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NO. 13

WASHINGTON SQUARE

CHAPTER I

THE GREAT MRS. DE PEYSTER

It was a raw, ill-humored afternoon, yet too late in the spring for the ministration of steam heat, so the unseasonable May chill was banished from Mrs. De Peyster's sitting-room by a wood fire that crackled in the grate; crackled most decorously, be it added, for Mrs. De Peyster's fire would no more have forgotten itself and shown a boisterous enthusiasm than would one of her admirably trained servants. Beside a small steel safe, whose outer shell of exquisite cabinet-work transformed that fortress against burglarious desire into an article of furniture that harmonized with the comfortable elegance of a lady's boudoir, sat Mrs. De Peyster herself—she was born a De Peyster—carefully transferring her jewels from the trays of the safe to leathern cases. She looked quite as Mrs. De Peyster should have looked: with an aura of high dignity that a sixty-year-old dowager of the first water could not surpass, yet with a freshness of person that (had it not been for her dignity) might have made her early forties seem a blossomy thirty-five.

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Before the well-bred fire sat a lady whose tears had long since dried that she had shed when she had bid good-bye to thirty. She was—begging the lady's pardon—a trifle spare, and a trifle pale, and though in a manner well enough dressed her clothes had an air of bewilderment, of general irresolution, as though each article was uncertain in its mind as to whether it purposed to remain where it had been put, or casually wander away on blind and timorous adventures.

A dozen years before, Mrs. De Peyster, then in the fifth year of her widowhood, had graciously undertaken to manage and underwrite the début of her second cousin (not of the main line, be

it said) and had tried to discharge her duty in the important matter of securing her a husband. But her efforts had been futile, and to say that Mrs. De Peyster had not succeeded was to admit that poor Olivetta Harmon was indeed a failure. She had lacked the fortune to attract the conservative investor who is looking for a sound business proposition in her he promises to support; she had lacked the good looks to lure on the lover who throws himself romantically away upon a penniless pretty face; and she had not been clever enough to attract the man so irrationally bold as to set sail upon the sea of matrimony with a woman of brains. And so, her brief summer at an end, she had receded to those remote and undiscovered shores on which dwell the poor relations of the Four Hundred; whereon she had lived respectably, [pg 3] as a lady (for that she should ever appear a lady was due the position of Mrs. De Peyster), upon an almost microscopic income; and from which bleak and distant land of second-cousindom she came in glad and proud obedience to fill an occasional vacant place at one of Mrs. De Peyster's second-best dinner parties.

She had arrived but the moment before to bid her exalted cousin adieu and wish her *bon-voyage*, and was now silently gazing in unenvious admiration at the jewels Mrs. De Peyster was transferring to their traveling-cases—with never a guess that perturbation might exist beneath her kinswoman's composed exterior. As a matter of fact, under the trying circumstances which confronted Mrs. De Peyster, any other household would have been in confusion, any lesser woman might have been headed toward hysteria. But centuries of having had its own will had established the De Peyster habit of believing that things would eventuate according to the De Peyster wish; it was not in the De Peyster blood to give way. And yet, though self-control might restrain worry from the surface, it could not banish it from the private chambers of her being.

Mrs. De Peyster glanced at the open door of her bedroom—hesitated—then called: "Miss Gardner!"

A trim and pretty girl stepped in. "Yes, Mrs. De Peyster."

"Will you please call up Judge Harvey's office [pg 4] once more, and inquire if there is any news about my son. And ask when Judge Harvey will be here."

Miss Gardner crossed to Mrs. De Peyster's desk and took up the telephone.

"Why, Cousin Caroline, has Jack —"

"One moment, Olivetta," — motioning toward the telephone, —
"until Miss Gardner is through."

They sat silent until the receiver was hung up. Mrs. De Peyster strove to keep anxiety from her voice.

"Well, Miss Gardner, — any trace of my son yet?"

"They have learned nothing whatever."

"And — and Judge Harvey? When will he be here?"

