

woman leaned still further over the rail, trying to keep the little black spot in sight, but soon, so very soon, it was such a long way away that she couldn't even be sure that it was there at all.

After a time, another woman came out on deck. This one was thin and bony and wore glasses. She saw the first woman and walked over to her.

'So *there* you are,' she said.

The fat woman turned and looked at her, but said nothing.

'I've been searching for you,' the bony one continued. 'Searching all over the ship.'

'It's very strange,' the fat woman said. 'A man jumped off the deck just now, with his clothes on.'

'Nonsense!'

'Oh, yes. He said he wanted to get some exercise, and he jumped in and didn't even take his clothes off.'

'You'd better come down now,' the bony woman said. Her mouth had suddenly become firm, her whole face sharp, and she spoke less kindly than before. 'And don't you ever go wandering about on deck alone like this again. You know you're meant to wait for me.'

'Yes, Maggie,' the fat woman answered, and again she smiled, a kind, trusting smile, and she took the hand of the other one and allowed herself to be led away across the deck.

'Such a nice man,' she said. 'He waved to me.'

## Mrs Bixby and the Colonel's Coat

Mr and Mrs Bixby lived in a smallish flat somewhere in New York City. Mr Bixby was a dentist, who earned an average income. Mrs Bixby was a big, active woman with a wet mouth. Once a month, always on Friday afternoons, Mrs Bixby would get on the train at Pennsylvania Station and travel to Baltimore to visit her old aunt. She would spend the night with the aunt and return to New York City on the following day, in time to cook supper for her husband. Mr Bixby accepted this arrangement good-naturedly. He knew that Aunt Maude lived in Baltimore, and that his wife was very fond of the old lady, and certainly it would be unreasonable to refuse either of them the pleasure of a monthly meeting.

'But you mustn't ever expect me to come too,' Mr Bixby had said in the beginning.

'Of course not, darling,' Mrs Bixby had answered. 'After all, she's not *your* aunt. She's mine.'

So far, so good.

As it turned out, though, the aunt was only a convenient excuse for Mrs Bixby. The real purpose of her trips was to visit a gentleman known as the Colonel, and she spent the greater part of her time in Baltimore in his company. The Colonel was very wealthy. He lived in an attractive house on the edge of the town. He had no wife and no family, only a few loyal servants, and in Mrs Bixby's absence he amused himself by riding his horses and hunting.

Year after year, this pleasant friendship between Mrs Bixby and the Colonel continued without a problem. They met so rarely – twelve times a year is not much when you think about it – that there was little or no chance of their growing bored with one

another. The opposite was true: the long wait between meetings made them fonder, and each separate occasion became an exciting reunion.

Eight years went by.

It was just before Christmas, and Mrs Bixby was standing on the station in Baltimore, waiting for the train to take her back to New York. This particular visit which had just ended had been more than usually pleasant, and Mrs Bixby was feeling cheerful. But then the Colonel's company always made her feel cheerful these days. The man had a way of making her feel that she was a rather special woman. How very different from her dentist husband at home, who only succeeded in making her feel that she was a sufferer from continuous toothache, someone who lived in the waiting room, silent among the magazines.

'The Colonel asked me to give you this,' a voice beside her said. She turned and saw Wilkins, one of the Colonel's servants, a small man with grey skin. He pushed a large, flat box into her arms.

'Good heavens!' she cried. 'What a big box! What is it, Wilkins? Was there a message? Did he send me a message?'

'No message,' the servant said, and he walked away.

As soon as she was on the train, Mrs Bixby carried the box into the Ladies' Room and locked the door. How exciting this was! A Christmas present from the Colonel. She started to undo the string. 'I'll bet it's a dress,' she thought. 'It might even be two dresses. Or it might be a whole lot of beautiful underclothes. I won't look. I'll just feel around and try to guess what it is. I'll try to guess the colour as well, and exactly what it looks like. Also, how much it cost.'

She shut her eyes and slowly lifted off the lid. Then she carefully put one hand into the box. There was some paper on top; she could feel it and hear it. There was also an envelope or card of some sort. She ignored this and began feeling under the

paper, her fingers reaching out delicately.

'My God!' she cried suddenly. 'It can't be true!'

She opened her eyes wide and looked at the coat. Then she seized it and lifted it out of the box. The thick fur made a wonderful noise against the paper and when she held it up and saw it hanging to its full length, it was so beautiful it took her breath away.

She had never seen mink like this before. It *was* mink, wasn't it? Yes, of course it was. But what a beautiful colour! The fur was almost pure black. At first, she thought it *was* black; but when she held it closer to the window, she saw that there was a touch of blue in it as well, a deep rich blue. But what could it have cost? She hardly dared to think. Four, five, six thousand dollars? Possibly more.

