

The Way up to Heaven

All her life, Mrs Foster had had such a strong fear of missing a train, a plane, a boat or even the start of a play that her fear was almost an illness. In other respects, she was not a particularly nervous woman, but just the thought of being late on occasions like these would throw her into a terrible state. As a result, a small muscle in the corner of her left eye would begin to tremble. It was not very much, but the annoying thing was that the problem refused to disappear until an hour or so after the train or plane – or whatever it was – had been safely caught.

It is really strange how in certain people a simple fear about a thing like catching a train can grow into serious anxiety. At least half an hour before it was time to leave the house for the station, Mrs Foster would step out of the lift all ready to go, and then, as she was unable to sit down, she would move about from room to room until her husband, who must have known about her state of mind, finally joined her and suggested in a cool dry voice that perhaps they had better go now, had they not?

Mr Foster may possibly have had a right to be annoyed by this silliness of his wife's, but he could have had no excuse for increasing her anxiety by keeping her waiting unnecessarily. It is not, of course, certain that this is what he did, but whenever they were going somewhere, his timing was so exact – just a minute or two late, you understand – and his manner so calm that it was hard to believe that he was not purposely causing pain to the unhappy lady. He must have known that she would never dare to call out and tell him to hurry. He had trained her too well for that. He must also have known that if he was prepared to wait just a little longer than was wise, he could make her nearly crazy. On one or two special occasions in the

later years of their married life, it seemed almost as though he had *wanted* to miss the train, simply to increase the poor woman's suffering.

If the husband *was* guilty, what made his behaviour doubly unreasonable was the fact that, with the exception of this one small weakness, Mrs Foster was, and always had been, a good and loving wife. For over thirty years, she had served him loyally and well. There was no doubt about this. Even she knew it, and although she had for years refused to let herself believe that Mr Foster would ever consciously hurt her, there had been times recently when she had begun to wonder.

Mr Eugene Foster, who was nearly seventy years old, lived with his wife in a large six-floor house in New York City, on East 62nd Street, and they had four servants. It was a dark, cheerless place, and few people came to visit them. But on this particular morning in January, the house had come alive and there was a great deal of activity. One servant was leaving piles of dustsheets in every room, while another was covering the furniture with them. The butler was bringing down cases and putting them in the hall. The cook kept coming up from the kitchen to have a word with the butler, and Mrs Foster herself, in an old-fashioned fur coat and a black hat, was running from room to room and pretending to organize these operations. Actually, she was thinking of nothing at all except the fact that she was going to miss her plane if her husband didn't come out of his study soon and get ready.

'What time is it, Walker?' she asked the butler as she passed him.

'It's ten minutes past nine, madam.'

'And has the car come?'

'Yes, madam, it's waiting. I'm just going to put the luggage in now.'

'It takes an hour to get to the airport,' she said. 'My plane leaves

at eleven. I have to be there half an hour before that to check in. I shall be late. I just *know* I'm going to be late.'

'I think you have plenty of time, madam,' the butler said kindly. 'I warned Mr Foster that you must leave at 9.15. There's still another five minutes.'

'Yes, Walker, I know, I know. But get the luggage in quickly, will you, please?'

She began walking up and down the hall, and whenever the butler came by, she asked him the time. This, she kept telling herself, was the *one* plane she must not miss. It had taken months to persuade her husband to allow her to go. If she missed it, he might easily decide that she should forget the whole thing. And the trouble was that he was determined to go to the airport with her to say goodbye.

'Dear God,' she said out loud, 'I'm going to miss it. I know, I know, I *know* I'm going to miss it.' The little muscle beside the left eye was trembling violently now. The eyes themselves were very close to tears.

'What time is it, Walker?'

'It's eighteen minutes past, madam.'

'Now I really *will* miss it!' she cried. 'Oh, I wish he would come!'

