

IT IS A SECRET ::

By
May Edginton

On Christmas Day Life Itself Came Bearing Gifts to Lovely Lady Stasey, Distinguished for Her Gallant Acceptance of Futility

"AND of course, Barnes," said Lady Stasey, taking off her glasses and looking at her maid benignly in the kind, weak-sighted way of the quiet old lady that she was obliged to realize she had become, "you are happily arranged for at Christmas?"

"O, yes, my lady; thank you," Barnes replied. Lady Stasey stifled the little sigh that threatened her cheerful manner; though she could not quite stifle the little fear in her heart, the fear of the expectation of loneliness again.

For the last four or five Christmases she had so wished Barnes would reply, "Well, no, my lady, I don't seem to have arranged." And then she, too, could say: "Then we'll keep each other company, for somehow—I've a touch of my neuralgia—I feel like being quietly at home myself."

But Barnes was always happily provided for among her friends and relations, who were probably quite superior people, considering the gentle finickiness of Barnes herself.

"There's still Mary," Lady Stasey encouraged herself when the maid had left the room. "I haven't heard from Mary yet."

The small flat was quiet; and it might be still quieter on Christmas day.

There was nothing else left to do except one small task, which in a few moments now she could perform.

There was a specially wrapped package on the rug. It was special because, so far as Lady Stasey knew, one of her little Christmas labels and wrote on it: "For grandma's boy."

For she did not even know his name, nor where he was. Neither had she ever seen him.

Only as he belonged to no one else now—O! you are a hard man and a hard father, my son Roger!—he belonged, little as he knew it, to her.

Lady Stasey opened the cupboard, and there on its shelves were twenty packages, all labeled alike:

"For grandma's boy."

Carefully, with her old hands, she put in the twenty-first. This was a present of some magnificence, a wrist watch of the very latest and most businesslike design, such as would please the kind of man she hoped the boy to be. She had chosen it very carefully and after a great deal of anxiety and calculation, for she was not a rich woman.

She was not at all a rich woman, and perhaps it was because of that . . .

She had already put on her last summer's best gown, now worn for home evenings, and after she had locked the cupboard again she resumed her seat by the fire with her memories, the children's last letters, and her clear, old vision which showed her that neat, clear truth about everything. The truth had no longer power to be really terrible. She could beat it every time.

Hers were good, fine children, Roger—fifty now! John—forty-eight now! Pansy—over forty-five! Mary, her youngest—forty!

Good children, quite polite, and as attentive and affectionate . . .

As attentive, as affectionate—as what?

"As one can expect," said Lady Stasey in a little voice aloud to herself, smiling her small, fine smile.

For she was not at all a rich woman.

SIR JOSEPH saw fit to leave their children their due portions at the time of his death; and to her he had left her modest honor of knight's lady and, instead of an income and capital at her disposal, only an annuity.

Except for what was requisite to her needs in the way of furniture she had nothing to bequeath to any one.

So circumstances were different from what they might have been, and not to be wondered at. It was the way of the world, and she had seen it work out often.

When a grandma had the money, they all came around her then. Grandchildren were trained to write dutiful and loving notes every anniversary, and there was quite a rivalry among daughters-in-law for the pleasure of grandma's company at Christmas.

Natural and understandable; the way of the world.

But when a grandma did not possess the money things worked out otherwise.

Besides, her children had scattered.

Take Roger, the rice merchant.

She took Roger; his last letter was in her hand. . . . and so, dear mother, we may spend our next leave, perhaps, at home, though it is so long since I was in England that it hardly seems home now. . . . As you say, you have never seen my wife and daughter, but, her people being Americans, we have at her desire spent most of our not very frequent leaves—when her health has not dragged us to Baden Baden—with them. . . .

"Americans; and rich Americans," Lady Stasey thought. "Very natural." But she was still sorry that Roger would seem to marry these invisible daughters-in-law. First of all, his second year out in the east, that orphaned daughter of a missionary, of whom he wrote in his cool, guarded fashion even then, but of whom quite soon he wrote no longer.

For she had run away! From Roger and their baby son!

Well, Roger was always a good father.

"I wish Joseph had let me write for the baby," Lady Stasey thought all over again. She didn't so much as know the baby's name. Roger sent even the baby away; then, when she wrote and inquired at length, the baby was a boy in a cheap Swiss school for Anglo-Indians. . . . "Which school, dear Roger? Write and let me know, and I may persuade his grandpa to take me out for a holiday." And then the boy—so suddenly it seemed, all those letters having been so abortive—was a young scoundrel, cast off by Roger. . . . "O, you are a hard man, Roger, my son!" And the only personality the boy had was in that locked cupboard in this green drawing room.

Only in the cupboard he took form: "Grandma's boy."

He belonged to nobody, it seemed; poor lad. And, so, wholly to her.

Roger's letter crackled in her hand.

"... No doubt you will be spending your Christmas with John and his family. Had we been in England we should have hoped, after all these years, to have had you with us; but . . ."

But. But. But.