"His office said he was at a meeting of the directors of the New York and New England Railroad, and that he was coming here straight after the meeting."

"Thank you, Miss Gardner. You may now go on with the packing. I'll have the jewels ready very shortly, and Matilda will be in to help you as soon as she is through arranging with the servants."

"Why, Cousin Caroline, what is it about Jack?" burst out Olivetta with an excited flutter after Miss Gardner had gone into the bedroom. "I hadn't heard anything of it before! Has — has anything happened to him?"

Olivetta, an intimate, a relative, and a worshipful inferior, was one of the few persons with whom Mrs. [pg 5] De Peyster could bring herself to unbend and be confidential. "That is what I do not know. About a week ago Jack suddenly disappeared —"

"Disappeared!"

"Oh, he left a note, telling me not to worry. But not a word has been heard from him since. Of course, it may only be some wild escapade, but then he knew we were going on shipboard this evening, and he should have been home long before this."

"How terrible!" cried the sympathetic Olivetta, pushing into place a few of the inconstant hairpins that threatened to bestrew the floor. "Went a week ago!" And then suddenly: "Why, that was about the

time that first rumor was printed of his engagement to Ethel Quintard. And again this morning—in the 'Record'—did you see it?"

"I never give thought to the newspapers," was Mrs. De Peyster's somewhat stiff response.

"You have—have told the police?"

"The police, of course not! But I have advised with Judge Harvey, and he has a firm of private detectives on the case."

"And they have clues?"

"They have nothing, as you just heard Miss Gardner report."

"Cousin Caroline! With all these—these thugs and hold-up men we read about—and all the accidents—"

"Olivetta! Don't!" And then in a more composed voice: "I am hoping it is merely some boyish [pg 6] prank. But even that will be bad enough, if he misses the boat."

"Yes, I see. You told me about arranging with Mrs. Quintard also to sail on the Plutonia."

"I had counted on the trip—Jack and Ethel being thrown together, you know."

"Indeed, it was very clever of you!"

"I am hoping it may be only some boyish prank," Mrs. De Peyster repeated. "You may not have noticed it, Olivetta," she continued, permitting a sigh to escape her, "but of late Jack has acted at times—well, rather queerly."

"Queerly! How?"

"He has been far from being himself. In fact, I have observed a number of things not at all natural to a De Peyster."

"Caroline! What a worry he must be to you!"

"Yes. But I am hoping for the best. And now, please, we will say no more about it."

They were silent for a moment. Miss Gardner entered, took the jewels which in the mean time Mrs. De Peyster had finished putting

in their cases, and went again into the bedroom. Olivetta's eyes followed her.

"You are still pleased with Miss Gardner?"

"Thus far she has proved herself competent. I consider myself very fortunate in finding a secretary who is not above some of the duties of a lady's maid. It is a very happy combination for traveling."

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"She seems almost too good to be true," mused Olivetta. "She's really very pretty. I hope Jack hasn't—"

"Olivetta! How can you! Jack has never paid her the slightest attention, nor she him."

"Pardon me, Caroline! But she's so pretty, and she's just the sort of girl who attracts men—and—and"—a bit wistfully—"gets engaged and gets married."

"Nonsense, Olivetta. When she first came to me I asked her if she were in love or engaged. She said she was not, and I told her my rules. She is a very sensible girl."

"At any rate, she must be a great relief after that Marie you had."

Mrs. De Peyster flushed, as though at some disagreeable memory.

"Have you learned yet whether Marie was actually a spy for Mrs. Allistair?" inquired Olivetta.

"She confessed that she was getting money besides the wages I paid her. That is proof enough."

"I believe it of Mrs. Allistair! She wouldn't stop at anything to win your place as social leader. But she could never fill it!"

"She will never win it!" Mrs. De Peyster returned with calm confidence.

At that moment the door from the hallway opened and there entered a woman of middle age, in respectable dull-hued black, with apron of black silk and a white cap.