This was an important journey for Mrs Foster. She was going all alone to Paris to visit her daughter, her only child, who was married to a Frenchman. Mrs Foster did not like the Frenchman very much, but she was fond of her daughter, and, more than that, she had developed a great desire to see her three grandchildren. She knew them only from the many photographs that she had received and that she kept putting up all over the house. They were beautiful, these children. She loved them, and each time a new picture arrived she would carry it away and sit with it for a long time, examining it lovingly and searching the small faces for signs of that old satisfying blood likeness that meant so much.

And now, recently, she had come more and more to feel that she did not really wish to end her days in a place where she could not be near these children, and let them visit her, and take them for walks, and buy them presents, and watch them grow. She knew, of course, that it was wrong and in a way disloyal to have thoughts like these while her husband was still alive. She knew also that although he was no longer active in business, he would never agree to leave New York and live in Paris. It was extremely surprising that he had ever agreed to let her fly over there alone for six weeks to visit them. But, oh, how she wished she could live there always, and be close to them!

'Walker, what time is it?'

'Twenty-two minutes past, madam.'

As he spoke, a door opened and Mr Foster came into the hall. He stood for a moment, looking carefully at his wife, and she looked back at him – at this small but neat old man with the large bearded face.

'Well,' he said, 'I suppose perhaps we'd better go soon if you want to catch that plane.'

'Yes, dear – *yes!* Everything's ready. The car's waiting.'

'That's good!' he said. With his head over to one side, he was watching her closely.

'Here's Walker with your coat, dear. Put it on,' she said.

'I'll be with you in a moment,' he said. 'I'm just going to wash my hands.'

She waited for him, and the tall butler stood beside her, holding the coat and the hat.

'Walker, will I miss it?'

'No, madam,' the butler answered. 'I think you'll catch it all right.'

Then Mr Foster appeared again, and the butler helped him to put on his coat. Mrs Foster hurried outside and got into the hired car. Her husband came after her, but he walked down the steps

slowly, pausing halfway to look up at the sky and to smell the cold morning air.

'It looks a bit foggy,' he said as he sat down beside her. 'And it's always worse out there at the airport. I shouldn't be surprised if the flight can't take off.'

'Don't say that, dear – *please*.'

They didn't speak again until the car had crossed over the river to Long Island.

'I arranged everything with the servants,' Mr Foster said. 'They're all going away today. I gave them half-pay for six weeks and told Walker I'd write to him when we wanted them back.'

'Yes,' she said. 'He told me.'

'I'll move into the club tonight. It'll be a nice change, staying at the club.'

'Yes, dear. I'll write to you.'

'I'll call in at the house occasionally to see that everything's all right and to collect the mail.'

'But don't you really think Walker should stay there all the time to look after things?' she asked nervously.

'Nonsense. It's quite unnecessary. And I'd have to pay him full wages.'

'Oh, yes,' she said. 'Of course.'

'What's more, you never know what people do when they're left alone in a house,' Mr Foster announced, and with that he took out a cigarette and lit it with a gold lighter.

She sat still in the car, with her hands held tightly together.

'Will you write to me?' she asked.

'I'll see,' he said. 'But I doubt it. You know I don't like letter-writing unless there's something particular to say.'

'Yes, dear, I know. So don't trouble yourself.'

They drove on, and as they came nearer to the flat land on which the airport was built, the fog began to thicken and the car had to slow down.

'Oh, dear!' cried Mrs Foster. 'I'm *sure* I'm going to miss it now! What time is it?'

'Stop worrying,' the old man said. 'It doesn't matter. They never fly in this sort of weather. I don't know why you came out at all.'

She could not be sure, but it seemed to her that there was suddenly a new note in his voice, and she turned to look at him. It was difficult to notice any change in his expression under all that hair.

'Of course,' he went on, 'if by any chance it *does* go, then I agree with you – you'll be certain to miss it now. Why don't you get used to the idea?'

She turned away and looked through the window at the fog. It seemed to be getting thicker as they went along, and now she could only just see the edge of the road. She knew that her husband's eyes were still on her. She looked at him again, and this time a wave of terror swept over her as she noticed that his eyes were fixed on the little place in the corner of her eye where she could feel the muscle trembling.