She just couldn't take her eyes off it. Nor, for that matter, could she wait to try it on. Quickly she slipped off her own plain red coat. She was breathing fast now, she couldn't help it, and her eyes were stretched very wide. But, oh God, the feel of that fur! The great black coat seemed to slide onto her almost by itself, like a second skin. It was the strangest feeling! She looked into the mirror. It was wonderful. Her whole personality had suddenly changed completely. She looked wonderful, beautiful, rich and sexy, all at the same time. And the sense of power that it gave her! In this coat she could walk into any place she wanted and people would come running around her like rabbits. The whole thing was just too wonderful for words!

Mrs Bixby picked up the envelope that was still lying in the box. She opened it and pulled out the Colonel's letter:

*I once heard you saying that you were fond of mink so I got you this. I'm told it's a good one. Please accept it with my sincere good wishes as a parting present. For my own personal reasons I shall not be able to see you any more. Goodbye and good luck.*

Well!

Imagine that!

Just when she was feeling so happy.

No more Colonel.

What a terrible shock.

She would miss him terribly.

Slowly, Mrs Bixby began stroking the soft black fur of the coat.

She had lost one thing but gained another.

She smiled and folded the letter, meaning to tear it up and throw it out of the window. But while she was folding it, she noticed that there was something written on the other side:

*Just tell them that nice generous aunt of yours gave it to you for Christmas.*

The smile on Mrs Bixby's face suddenly disappeared.

'The man must be crazy!' she cried. 'Aunt Maude doesn't have that sort of money. She couldn't possibly give me this.'

But if Aunt Maude didn't give it to her, then who did?

Oh God! In the excitement of finding the coat and trying it on, she had completely ignored this important detail.

In a few hours she would be in New York. Ten minutes after that she would be home, and her husband would be there to greet her; and even a man like Cyril, living in the dark world of tooth decay and fillings and root treatments, would start asking a few questions if his wife suddenly walked in from a weekend wearing a six-thousand-dollar mink coat.

'You know what I think,' she told herself. 'I think that Colonel has done this on purpose just to drive me crazy. He knew perfectly well that Aunt Maude didn't have enough money to buy this. He knew I wouldn't be able to keep it,' she told herself.

But the thought of parting with it now was more than Mrs Bixby could bear.

'I've got to have this coat!' she said out loud. 'I've got to have this coat! I've got to have this coat!'

Very well, my dear. You shall have the coat. But don't worry. Sit still and keep calm and start thinking. You're a clever girl, aren't you? You've tricked him before. The man has never been able to see much further than the end of his own instruments. So sit completely still and *think*. There's lots of time.

Two and a half hours later, Mrs Bixby stepped off the train at Pennsylvania Station and walked quickly out into the street. She was wearing her old red coat again now and was carrying the box in her arms. She signalled for a taxi.

'Driver,' she said, 'do you know of a pawnbroker that's still open around here?'

The man behind the wheel looked back at her, amused.

'There are plenty of them in this area,' he answered.

'Stop at the first one you see, then, will you please?' She got in and was driven away.

Soon the taxi stopped outside a pawnbroker's shop.

'Wait for me, please,' Mrs Bixby said to the driver, and she got out of the taxi and entered the shop.

'Yes?' the owner said from a dark place in the back of the shop.

'Oh, good evening,' Mrs Bixby said. She began to untie the string around the box. 'Isn't it silly of me? I've lost my handbag, and as this is Saturday, all the banks are closed until Monday and I've simply got to have some money for the weekend. This is quite a valuable coat, but I'm not asking much. I only want to borrow enough on it to help me until Monday.'

The man waited and said nothing. But when she pulled out the mink and allowed the beautiful thick fur to fall over the counter, he came over to look at it. He picked it up and held it out in front of him.

'If only I had a watch on me or a ring,' Mrs Bixby said, 'I'd give you that instead. But I don't have a thing with me except this

coat.' She spread out her fingers for him to see.

'It looks new,' the man said, stroking the soft fur.

'Oh, yes, it is. But, as I said, I only want to borrow enough money to help me until Monday. How about fifty dollars?'

'I'll lend you fifty dollars.'

'It's worth a hundred times more than that, but I know you'll take good care of it until I return.'

The man went over to a drawer and brought out a ticket and placed it on the counter. The ticket had a row of small holes across the middle so that it could be torn in two, and both halves were exactly the same.

'Name?' he asked.

'Leave that out. And the address.'