John's Christmas letter had come too, very early, to announce that he had ordered a case of port for her from Morton & Fasquins; he hoped it would arrive all right, and took it for granted that she would go to Pansy for Christmas. "Had we been at home we might have persuaded you to come to us for once," John wrote, and in her wisdom she read the relief in the next sentence, "but we are going to a Brighton hotel."

Pansy's letter enclosed a very finely embroidered handkerchief of Irish linen. Poor Pansy! with that beautiful Irish husband!

"... I suppose you will take me to go to them for Christmas, mother, if you can be persuaded to leave your dear London and your own

mouth; and with a hard glitter in his dark eyes, and the tired look of his skin. He wore a dinner jacket suit in almost the last stage of shabbiness, and that suit represented his wardrobe. He had had an idea that he might pick up a job—and something else perhaps; he had long come, in his mind, to such ideas as a waiter this Christmas night, and for the dinner suit he had bartered all such other nearly worthless clothes as he possessed. But there was no last minute job. The rich people went into the rich restaurants already well staffed; and the poor people stayed at home.

He was a very poor person; but he had no home, so could not stay there. For a week in London he had just had longing for the night.



"Well, dear," she said quite tranquilly, "no ball?"

chronies. We'd love to have you here, but . . ."

Lady Stasey thought: "I shall write and tell them all that at Christmas I was with Mary."

There was still Mary.

It was at this exact moment that she heard the postman's knock; and Barnes came in gently with Mary's letter.

"... I expect you'll have a very happy time, mother, with all your friends. I am writing early, and Sharrods are sending you a bottle of lavender water from me. No doubt you're going to Pansy's for Christmas as you told me you might—"

"Yes, I did tell her I might," said Lady Stasey aloud, trembling a little.

"YOU will wear your evening dress, my lady, of course?" said Barnes.

"Of course; O, yes," Lady Stasey replied briskly, "and perhaps you will put out my lace shawl."

"You will wear your fur coat over it, my lady?"

"I shan't need your help, Barnes," she said, "you dress yourself! As usual we're both going to be gay tonight. And let me see you before you go," she added briskly.

Barnes looked very nice indeed when she entered the drawing room where Lady Stasey was sitting by the fire in her one evening dress of soft purple with her lace shawl over her shoulders. In fact, Lady Stasey quite started, and she blinked a little at the apparition in the doorway. It was as if a real lady and not a maid servant stood there. For Barnes had waved her own graying hair beautifully; and she wore a dress that Lady Stasey had not seen before and would not have guessed Barnes to possess. She had powdered her face and—"surely not," Lady Stasey thought—reddened her lips.

Lady Stasey smiled, startled as she was, "You look very nice indeed. A happy evening to you!"

"Thank you, my lady. And to you. Good-night, my lady."

"Good-night," said Lady Stasey with gracious affection.

It had never happened quite—like this before, for the last four or five years, foreseeing the necessity in time, she had somehow managed to stave off such a Christmas evening as this, by inviting to her now seldom visited club an old friend—who died last summer—or by seeking an invitation very cunningly here or there.

But now the time had come; and she was quite alone.

THE very young man was in a dangerous mood and looked it. He did not look a nice young man in any way, with lines already etched from his well shaped nose to the corners of his bitter

lift. He had just two tools, the glass cutter and a heavy jimmy, in his coat pocket.

The door was merely latched; there was no burglar proof key in it, and he had it open in another second, had stepped inside. He put the glass panel, adherent to the newspaper, down against the wall—still carefully, for, of course, you never knew. And feeling along the wall—impossible to put any inside light on now—he arrived at a door and opened it, and moonlight showed him a little kitchen, very neat.

It was the old girl's bedroom he was chiefly after, though. And then, silver memories of his mind were faint childish memories of hearing his father say to some one . . . Mother has a little Georgian silver. Or, "Mother collects, in a modest way." Of course she had jewels. Old fashioned diamonds set in gold, most likely. Only wouldn't the old girl be wearing them tonight?

There might be money. Cash would be best of all.

SO, feeling cautiously along the wall opposite the kitchen, he came to another knob and turned it. In a room very shadowily lighted by a dying fire only sat the old lady.

And almost instantly he became aware of her eyes looking at him. He could not definitely see them, only he knew that they saw.

She had lifted a hand and turned on a reading lamp beside her. She sat quite still. "Come in," she said.

He drew a long breath and surveyed her rapidly. Not actual robbery now, perhaps; but . . . pitch a tale?

She was looking at him; looking and looking.

"Tell me your name," she said.

"It's—I was christened Stephen. I've seen called all sorts of names since." He tried to smile.

"Your face is rather familiar to me."

How could it be? He was not like his father—her son, Rogers. How could his face be familiar to her? It was an old woman's fancy—but terrifying. He did not want her to know him. He did not want to pitch a tale. He wanted just to bow himself out quietly and leave her heart unburnt, unharmed, by the knowledge of what he had done and what he had proposed to do.

He said, "O, that couldn't be. I've only been a week in London. Before that I've lived in all sorts of places half over the world—"

"What sort of places?" said Lady Stasey.

And she continued to look at him.

He burst out, "Dirty, beastly places with the kind of dirt and beastliness you wouldn't understand because you've never seen—"

"I haven't seen," said Lady Stasey, "but I understand."