'Won't you?' he said.

'Won't I what?'

'Be sure to miss it now if it goes? We can't drive fast in this fog.'

He didn't speak to her any more after that. The car drove slowly on and on. The driver had a yellow lamp directed onto the edge of the road, and this helped him to keep going. Other lights, some white and some yellow, kept coming out of the fog towards them, and there was an especially bright one that followed close behind them all the time.

Suddenly the driver stopped the car.

'There!' Mr Foster cried. 'We're stuck. I knew it.'

'No, sir,' the driver said, turning round. 'This is the airport.'

Without a word, Mrs Foster jumped out and hurried through the main entrance into the building. There was a crowd of people

inside, mostly unhappy passengers standing around the ticket counters. She pushed her way through and spoke to the clerk.

'Yes,' he said. 'Your flight has been delayed. But please don't go away. We're expecting this weather to clear at any moment.'

She went back to her husband, who was still sitting in the car, and told him the news. 'But don't wait, dear,' she said. 'There's no sense in that.'

'I won't,' he answered, 'as long as the driver can get me back. Can you get me back, driver?'

'I think so,' the man said.

'Is the luggage out?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Goodbye, dear,' Mrs Foster said, leaning into the car and giving her husband a small kiss on the rough grey fur of his cheek.

'Goodbye,' he answered. 'Have a good trip.'

The car drove off, and Mrs Foster was left alone.

The rest of the day was like a bad dream. She sat for hour after hour on a seat as close to the airline desk as possible, and every thirty minutes or so she got up and asked the clerk if the situation had changed. She always received the same reply – that she must continue to wait, because the fog might blow away at any moment. It was not until after six in the evening that it was announced that the flight had been delayed until eleven o'clock the next morning.

Mrs Foster did not quite know what to do when she heard this news. She stayed sitting on her seat for at least another half-hour, wondering, in a tired sort of way, where she might go to spend the night. She hated to leave the airport. She didn't wish to see her husband. She was frightened that in one way or another he would, in the end, manage to prevent her from getting to France. She would have liked to remain just where she was, sitting on the seat all night. That would be the safest. But she was already very

tired, and it did not take her long to realize that this was a stupid thing for an old lady to do. So in the end she went to a phone and called the house.

Her husband, who was on the point of leaving for his club, answered it himself. She told him the news, and asked whether the servants were still there.

'They've all gone,' he told her.

'In that case, dear, I'll just get myself a room somewhere for the night. And don't worry yourself about it at all.'

'That would be silly,' he said. 'You've got a large house available here. Use it.'

'But, dear, it's *empty*.'

'Then I'll stay with you myself.'

'There's no food in the house. There's nothing.'

'Then eat before you come in. Don't be so stupid, woman! Everything you do, you seem to want to make a problem out of it.'

'Yes,' she said. 'I'm sorry. I'll get myself a sandwich here, and then I'll come home.'

Outside, the fog had cleared a little, but it was still a long, slow drive in the taxi, and she did not arrive back at the house on 62nd Street until fairly late.

Her husband came out of his study when he heard her coming in. 'Well,' he said, standing by the door, 'how was Paris?'

'We leave at eleven in the morning,' she answered. 'It's definite.'

'You mean, if the fog clears.'

'It's clearing now. There's a wind coming up.'

'You look tired,' he said. 'You must have had an anxious day.'

'It wasn't very comfortable. I think I'll go straight to bed.'

'I've ordered a car for the morning,' he said. 'Nine o'clock.'

'Oh, thank you, dear. And I certainly hope you're not going to go to the trouble of coming all the way out again to see me off.'

'No,' he said slowly. 'I don't think I will. But there's no reason

why you shouldn't drop me at the club on your way.'

She looked at him, and at that moment he seemed to be standing a long way off from her. He was suddenly so small and far away that she couldn't be sure what he was doing, or what he was thinking, or even what he was.

'The club is in the city centre,' she said. 'It isn't on the way to the airport.'

