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ROALD DAHL

MRS BIXBY AND THE COLONEL'S COAT

AMERICA is the land of opportunities for women. Already they own about eightyfive per cent of the wealth of the nation. Soon they will have it all. Divorce has become a lucrative process, simple to arrange and easy to forget; and ambitious females can repeat it as often as they please and parlay their winnings to astronomical figures. The husband's death also brings satisfactory rewards and some ladies prefer to rely upon this method. They know that the waiting period will not be unduly protracted for overwork and hypertension are bound to gel the poor devil before long, and he will die at his desk with a bottle of benzedrines in one hand and a packet of tranquillizers in the other.

Succeeding generations of youthful American males are not deterred in the slightest by this terrifying pattern of divorce and death. The higher the divorce rate climbs, the more eager they become. Young men marry like mice, almost before they have reached the age ol puberty, and a large proportion of them have at least two ex-wives on the payroll by the time they are thirtysix years old. To support these ladies in the manner to which they are accustomed, the men must work like slaves, which is of course precisely what they are. But now at last, as they approach their premature middle age, a sense of disillusionment and fear begins to creep slowly into their hearts, and in the evenings they take to huddling together in little groups, in clubs and bars, drinking their whiskies and swallowing their pills, and trying to comfort one another with stories.

The basic theme of these stories never varies. There are always three main characters-the husband, the wife, and the dirty dog. The husband is a decent clean-living man, working hard at his job. The wife is cunning, deceitful, and lecherous, and she is invariably up to some sort of jiggery-pokery with the dirty dog. The husband is too good a man even to suspect her. Things look black for the husband. Will the poor man ever find out? Must he be a cuckold for the rest of his life? Yes, he must. But wait! Suddenly, by a brilliant manoeuvre, the husband completely turns the tables on his monstrous spouse. The woman is flabbergasted, stupefied, humiliated, defeated. The audience of men around the bar smiles quietly to itself and takes a little comfort from the fantasy.

There are many of these stories going around, these wonderful wishful thinking dreamworld inventions of the unhappy male, but most of them are too fatuous to be worth repeating, and far too fruity to be put down on paper. There is one, however, that seems to be superior to the rest, particularly as it has the merit of being true. It is extremely popular with twice-or thricebitten males in search of solace, and if you are

one of them, and if you haven't heard it before, you may enjoy the way it comes out. The story is called "Mrs Bixby and the Colonel's Coat', and it goes something like this: Mr and Mrs Bixby lived in a smallish apartment somewhere in New York City. Mr Bixby was a dentist who made an average income. Mrs Bixby was a big vigorous woman with a wet mouth. Once a month, always on Friday afternoons, Mrs Bixby would board 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 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 deny either of them the pleasure of a monthly meeting.

"Just so long as you don't ever expect me to accompany you," Mr Bixby had said in the beginning.

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

So far so good.

As it turned out, however, the aunt was little more than a convenient alibi for Mrs Bixby. The dirty dog, in the shape of a gentleman known as the Colonel, was lurking slyly in the background, and our heroine spent the greater part of her Baltimore time in this scoundrel's company. The Colonel was exceedingly wealthy. He lived in a charming house on the outskirts of town. No wife or family encumbered him, only a few discreet and loyal servants, and in Mrs Bixby's absence he consoled himself by riding his horses and hunting the fox.

Year after year, this pleasant alliance between Mrs Bixby and the Colonel continued without a hitch. They met so seldom-twelve times a year is not much when you come to think of it-that there was little or no chance of their growing bored with one another. On the contrary, the long wait between meetings only made the heart grow fonder, and each separate occasion became an exciting reunion.

"Tally-ho!" the Colonel would cry each time he met her at the station in the big car. "My dear, I'd almost forgotten how ravishing you looked. Let's go to earth."

Eight years went by.

It was just before Christmas, and Nits 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 agreeable, and she was in a cheerful mood. But then the Colonel's company always did that to her these days. The man had a way of making her feel that she was altogether a rather remarkable woman, a person of

subtle and exotic talents, fascinating beyond measure; and what a very different thing that was from the dentist husband at home who never succeeded in making her feel that she was anything but a son of eternal patient, someone who dwelt in the waiting-room, silent among the magazines, seldom if ever nowadays to be called in to suffer the finicky precise ministrations of those clean pink hands.

“The Colonel asked me to give you this,” a voice beside her said. She turned and saw Wilkins, the Colonel’s groom, a small wizened dwarf with grey skin, and he was pushing a large flattish cardboard box into her arms.

“Good gracious me!” she cried, all of a flutter. “My heavens, what an enormous box! What is it, Wilkins? Was there a message? Did he send me a message?”

“No message,” the groom said, and he walked away.