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"Ah, Matilda," remarked Mrs. De Peyster. "The servants, are they all gone yet?"

"The last one, the cook, is just going, ma'am. There's just William and me left. And the men have already come to board up the windows and the door."

"You paid the servants board wages as I instructed, and made clear to them about coming to Newport when I send orders?"

"Yes, ma'am. And they all understand."

"Good," said Mrs. De Peyster. "You have Mr. Jack's trunks packed?"

"All except a few things he may want to put in himself."

"Very well. You may now continue helping Miss Gardner with my things."

But Matilda did not obey. She trembled—blinked her eyes—choked; then stammered:—

"Please, ma'am, there's—there's something else."

"Something else?" queried Mrs. De Peyster.

"Yes, ma'am. Downstairs there are six or seven young men from the newspapers. They want—"

"Matilda," interrupted Mrs. De Peyster in stern reproof, "you are well enough acquainted with my invariable custom regarding reporters to have acted without referring this matter to me. It is a distinct annoyance," she added, "that one cannot make a single move without the newspapers following one!"

"Indeed it is!" echoed the worshipful and indignant [pg 9] Olivetta. "But that is because of your position."

"I tried to send them away," said Matilda hurriedly. "And I told them you were never interviewed. But," she ended helplessly, "it didn't do any good. They're all sitting downstairs waiting."

"I shall not see them," Mrs. De Peyster declared firmly.

"There was one," Matilda added timorously, "who drew me aside and whispered that he didn't want an interview. He wants your picture."

"Wants my picture!" exclaimed Mrs. De Peyster.

"Yes, ma'am. He said the pictorial supplement of his paper a week from Sunday was going to have a page of pictures of prominent society women who were sailing for Europe. He said something about calling the page 'Annual Exodus of Social Leaders.' He wants to print that painting of you by that new foreign artist in the center of the page." And Matilda pointed above the fireplace to a gold-framed likeness of Mrs. De Peyster—stately, aloof, remote, of an ineffable composure, a masterpiece of blue-bloodedness.

"You know my invariable custom; give him my invariable answer," was Mrs. De Peyster's crisp response.

"Pardon me, but—but, Cousin Caroline," put in Olivetta, with eager diffidence, "don't you think this is different?"

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"Different?" asked Mrs. De Peyster. "How?"

"This isn't at all like the ordinary offensive newspaper thing. A group of the most prominent social leaders, with you in the center of the page—with you in the center of them all, where you belong! Why, Caroline,—why—why—" In her excitement for the just glorification of her cousin, Olivetta's power of speech went fluttering from her.

"Perhaps it may not be quite the same," admitted Mrs. De Peyster. "But I see no reason for departing from my custom."

"If not for your own sake, then—then for the artist's sake!" Olivetta pursued, a little more eagerly, and a little more of diffidence in her eagerness. "You have taken up M. Dubois—you have been his most distinguished patron—you have been trying to get him properly started. To have his picture displayed like that, think how it will help M. Dubois!"

Mrs. De Peyster gave Olivetta a sharp look, as though she questioned the entire disinterestedness of this argument; then she considered an instant; and in the main it was her human instinct to help a struggling fellow being that dictated her decision.

"Matilda, you may give the man a photograph of the picture. And as I treat the papers without discrimination, you may give photo-

graphs to all the reporters who wish them. But on the understanding that M. Dubois is to have conspicuous credit."

"Very well, ma'am."

"And send all of them away."

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"I'll do what I can, ma'am." And Matilda went out.

"What time does the Plutonia sail?" inquired Olivetta, with the haste of one who is trying to get off of very thin ice.

"At one to-night. Matilda will get me a bit of dinner and I shall go aboard right after it."

"How many times does this make that you've been over?"

"I do not know," Mrs. De Peyster answered carelessly. "Thirty or forty, I dare say."

Olivetta's face was wistful with unenvious envy. "Oh, what a pleasure!"

"Going to Europe, Olivetta, is hardly a pleasure," corrected Mrs. De Peyster. "It is a duty one owes one's social position."