'But you'll have plenty of time, my dear. Don't you want to drop me at the club?'

'Oh, yes – of course.'

'That's good. Then I'll see you in the morning at nine.'

She went up to her bedroom on the second floor, and she was so tired that she fell asleep soon after she lay down.

Next morning, Mrs Foster was up early, and by 8.30 she was downstairs and ready to leave.

Shortly after nine, her husband appeared. 'Did you make any coffee?' he asked.

'No, dear. I thought you'd get a nice breakfast at the club. The car is here. It's been waiting. I'm all ready to go.'

They were standing in the hall – they always seemed to be meeting in the hall these days.

'Your luggage?'

'It's at the airport.'

'Ah, yes,' he said. 'Of course. And if you're going to take me to the club first, I suppose we'd better go fairly soon, hadn't we?'

'Yes!' she cried. 'Oh, yes – *please!*'

'I'm just going to get a packet of cigarettes. I'll be with you in a moment. You get in the car.'

She turned and went out to where the driver was standing, and he opened the car door for her.

'What time is it?' she asked him.

'About 9.15.'

Mr Foster came out five minutes later, and watching him as he

walked slowly down the steps, she noticed that his legs were like goat's legs in those narrow trousers that he wore. As on the day before, he paused halfway down the steps to smell the air and to examine the sky. The weather was still not quite clear, but there was a little sun forcing its way through the mist.

'Perhaps you'll be lucky this time,' he said as he settled himself beside her in the car.

'Hurry, please,' she said to the driver. 'Please start the car. I'm late.'

'*Just a moment!*' Mr Foster said suddenly. 'Wait a moment, driver, will you?'

'What is it, dear?' She saw him searching the pockets of his overcoat.

'I had a little present I wanted you to take to Ellen,' he said. 'Now, where is it? I'm sure I had it in my hand as I came down.'

'I never saw you carrying anything. What sort of present?'

'A little box wrapped up in white paper. I forgot to give it to you yesterday. I don't want to forget it today.'

'A little box!' Mrs Foster cried. 'I never saw any little box!' She began hunting feverishly in the back of the car.

Her husband continued searching through the pockets of his coat. Then he unbuttoned the coat and felt around in his jacket.

'I must have left it in my bedroom. I won't be a moment.'

'Oh, *please!*' she cried. 'We haven't got time! *Please* leave it! You can post it to her. It's only one of those silly combs in any case. You're always giving her combs.'

'And what's wrong with combs, may I ask?' he said, angry that she should have lost her temper for once.

'Nothing, dear, I'm sure. But . . .'

'Stay here!' he commanded. 'I'm going to get it.'

'Be quick, dear! Oh, *please* be quick!'

She sat still, waiting and waiting.

'Driver, what time is it?'

The man looked at his watch. 'Nearly 9.30.'

'Can we get to the airport in an hour?'

'Just about.'

At this point, Mrs Foster suddenly spotted a corner of something white down in the crack of the seat on the side where her husband had been sitting. She reached over and pulled out a small paper-wrapped box, and at the same time she couldn't help noticing that it was stuck down there very firmly and deep, as if with the help of a pushing hand.

'Here it is!' she cried. 'I've found it! Oh, dear, and now he'll be up there for ever, searching for it! Driver, quickly – run in and call him down, will you please?'

The driver did not care very much for any of this, but he got out of the car and went up the steps to the front door. Then he turned and came back. 'The door's locked,' he announced. 'Have you got a key?'

'Yes – wait a minute.' She began hunting in her bag. Her little face was tight with anxiety. 'Here it is! No – I'll go myself. It'll be quicker. I know where he'll be.'

She hurried out of the car and up the steps to the front door, slid the key into the keyhole, and was about to turn it – and then she stopped. Her head came up, and she stood there completely still. She waited – five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten seconds. From the way she was standing there, it seemed as if she were listening for a sound that she had heard a moment before from a place far away inside the house.

