice, faintly deformed by the echo of a cockney youth, announced, 'Mrs Sanderson!' If Taylor had had his way, Mrs Parkington knew, he would have ignored Alice's other no less unfortunate marriages, and announced 'The Duchess de Brantès', but she had put an end to that snobbery long ago. Mrs Parkington thought it silly to announce the guests at a family dinner, but she had not the heart to deny Taylor a second pleasure and satisfaction.

Her daughter came in, dressed in a gown which the old woman thought, after the first glance, was much too young for her. Alice had never had any sense of choosing the proper clothes and she had stubbornly refused to allow anyone else to choose for her. She was wearing in her hair, above her sallow face, an absurd ornament of artificial flowers, sequins, and tulle. Only a young and beautiful woman could have carried it off, and Alice was neither. She looked like the Major's side of the house, big and touched by what the old lady felt must be a congenital and inherited blowziness. Her drinking contributed nothing towards greater neatness or chic. Her maid might send her out looking almost chic but very early in the course of the evening, sometimes even before she arrived at dinner, she began to go to pieces. Her hair grew untidy, her corsets slipped up, her stockings wrinkled. Lately she had taken to spilling things at table. It wasn't only Alice's congenital untidiness, Mrs Parkington knew; drink made it much worse. Only last week Alice had fallen off her chair during the music after dinner at the Desmonds.

Now, as her daughter crossed the room towards her, she watched for the signs. There were none. Alice seemed to be quite, as her father put it in the old days, 'on an even keel', but you could never tell how much she had had to drink in the bathroom out of the lotion bottle. She was like her father that way, too, but the Major had had a prodigious head. Mrs Parkington had seen him drink four times as much as the men around him who grew tipsy, without even showing any

signs. It was an accomplishment he had used in business deals to make for him millions of dollars.

Alice was quite near now. She embraced her mother, kissing her on the wrinkled cheek and saying, 'Merry Christmas, Mother.' Although she turned away her head, it was no good. There was a smell of spices on her breath.

'Merry Christmas,' said Mrs Parkington, 'and thank you for the lovely silver box.'

'It's old,' said Alice abruptly, 'Dutch, I should think. Is everyone coming tonight?'

'Everyone. It's the first time for years the whole family has been in New York at Christmas.'

Alice said, 'I want to see Madeleine's cowboy. She is certainly insatiable.'

'She's merely healthy and a little spoiled.'

'I hope he'll stand up under the strain better than the others. Madeleine's trouble is that she's congenitally moral. If she were more promiscuous and married less she wouldn't be in the papers so often.'

'Alice!' said Mrs Parkington.

'I only mean it in a kindly way. I hope he's good and strong, for Madeleine's sake.'

Talk of this sort always made Mrs Parkington uneasy. It was 'modern', she supposed, but she had never grown quite used to it, and she did not like cattiness in women. But she knew that Alice had some right to talk thus; she remembered Madeleine's own epithets 'the disappointed Duchess' and the 'bathroom drinker'. However, Mrs Parkington decided to veer away from the subject.

The Duchess sat down, wearily. You knew by the way she sat down that she was not only tired but bored, desperately bored. There was boredom in the weary eyelids, in the sagging throat. She had come to dinner because it was a ceremony, and because it was better than staying at home alone. Her mother, watching her, reflected even while they talked how extraordinary it was that a woman who had had so much wealth and so many opportunities in life, should have so few resources. Alice did not even enjoy reading, and she had no hobbies and was really interested in nothing whatever. It was extraordinary that she should seem older than her own mother.

There had never been much open sympathy or understanding between them. Mrs Parkington could never find any means of keeping

up a sustained conversation with her daughter. Their talk was always no more than a series of false starts which led nowhere. Now, in desperation, she said, 'What have you been doing lately?'

'Nothing much. I went to the opera on Friday in the Geraghty box.'

'Odd people. There was never as much ermine in the world as Mrs Geraghty wears.'

'I suppose she needs to assert herself in some way. Oceans of ermine is as good as any other way. At least you can *buy* ermine if you have enough money.'

Mrs Parkington made no reply. She had seen a great many Mrs Benjamin Franklin Geraghtys come and go in her time. She wasn't even bored by them any longer, because for a long time she had been quietly eliminating from her existence people who had to buy ermine in order to assert themselves. Of course you couldn't eliminate your own family entirely, no matter how much they bored you.

The Duchess opened her evening bag and brought out an enamelled box, from which she took a small pellet, swallowing it quickly. Her mother saw the action without seeing it, out of the corner of her eye, wondering what it was Alice was taking – drugs or breath scent or one of those new-fangled things. Then she heard Taylor's voice announcing Mr and Mrs Swann, and all her senses quickened at the prospect of seeing her granddaughter Madeleine's latest husband.

She scarcely noticed Madeleine herself, coming towards her in that enthusiastic way she had of being a whole herd of steers about to trample you. Some day, the old lady felt, Madeleine in one of her rushes would be unable to stop short and the results would be disastrous for someone. Her granddaughter was a big, coarse woman of thirty-nine, with bumptious good health and the appearance and manners of an aggressive cook.

The old lady's eyes were all for the husband, and when she saw him, she thought: Anyway, he's better than the Argentine or the other two. He's a man and he's hard, and maybe that's what Madeleine needs. They say little tough fellows like that are pretty good.

Madeleine did manage to pull up in time and gave her a heavy, rather wet, and very enthusiastic kiss on the cheek. Mrs Parkington was rather finicky and could not control a grimace of displeasure which Madeleine failed to notice as she said, with enthusiasm, 'This, Grandmother, is my husband Al.'

Al took her hand and said, 'How d'you do, ma'am?' And the old lady thought: A professional cowboy! A dude rancher! But his big hand, common and outsized for his small stature, a working-man's hand, was horny, and she noticed that even his dinner-jacket did not conceal that faintly protruding abdomen which cowboys, no matter how young or thin, acquired from long slouching in a Mexican saddle.

Her first reaction was that he was common – incredibly common – but Madeleine with her concentration of purpose, would not, of course, mind his commonness: on the contrary, with her strong tastes, she would doubtless find it an asset. He was spare, with a hatchet face, lined and leathery, but he had very nice eyes, very alive and blue, and a sensual but controlled mouth. The eyes and mouth made her like him.

'I'm very glad to know you,' she said, meaning it.

Then Madeleine presented him to the Duchess, who had been watching all the while with a faint glint of humour in the tired, heavy-lidded, over-made-up eyes.

Then Amory Stilham came in with his wife and son – the old lady's granddaughter and great-grandson. They came directly to her, and in her heart now she wanted nothing of them. With an effort she altered her features into a smile of welcome.

Helen, her granddaughter, was not at all like her sister, Madeleine. She was a thin, spare, nervous woman, with a mouth which sagged bitterly at the corners, as if she held a grudge against life because it had denied her something she wanted more than all the things which had been given her. You would have said that she had everything. She was married to one of the Stilhams, a big, handsome if stupid man, and she had wealth and a house in town and one in Westbury. She had horses and a yacht and two children, a boy and a girl. None the less, the thin mouth turned down at the corners. At times it turned down savagely.

Helen, it was true, was the only one in the family with brains – the kind of brains which could create or accomplish things, but she never seemed to accomplish anything more than to serve in a bored way on countless committees. There was no way of really communicating with Helen – Mrs Parkington had discovered that long ago. Helen gave the impression of living inside a shell, one of those shells which required a knife and biceps to open. Her handclasp was flabby.