"Yes, I know that's true with you, Cousin Caroline. But with me—what a joy! When you took me over with you that summer, we only did the watering-places. But now"—a note of ecstatic desire came into her voice, and she clasped her hands—"but now, to see Paris!—the Louvre!—the Luxembourg! It's the dream of my life!"

Mrs. De Peyster again gave her cousin a suspicious look.

"Olivetta, have you been allowing M. Dubois to pay you any more attention?"

"No, no,—of course not," cried Olivetta, and a sudden color tinted the too-early autumn of her cheeks. "Do you think, after what you said—"

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"M. Dubois is a very good artist, but—"

"I understand, Cousin Caroline," Olivetta put in hastily. "I think too much of your position to think of such a thing. Since you – since then – I have not spoken to him, and have only bowed to him once."

"We will say no more about it," returned Mrs. De Peyster; and she kissed Olivetta with her duchess-like kindness. "By the by, my dear, your comb is on the floor."

"So it is. It's always falling out."

Olivetta picked it up, put it into place, and with nervous hands tried to press into order loose-flying locks of her rather scanty hair.

Mrs. De Peyster arose; her worry about her missing son prompted her to seek the relief of movement. "I think I shall take a turn about the house to see that everything is being properly closed. Would you like to come with me?"

Olivetta would; and, talking, they went together down the stairs. As they neared the ground floor, Matilda's voice arose to them, expostulating, protesting.

"What can that be about?" wondered Mrs. De Peyster, and following the voice toward its source she stepped into her reception-room. Instantly there sprang up and stood before her a young man with the bland, smiling, excessively polite manner of a gentleman-brigand. And around her crowded five or six other figures.

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Matilda, pressing through them, glared at these invaders in helpless wrath, then at her mistress in guilty terror.

"I – I did my best, ma'am. But they wouldn't go." And before punishment could fall she discreetly fled.

"Pardon this seeming intrusion, Mrs. De Peyster," the foremost young man said rapidly, smoothly, appeasingly. "But we could not go, as you requested. The sailing of Mrs. De Peyster, under the attendant circumstances, is a piece of news of first importance; in fact, almost a national event. We simply had to see you. I trust you perceive and appreciate our professional predicament."

Mrs. De Peyster was glaring at him with devastating majesty.

"This – this is an outrage!"

"Perhaps it may seem an outrage to you," said the young man swiftly, politely, and thoroughly undevastated. "But, really, it is only our duty. Our duty to our papers, and to the great reading public. And when newspaper men are doing their duty they must necessarily fail, to their great personal regret, in the observance of some of the nicer courtesies."

Mrs. De Peyster was almost inarticulate.

"Who— who are you?"

"Mayfair is my name. Of the 'Record.'"

"The 'Record'! That yellow, radical paper!"

Mr. Mayfair stepped nearer. His voice sank to an easy, confidential tone.

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"You are misled by appearances, Mrs. De Peyster. Every paper has got to have a policy; we're the common people's paper—big circulation, you know; and we so denounce the rich on our editorial page. But as a matter of fact we give our readers more live, entertaining, and respectful matter about society people than any other paper in New York. It's just what the common people love. And now"—easily shifting his base—"about this reported engagement of your son and Miss Quintard. As you know, it's the best 'romance in high life' story of the season. Will you either confirm or deny the report?"

"I have nothing whatever to say," flamed out Mrs. De Peyster. "And will you leave this house instantly!"

"Ah, Miss Quintard's mother would not deny it either," commented Mr. Mayfair with his polite imperturbability. His sharp eyes glinted with satisfaction. Young Mr. Mayfair admired himself as being something of the human dynamo. Also it was his private opinion that he was of the order of the super-reporter; nothing ever "got by him." "And so," he went on without a pause, "since the engagement is not denied, I suppose we may take it as a fact. And now"—again with his swift change of base—"may I ask, as a parting word before you sail, whether it is your intention next season to contest with Mrs. Allistair—"