As soon as she was on the train, Mrs Bixby carried the box into the privacy of 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 said aloud. “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 tight and slowly lifted off the lid. Then she put one hand down into the box. There was some tissue paper on top; she could feel it and hear it rustling. There was also an envelope or a card of some sort. She ignored this and began burrowing underneath the tissue paper, the fingers reaching out delicately, like tendrils.

“My God,” she cried suddenly. “It can’t be true!”

She opened her eyes wide and stared at the coat. Then she pounced on it and lifted it out of the box, Thick layers of fur made a lovely noise against the tissue paper as they unfolded, and when she held it up and saw it hanging to its full length, it was so beautiful it took her breath away.

Never had she seen mink like this before. It was mink, wasn’t it? Yes, of course it was. But what a glorious 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, like cobalt. Quickly she looked at the label. It said simply, WILD LABRADOR MINK. There was nothing else, no sign of where it had been bought or anything. But that, she told herself, was probably the Colonel’s doing. The wily old fox was making darn sure he didn’t leave any tracks. Good for him. But what in the world 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 panting a little now, she couldn’t help it, and her eyes were stretched very wide. But oh God, the feel of that fur! And those huge Wide sleeves with their thick turned-up cuffs! Wh0 was it had once told her that they always Used female skins for the arms and male skins for the rest of the coat? Someone had told her that. Joan Rutfield, probably; though how Joan would know anything about mink she couldn’t imagine.

The great black coat seemed to slide on to her almost of its own accord, like a second skin. Oh boy! It was the queerest feeling! She glanced into the mirror. It was fantastic. Her whole personality had suddenly changed completely. She looked dazzling, radiant, rich, brilliant, voluptuous, 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 scurrying 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 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 gift. For my own personal reasons I shall not be able to see you any more. Good-bye and good luck.

Well!

Imagine that!

Right out of the blue, just when she was feeling so happy.

No more Colonel.

What a dreadful shock.

She would miss him enormously.

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

What you lose on the swings you get back on the roundabouts.

She smiled and folded the letter, meaning to tear it up and throw it out of the window, but in folding it she noticed that there was something written on the other side: Ps. Just tell them that nice generous aunt of yours gave it to you for Christmas.

Mrs Bixby’s mouth, at that moment stretched wide in a silky smile, snapped back like a piece of elastic.

“The man must be mad!” she cried. “Aunt Maude doesn’t have that son 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 overlooked this vital aspect.

In a couple of hours she would be in New York. Ten minutes after that she would be home, and the husband would be there to greet her; and even a man like Cyril, dwelling as he did in a dark phlegmy world of root canals, bicuspids, and caries, would start asking a few questions if his wife suddenly waltzed in from a week-end wearing a six-thousand-dollar mink coat.

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

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

“I’ve got to have this coat!” she said aloud. “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 panic. Sit still and keep calm and start thinking. You’re a clever girl, aren’t you? You’ve fooled him before. The man never has been able to see much further than the end of his own probe, you know that. So just sit absolutely 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 quietly to the exit. She was wearing her old red coat again now and carrying the cardboard box in her arms. She signalled for a taxi.

“Driver,” she said, “would you know of a pawnbroker that’s still open around here?”

The man behind the wheel raised his brows and looked back at her, amused.

“Plenty along Sixth Avenue,” he answered.

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

Soon the taxi pulled up outside a shop that had three brass balls hanging over the entrance.

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

There was an enormous cat crouching on the counter eating fishheads out of a white saucer. The animal looked up at Mrs Bixby with bright yellow eyes, then looked away again and went n eating. Mrs Bixby stood by the counter, as far away from the cat as possible, waiting for someone to come, staring at the watches, the shoe buckles, the enamel brooches, the old binoculars, the broken spectacles, the false teeth. Why did they always pawn their teeth, she wondered.

“Yes?” the proprietor said, emerging 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. The man went up to the cat and started stroking it along the top of its back, and the cat went on eating the fishheads.

“Isn’t it silly of me?” Mrs Bixby said. “I’ve gone and lost my pocket-book, and this being Saturday, the banks are all closed until Monday and I’ve simply got to have some money for the week-end. This is quite a valuable coat, but I’m not asking much. I only want to borrow enough on it to tide me over till Monday. Then I’ll come back and redeem it.”

The man waited, and said nothing. But when she pulled out the mink and allowed the beautiful thick fur to fall over the counter, his eyebrows went up and he drew his hand away from the cat and 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 the fact is I don’t have a thing with me other than this coat.” She spread out her fingers for him to see.

“It looks new,” the man said, fondling the soft fur.

“Oh yes, it is. But, as I said, I only want to borrow enough to tide me over till Monday. How about fifty dollars?”