Yes – quite clearly she was listening. She appeared actually to be moving one of her ears closer and closer to the door. Now it was right up against the door, and for another few seconds she remained in that position, head up, ear to door, hand on key, about to enter but not entering, trying instead, or so it seemed, to hear these sounds that were coming faintly from some place deep inside the house.

Then, suddenly, she came to life again. She took the key out of the door and came running back down the steps.

'It's too late!' she cried to the driver. 'I can't wait for him, I simply can't. I'll miss my plane. Hurry now, driver, hurry! To the airport!'

The driver, if he had been watching her closely, might have noticed that her face had turned white and that her whole expression had suddenly changed. There was no longer that rather soft and silly look. A strange hardness had settled on her features. The little mouth was now tight and thin, the eyes were bright, and the voice, when she spoke, carried a new note of decision.

'Hurry, driver, hurry!'

'Isn't your husband travelling with you?' the man asked, surprised.

'Certainly not! I was only going to drop him at his club. Don't sit there talking, man. Let's go! I've got to catch a plane for Paris!'

The man drove fast all the way, and she just caught her plane. Soon she was high up over the Atlantic, sitting back comfortably in her seat, listening to the sound of the engines, flying to Paris at last. The new confidence was still with her. She felt extremely strong and, in a strange sort of way, wonderful. She was a little breathless with it all, but this was more from shock at what she had done than from anything else, and as the plane flew further and further away from New York and East 62nd Street, a great sense of calmness began to settle over her. By the time she reached Paris, she was just as strong and cool and calm as she could wish.

She met her grandchildren, and they were even more beautiful than in their photographs. Every day she took them for walks, and fed them cakes, and bought them presents, and told them stories.

Once a week, on Tuesdays, she wrote a letter to her husband –

a nice, long letter – full of news, which always ended with the words, ‘Now, be sure to take your meals regularly, dear, although this is something I’m afraid you may not be doing when I’m not with you.’

When the six weeks were up, everybody was sad that she had to return to America, to her husband. Everybody, this is, except her. Surprisingly, she didn’t seem to mind as much as one might have expected, and when she kissed them all goodbye, there was something in her manner and in the things she said that appeared to leave open the possibility of a return in the not too distant future.

But, like the good wife she was, she did not stay longer than planned. Exactly six weeks after she had arrived, she sent a message to her husband and caught the plane back to New York.

Arriving at New York airport, Mrs Foster was interested to find that there was no car to meet her. It is possible that she may even have been a little amused. But she was extremely calm and did not give too much money to the man who helped her into a taxi with her luggage.

New York was colder than Paris, and there were piles of dirty snow lying in the streets. The taxi stopped in front of the house on 62nd Street, and Mrs Foster persuaded the driver to carry her two large cases to the top of the steps. Then she paid him and rang the bell. She waited, but there was no answer. Just to make sure, she tried again, and she could hear the bell ringing far away in the kitchen, at the back of the house. But still no one came.

So she took out her key and opened the door herself.

The first thing she saw as she entered was a great pile of mail lying on the floor, where it had fallen after being slipped through the letterbox. The place was dark and cold. A dustsheet still covered the big clock. There was a faint and strange smell in the air that she had never smelt before.

She walked quickly across the hall and disappeared for a

moment around the corner to the left, at the back. There was something purposeful about this action. When she returned a few seconds later, there was a faint look of satisfaction on her face.

She paused in the centre of the hall, as if wondering what to do next. Then, suddenly, she turned and went across into her husband’s study. On the desk she found his address book, and after hunting through it for a few minutes she picked up the phone and dialled a number.

‘Hello,’ she said. ‘Listen – this is Number Nine, East 62nd Street . . . Yes, that’s right. Could you send someone round as soon as possible, do you think? Yes, it seems to be stuck between the second and third floors. At least, I think it is . . . Right away? Oh, that’s very kind of you. You see, my legs aren’t too good for walking up a lot of stairs. Thank you so much. Goodbye.’

She replaced the receiver and sat there at her husband’s desk, patiently waiting for the man who would be coming soon to repair the lift.