She saw the man pause, and she saw the pen waiting over the dotted line.

'You don't *have* to put the name and address, do you?'

The man shook his head and the pen moved on down to the next line.

'It's just that I'd rather not,' Mrs Bixby said. 'It's purely personal.'

'You'd better not lose this ticket, then.'

'I won't lose it.'

'Do you realize that anyone who gets hold of this ticket can come in and claim the coat?'

'Yes, I know that.'

'What do you want me to put for a description?'

'No description either, thank you. It's not necessary. Just put the amount I'm borrowing.'

The pen paused again, waiting over the dotted line beside the word 'Description'.

'I think you ought to put a description. A description is always a help if you want to sell the ticket. You never know, you might want to sell it sometime.'

'I don't want to sell it.'

'You might have to. Lots of people do.'

'Look,' Mrs Bixby said. 'I'm not poor, if that's what you mean. I simply lost my bag. Don't you understand?'

'It's your coat,' the man said.

At this point, an unpleasant thought struck Mrs Bixby. 'Tell me something,' she said. 'If I don't have a description on my ticket, how can I be sure that you'll give me back the coat and not something else when I return?'

'It goes in the books.'

'But all I've got is a number. So actually, you could hand me any old thing you wanted, isn't that so?'

'Do you want a description or don't you?' the man asked.

'No,' she said. 'I trust you.'

The man wrote 'fifty dollars' opposite the word 'Value' on both parts of the ticket, then he tore it in half down the middle and gave one half to Mrs Bixby. Then he gave her five ten-dollar notes. 'The interest is three per cent a month,' he said.

'All right. Thank you. You'll take good care of it, won't you?'

The man said nothing.

Mrs Bixby turned and went out of the shop onto the street where the taxi was waiting. Ten minutes later, she was home.

'Darling,' she said as she bent over and kissed her husband. 'Did you miss me?'

Cyril Bixby laid down the evening newspaper and looked at the watch on his wrist. 'It's twelve and a half minutes past six,' he said. 'You're a bit late, aren't you?'

'I know. It's those terrible trains. Aunt Maude sent you her love as usual. I need a drink. What about you?'

Her husband folded his newspaper neatly and went over to the drinks' cupboard. His wife remained in the centre of the room, watching him carefully, wondering how long she ought to wait. He had his back to her now, bending forward to measure the

drinks. He was putting his face right up close to the measurer and looking into it as though it were a patient's mouth.

'See what I've bought for measuring the drinks,' he said, holding up a measuring glass. 'I can get it to the nearest drop with this.'

'Darling, how clever.'

I really must try to make him change the way he dresses, she told herself. His suits are just too silly. There had been a time when she thought they were wonderful, those old-fashioned jackets and narrow trousers, but now they simply seemed silly. You had to have a special sort of face to wear things like that, and Cyril just didn't have it. It was a fact that in the office he always greeted female patients with his white coat unbuttoned so that they could see his clothes beneath; in some strange way this was clearly meant to give the idea that he was a bit of a ladies' man. But Mrs Bixby knew better. It meant nothing.

'Thank you, darling,' she said, taking the drink and seating herself in an armchair with her handbag on her knees. 'And what did *you* do last night?'

'I stayed on in the office and did some work. I got my accounts up to date.'

'Now, really, Cyril, it's time you let other people do your paperwork for you. You're much too important for that sort of thing.'

'I prefer to do everything myself.'

'I know you do, darling, and I think it's wonderful. But I don't want you to get too tired. Why doesn't that Pulteney woman do the accounts? That's part of her job, isn't it?'

'She does do them. But I have to decide on the prices first. She doesn't know who's rich and who isn't.'

'This drink is perfect,' Mrs Bixby said, setting down her glass on the side table. 'Quite perfect.' She opened her bag as if to look for something. 'Oh, look!' she cried, seeing the ticket. 'I forgot

to show you this! I found it just now on the seat of my taxi. It's got a number on it, and I thought it might be worth having, so I kept it.'

She handed the small piece of stiff brown paper to her husband, who took it in his fingers and began examining it closely, as if it were a problem tooth.

'You know what this is?' he said slowly.

'No, dear, I don't.'

'It's a pawn ticket.'

'A what?'

'A ticket from a pawnbroker's. Here's the name and address of the shop.'

'Oh dear, I *am* disappointed. I was hoping it might be a ticket for a horse race or something.'

'There's no reason to be disappointed,' Cyril Bixby said. 'As a matter of fact this could be rather amusing.'

'Why could it be amusing, darling?'

He began explaining to her exactly how a pawn ticket worked and particularly that anyone possessing the ticket could claim whatever it was. She listened patiently until he had finished.