“I’ll loan 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 fetched a ticket and placed it on the counter. The ticket looked like one of those labels you tie on to the handle of your suitcase, the same shape and size exactly, and the same stiff brownish paper. But it was perforated

across the middle so that you could tear it in two, and both halves were identical.

“Name?” he asked.

“Leave that out. And the address.”

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

“You don’t have to put the name and address, do you?”

The man shrugged and shook his head and the pen-nib 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.”

“You realize that anyone who gets hold of it can come in and claim the article?”

“Yes, I know that.”

“Simply on the number.”

“Yes, I know.”

“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-nib hesitated again, hovering over the dotted line beside the word ARTICLE.

“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 broke, if that’s what you mean. I simply lost my purse. Don’t you understand?”

“You have it your own way then,” the man said. “It’s your coat.”

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 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 vu on both sections of the ticket, then he tore it in half along the perforations and slid the lower portion across the counter. He took a wallet from the inside pocket of his jacket and extracted five ten-dollar bills. “The interest is three per cent a month,” he said.

“Yes, all right. And thank you. You’ll take good care of it, won’t you?”

The man nodded but said nothing.

“Shall I put it back in the box for you?”

“No,” the man said.

Mrs Bixby turned and went out of the shop on to 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 paper and glanced 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 dreadful trains. Aunt Maude sent you her love as usual. I’m dying for a drink, aren’t you?”

The husband folded his newspaper into a neat rectangle and placed it on the arm of his chair. Then he stood up and crossed over to the sideboard. His wife remained in the centre of the room pulling off her gloves, watching him carefully, wondering how long she ought to wait. He had his back to her now, bending forward to measure the

gin, putting his face right up close to the measurer and peering into it as though it were a patient's mouth.

It was funny how small he always looked after the Colonel. The Colonel was huge and bristly, and when you were near to him he smelled faintly of horseradish. This one was small and neat and bony and he didn't really smell of anything at all, except peppermint drops, which he sucked to keep his breath nice for the patients.

"See what I've bought for measuring the vermouth," he said, holding up a calibrated glass beaker. "I can get it to the nearest milligram 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 ridiculous for words. There had been a time when she thought they were wonderful, those Edwardian jackets with high lapels and six buttons down the front, but now they merely seemed absurd. So did the narrow stovepipe trousers. You had to have a special sort of face to wear things like that, and Cyril just didn't have it. His was a long bony countenance with a narrow nose and a slightly prognathous jaw, and when you saw it coming up out of the top of one of those tightly fitting oldfashioned suits it looked like a caricature of Sam Weller. He probably thought it looked like Beau Brummel. It was a fact that in the office he invariably greeted female patients with his white coat unbuttoned so that they would catch a glimpse of the trappings underneath; and in some obscure way this was obviously meant to convey the impression that he was a bit of a dog. But Mrs Bixby knew better. The plumage was a bluff. It meant nothing. It reminded her of an ageing peacock strutting on the lawn with only half its feathers left. Or one of those fatuous self-fertilizing flowers-like the dandelion. A dandelion never has to get fertilized for the setting of its seed, and all those brilliant yellow petals are just a waste of time, a boast, a masquerade. What's the word the biologists use? Subsexual. A dandelion is subsexual. So, for that matter, are the summer broods of water fleas. It sounds a bit like Lewis Carroll, she thought-water fleas and dandelions and dentists.

"Thank you, darling," she said, taking the Martini and seating herself on the sofa with her handbag on her lap. "And what did you do last night?"

"I stayed on in the office and cast a few inlays. I also got my accounts up to date."

"Now really, Cyril, I think it's high time you let other people do your donkey work for you. You're much too important for that sort of thing. Why don't you give the inlays to the mechanic?"

"I prefer to do them myself. I'm extremely proud of my inlays."

“I know you are, darling, and I think they’re absolutely wonderful. They’re the best inlays in the whole world. But I don’t want you to burn yourself out. And 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 price everything up first. She doesn’t know who’s rich and who isn’t.”

“This Martini is perfect,” Mrs Bixby said, setting down her glass on the side table. “Quite perfect.” She opened her bag and took out a handkerchief as if to blow her nose. “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 a lottery ticket or something, 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 minutely from all angles, as though it were a suspect 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. Here’s the name and address of the shop-somewhere on Sixth Avenue.”

“Oh dear, I am disappointed. I was hoping it might be a ticket for the Irish Sweep.”

“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, with particular reference to the fact that anyone possessing the ticket was entitled to claim the article. She listened patiently until he had finished his lecture.

“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? You know what that means?”

“No, dear, what does it mean?”

“It means that the item 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 gracious! I never knew that.”