"I'll go now," he said again, essaying to rise, essaying to smile; trembling all over.

But it was Lady Stasey who rose and came near.

"What is your other name?" she said softly.

HE ought to have said "Jones" or "Robinson"; but he felt light headed with hunger and unable to think quickly enough. He answered "Stasey."

"The only thing like Roger," said Lady Stasey, putting out a slim old hand and touching his hair, "is the way the hair grows on the forehead—very distinctive. I tried to train it when he was a baby—to train it differently; a silly thing to do, to try to train things or people in the way they will not go."

Then she ran those withered, roseleaf fingers along the sharp line of his thin young jaw, murmuring "I seem to know this, too." And then he felt an incredibly soft, withered, fragrant cheek against his own.

She had kissed him.

"Stand up a minute," she said, her eyes dancing; and when he rose she measured herself against him and found him six inches taller. "O, you fine boy! O, what a splendid grandson! I have hoped and prayed and never believed such a thing could happen. And you don't belong to any one but me!"

"Do I belong to you?"

"Say 'grandma.'"

"Grandma. Do I . . . belong . . . to you?"

She took his hand. "A happy Christmas, dear. Your present is all ready for you."

"A present for me?"

"In the cupboard." She took her velvet bag from the chair and found the key and opened the door and showed him the array.

Fumblingly he strapped on the watch.

How soiled his hands were!

"Can I have something to eat, grandma?"

Lovely, lovely words, old and sweet. Little children playing on a seashore and running to say, "Can I have something to eat, mother?" and great schoolboys demanding, "Can I have something to eat, mother?" And young men arriving home at all hours, "Can I have something to eat?"

Again she could pat loving little pats and admonish, "Wash paws first."

She was wise and understood. So when proudly, in her fur coat over the purple gown, she was

ready to go out with her fine young man—for there was nothing resembling a Christmas dinner in the flat—and when she saw the glass panel of her front door propped against the wall, although she knew, she said nothing. Anyway, she had never known any one who wasn't some sort of sinner needing to be forgiven. All were sinners, dear and frail. She just put her little arm in his, and they went slowly down the stairs to their taxi-cab.

HE WAS slightly fortified by her biscuits and the cup of meat extract which she knew, with sad horror but a tranquil mien, that he had tried not to wolf too greedily.

"We could find quite a little place fairly near, please, grandma."

"Go to the nearest little place that is open, please, driver," said Lady Stasey, "quite a little quiet place, if you please."

It was quite a little place and quite near; a restaurant warm and jolly and red. And there was exactly one table to spare, as if Providence itself had reserved it for an overwrought old lady and her tired young man.

The proprietor thought he had seen Lady Stasey before, walking by the right sort of lady. But she had not all too graciously accepted, and he stood over, now, taking their order himself.

A beautiful order—everything. "Listen. The old lady gained the courage of her wishes and her imagination with every dish she mentioned and which he applauded."

"I have one lady here, madame, who comes every Christmas night—no other time. But I always remember her. Yesterday when she telephoned for her usual table she ordered a small bottle of champagne to be put on ice, and when she came in tonight she was in *grande toilette*. I hoped it meant she met a friend here. But no, madame. No, as usual, she sits alone."

Lady Stasey raised her eyes, and saw, but a dozen yards away, in a corner, Barnes.

She was looking at no one. She dreamed. Her eyes were sad and yet like stars. Her mouth looked like loving somebody. Lady Stasey was not too old to recall that look. A half bottle of champagne lolled in its ice pail on Barnes' table.

The maroon cape hung gracefully on her shoulders, opened over her evening gown.

"The lady is a very great friend of mine," said Lady Stasey. "Sit still, Stephen, dear."

And she added an order very graciously to the manager. "If the lady has not finished her dinner, put another cover here."

Lady Stasey stood beside Barnes.

She felt herself remarkably wide awake for such an old woman, and not the smallest design or pattern of life's strange weaving could possibly escape her.

"Well, dear," she said quite tranquilly, "no ball?"

BARNES did not need to raise his head, to look up, for Lady Stasey to see exactly why Stephen's face was already so dear and so familiar. Here were the little clear contours, the fine bones, the lift of eyebrow.

They looked steadily at each other.

"No ball, my lady," said Barnes at last.

"Not 'my lady,'" said Lady Stasey, "call me 'mother,' my dear."

And just for a moment she sank into a chair beside her errant daughter-in-law, for she flagged. "How did you find me twenty years ago? And why?" she said.

Her daughter-in-law answered her old lady very gently: "When you were widowed I saw it in the papers, and when you gave up your big house and advertised for a maid I came to you. My name really was Barnes before I married Roger. And I thought—I didn't know where Roger had sent him—I thought, perhaps, if I stayed with you, somehow, some time I should find my little boy again."

"Stephen?"

"Stephen."

"How right you were, my dear," said Lady Stasey.

"It is his birthday."

"He was born on Christmas day—"

"Roger never told me that!"

"And he is twenty-one. So—the champagne. Because I'm losing heart . . . mother."

"I have another Christmas present for you," said Lady Stasey. "The cape was nothing. Just come along with me."

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