'You think it's worth claiming?' she asked.

'I think it's worth finding out what it is. You see this figure of fifty dollars that's written here? Do you know what it means?'

'No, dear, what does it mean?'

'It means that the thing in question is almost certain to be something quite valuable.'

'You mean it'll be worth fifty dollars?'

'More like five hundred.'

'Five hundred!'

'Don't you understand?' he said. 'A pawnbroker never gives you more than about a tenth of the real value.'

'Good heavens! I never knew that.'

'There's a lot of things you don't know, my dear. Now you

listen to me. As there's no name and address of the owner . . .'

'But surely there's something to say who it belongs to?'

'Not a thing. People often do that. They don't want anyone to know they've been to a pawnbroker. They're ashamed of it.'

'Then you think we can keep it?'

'Of course we can keep it. This is now *our* ticket.'

'You mean *my* ticket,' Mrs Bixby said firmly. 'I found it.'

'My dear girl, what *does* it matter? The important thing is that we are now in a position to go and claim it any time we like for only fifty dollars. How about that?'

'Oh, what fun!' she cried. 'I think it's very exciting, especially when we don't even know what it is. It could be *anything*, isn't that right, Cyril? Anything at all!'

'Certainly it could, although it's most likely to be either a ring or a watch.'

'But wouldn't it be wonderful if it were something really valuable?'

'We can't know what it is yet, my dear. We shall just have to wait and see.'

'I think it's wonderful! Give me the ticket and I'll rush over early on Monday morning and find out!'

'I think I'd better do that.'

'Oh no!' she cried. 'Let *me* do it!'

'I think not. I'll collect it on my way to work.'

'But it's *my* ticket! *Please* let me do it, Cyril! Why should *you* have all the fun?'

'You don't know these pawnbrokers, my dear. You could get cheated.'

'I wouldn't get cheated, honestly I wouldn't. Give the ticket to me, please.'

'Also you have to have fifty dollars,' he said, smiling. 'You have to pay out fifty dollars in cash before they'll give it to you.'

'I've got that,' she said. 'I think.'

'I'd rather you didn't handle it, if you don't mind.'

'But Cyril, I *found* it. Whatever it is, it's mine, isn't that right?'

'Of course it's yours, my dear. There's no need to get so annoyed about it.'

'I'm not. I'm just excited, that's all.'

'I suppose you haven't thought that this might be something particularly male. It isn't only women that go to pawnbrokers, you know.'

'In that case, I'll give it to you for Christmas,' Mrs Bixby said generously. 'With pleasure. But if it's a woman's thing, I want it myself. Is that agreed?'

'That sounds very fair. Why don't you come with me when I collect it?'

Mrs Bixby was about to say yes to this, but stopped herself just in time. She had no wish to be greeted like an old customer by the pawnbroker in her husband's presence.

'No,' she said slowly. 'I don't think I will. You see, it'll be even more exciting if I stay here and wait. Oh, I do hope it isn't going to be something that neither of us wants.'

'You've got a point there,' he said. 'If I don't think it's worth fifty dollars, I won't even take it.'

'But you said it would be worth five hundred.'

'I'm quite sure it will. Don't worry.'

'Oh, Cyril, I can hardly wait! Isn't it exciting?'

'It's amusing,' he said, slipping the ticket into his jacket pocket. 'There's no doubt about that.'

Monday morning came at last, and after breakfast Mrs Bixby followed her husband to the door and helped him on with his coat.

'Don't work too hard, darling,' she said. 'Home at six?'

'I hope so.'

'Are you going to have time to go to that pawnbroker?' she asked.

'My God, I forgot all about it. I'll take a taxi and go there now. It's on my way.'

'You haven't lost the ticket, have you?'

'I hope not,' he said, feeling in his jacket pocket. 'No, here it is.'

'And you have enough money?'

'Yes.'

'Darling,' she said, standing close to him and straightening his tie, which was perfectly straight. 'If it happens to be something nice, something you think I might like, will you telephone me as soon as you get to the office?'

'If you want me to, yes.'

'You know, I'm hoping it'll be something for you, Cyril. I'd much rather it was for you than for me.'

'That's very generous of you, my dear. Now I must hurry.'

About an hour later, when the telephone rang, Mrs Bixby was across the room so fast she had the receiver to her ear before the first ring had finished.

'I've got it!' he said.

'You have! Oh, Cyril, what was it? Was it something good?'

'Good!' he cried. 'It's wonderful! You wait until you see this! You'll faint!'

'Darling, what is it? Tell me quickly.'

'You're a lucky girl, that's what you are.'