“There’s a lot of things you don’t know, my dear. Now you listen to me. Seeing that 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 redeem it any time we like for only fifty dollars. How about that?”

“Oh, what fun!” she cried. “I think it’s terribly exciting, especially when we don’t even know what it is. It could be anything, isn’t that right, Cyril? Absolutely anything!”

“It could indeed, although it’s most likely to be either a ring or a watch.”

“But wouldn’t it be marvellous if it was a real treasure? I mean something really old, like a wonderful old vase or a Roman statue.”

“There’s no knowing what it might be, m dear. We shall just have to wait and see.”

“I think it’s absolutely fascinating! Give me the ticket and I’ll rush over first thing 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 pick it up 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’re liable to 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. It’s mine. Whatever it is, it’s mine, isn’t that right?”

“Of course it’s yours, my dear. There’s no need to get so worked up about it.”

“I’m not. I’m just excited, that’s all.”

“I suppose it hasn’t occurred to you that this might be something entirely masculine a pocket-watch, for example, or a set of shirt-studs. 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 magnanimously.

I’ll be delighted. 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 caught 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 thrilling if I stay behind 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 waistcoat 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.

“No, all right.”

“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 cab 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 waistcoat pocket. “No, here it is.”

“And you have enough money?”

“Just about.”

“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 sort of hoping it’ll be something for you, Cyril. I’d much rather it was for you than for me.”

“Thai’s very generous of you, my dear. Now I must run.”

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

“I got it!” he said.

“You did! Oh, Cyril, what was it? Was it something good?”

“Good!” he cried. “It’s fantastic! You wait till you get your eyes on this! You’ll swoon!”

“Darling, what is it? Tell me quick!”

“You’re a lucky girl, that’s what you are.”

“It’s for me, then?”

“Of course it’s for you. Though how in the world it ever got to be pawned for only fifty dollars I’ll be damned if I know. Someone’s crazy.”

“Cyril! Stop keeping me in suspense! I can’t bear it!”

“You’ll go mad when you see it.”

“What is it?”

“Try to guess.”

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

“A necklace,” she said.

“Wrong.”

“A diamond ring.”

“You’re not even warm. I’ll give you a hint. It’s something you can wear.”

“Something I can wear? You mean like a hat?”

“No, it’s not a hat,” he said, laughing.

“For goodness sake, Cyril! Why don’t you tell me?”

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

“You’ll do nothing of the sort!” 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. You’ll disorganize my whole morning schedule. 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 one-thirty then, while I’m having a sandwich. Good-bye.”

At half past one precisely, 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 the surgery.

“Go and have your lunch, Miss Pulteney,” he said to the assistant, who was busy putting instruments into the sterilizer. “You can finish that when you come back.” He waited until the girl had gone, then he walked over to a closet 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 swishing sound as he pulled out a garment from among the other things hanging there.

“All right! You can look!”

“I don’t dare to,” she said, laughing.

“Go on. Take a peek.”

Coyly, beginning to giggle, she raised one eyelid a fraction of an inch, just enough to give her a dark blurry view of the man standing there in his white overalls holding something up in the air.

“Mink!” he cried. “Real mink!”

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

But there was no coat. There was only a ridiculous fur neckpiece dangling from her husband's hand.

"Feast your eyes on 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 staring at her, waiting for her to say something.

"Why yes," she stammered. "I…I…think it's…it's lovely…really lovely."

"Quite took your breath away for a moment there, didn't it?"

"Yes, it did."

"Magnificent quality," he said. "Fine colour, too. You know something my dear? I reckon a piece like this would cost you two or three hundred dollars at least if you had to buy it in a shop."

"I don't doubt it."

There were two skins, two narrow mangylooking skins with their heads still on them and glass beads in their eye sockets and little paws hanging down. One of them had the rear end of the other in its mouth, biting it.

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

"No, it isn't."

"Better leave it behind when you go shopping or they'll all think we're millionaires 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 anyway."

He turned away and went over to the basin and began washing his hands. “Run along now, my dear, and buy yourself a nice lunch. I’d take you out myself but I’ve got old man Gorman in the waiting-room with a broken clasp on his denture.”

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 filthy 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 I was going to be late home tonight?” Cyril Bixby said, still washing his hands.

“No.,, “It’ll probably be at least eight-thirty the way things look at the moment. It may even be nine.”

“Yes, all right. Good-bye.” Mrs Bixby went out, slamming the door behind her.

At that precise moment, Miss Pulteney, the secretary-assistant, came sailing past her down the corridor on her way to lunch.

“Isn’t it a gorgeous day?” Miss Pulteney said as she went by, flashing a smile. There was a lilt in her walk, a little whiff of perfume attending her, 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.