'It's for me, then?'

'Of course it's for you, though I can't understand how the pawnbroker only paid fifty dollars for it. Someone's crazy.'

'Cyril! Tell me! I can't bear it!'

'You'll go crazy when you see it.'

'What is it?'

'Try to guess.'

Mrs Bixby paused. Be careful, she told herself. Be very careful now.

'A diamond ring,' she said.

'Wrong.'

'What then?'

'I'll help you. It's something you can wear.'

'Something I can wear? You mean like a hat?'

'No, it's not a hat,' he said, laughing.

'Cyril! Why don't you tell me?'

'Because I want it to be a surprise. I'll bring it home with me this evening.'

'No you won't!' she cried. 'I'm coming right down there to get it now!'

'I'd rather you didn't do that.'

'Don't be silly, darling. Why shouldn't I come?'

'Because I'm too busy. I'm half an hour behind already.'

'Then I'll come in the lunch hour. All right?'

'I'm not having a lunch hour. Oh, well, come at 1.30 then, while I'm having a sandwich. Goodbye.'

At half past one exactly, Mrs Bixby arrived at Mr Bixby's place of business and rang the bell. Her husband, in his white dentist's coat, opened the door himself.

'Oh, Cyril, I'm so excited!'

'So you should be. You're a lucky girl, did you know that?' He led her down the passage and into his room.

'Go and have your lunch, Miss Pulteney,' he said to his secretary, who was busy putting instruments away. 'You can finish that when you come back.' He waited until the girl had gone, then he walked over to a cupboard that he used for hanging up his clothes and stood in front of it, pointing with his finger. 'It's in there,' he said. 'Now – shut your eyes.'

Mrs Bixby did as she was told. Then she took a deep breath and held it, and in the silence that followed she could hear him opening the cupboard door, and there was a soft sound as he pulled something out from among the other things hanging there.

'All right! You can look!'

'I don't dare to,' she said, laughing.

'Go on. Have a look.'

She opened one eye just a little, just enough to give her a dark misty view of the man standing there in his white coat holding something up in the air.

'Mink!' he cried. 'Real mink!'

At the sound of the magic word she opened her eyes quickly, and at the same time she actually started forward in order to seize the coat in her arms.

But there was no coat. There was only a stupid little fur neckpiece hanging from her husband's hand.

'Just look at that!' he said, waving it in front of her face.

Mrs Bixby put a hand up to her mouth and started backing away. I'm going to scream, she told herself. I just know it. I'm going to scream.

'What's the matter, my dear? Don't you like it?' He stopped waving the fur and stood looking at her, waiting for her to say something.

'Why, yes,' she said slowly. 'I . . . I . . . think it's . . . it's lovely . . . really lovely.'

'It quite took your breath away for a moment, didn't it?'

'Yes, it did.'

'Very good quality,' he said. 'Fine colour, too. Do you know how much this would cost in a shop? Two or three hundred dollars at least.'

'I don't doubt it.'

There were two skins, two narrow dirty-looking skins with their heads still on them and little feet hanging down. One of them had the end of the other in its mouth, biting it.

'Here,' he said. 'Try it on.' He leaned forward and hung the thing around her neck, then stepped back to admire it. 'It's perfect. It really suits you. It isn't everyone who has mink, my dear.'

'No, it isn't.'

'You'd better leave it behind when you go shopping or they'll all think we're rich and start charging us double.'

'I'll try to remember that, Cyril.'

'I'm afraid you mustn't expect anything else for Christmas. Fifty dollars was rather more than I was going to spend.'

He turned away and went over to the sink and began washing his hands. 'Go and buy yourself a nice lunch now, my dear. I'd take you out myself, but I've got old man Gorman in the waiting room. There's a problem with his false teeth.'

Mrs Bixby moved towards the door.

I'm going to kill that pawnbroker, she told herself. I'm going right back there to the shop this very minute and I'm going to throw this dirty neckpiece right in his face, and if he refuses to give me back my coat I'm going to kill him.

'Did I tell you that I was going to be late home tonight?' Cyril Bixby said, still washing his hands. 'It'll probably be at least 8.30 the way things look at the moment. It may even be nine.'

'Yes, all right. Goodbye.' Mrs Bixby went out, banging the door shut behind her.

At that moment, Miss Pulteney, the secretary, came sailing past her down the passage on her way to lunch.

'Isn't it a beautiful day?' Miss Pulteney said as she went by, flashing a smile. She was walking in a very proud and confident manner, and she looked like a queen, just exactly like a queen in the beautiful black mink coat that the Colonel had given to Mrs Bixby.