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Rich Man, Poor Man

Maximilian Foster



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Chapter I

Promptly at six every week-day evening in the year Mr. Mapleson came down the stairs of the L road station on the corner and trudged up the side street toward his home. He lived at Mrs. Tilney's, the last house but one in the block; but though for more than sixteen years Mr. Mapleson had boarded there, none of the landlady's other patrons—or the landlady either, for that matter—knew much about their fellow-guest. Frankly he was a good deal of a puzzle. The others thought him queer in his ways besides. They were right perhaps. He was a little man, round-shouldered, elderly and spare, with an air of alert, bustling energy quite birdlike in its abruptness. Uppish you might have judged him, and self-important too; yet in his tired eyes as well as in the droop of his small sensitive mouth there was something that belied the vanity of a pompous, confident man. Nor was his briskness so very convincing, once you had closely scanned him, for beneath it all was a secret, furtive nervousness that bordered at times on the panicky. He was, in short, shy—shy to a last degree; a self-conscious, timorous man that on every occasion shrank mistrustfully from the busy world about him. A castaway marooned on a desert island could scarcely have been more solitary, only in Mr. Mapleson's case, of course, the solitude was New York.

There are many such. No quarter of the city, indeed, is without its Mr. Maplesons. They are to be seen caged behind the grilles of every bank and counting-room; they infest, as well, the hivelike offices of the big insurance companies; soft-footed, faithful, meek, they burrow dustily among the musty, dusty back rooms and libraries of the law. Mere cogs in the machine, their reward is existence, nothing else. Then when the cog is broken, its usefulness at an end, it is cast carelessly on the scrapheap, while the machine goes grinding on. O tempore! O mores! Mr. Mapleson was a clerk in a Pine Street real-estate office. His salary was twenty-eight dollars a week, and his employers thought it high!

But enough! Tonight it was Christmas Eve; and as Mr. Mapleson descended from the L road station and trudged westward on his way, a smile as secret, as furtive as himself, quivered radiantly on his lips. Overhead, through a rift in the fleecy, racing clouds, a host of stars blazed down like the lights of an anchored argosy; and when he looked up and saw them there the little man's eyes blinked and twinkled back at them. Then a gust of the night's raw wind swooped along the street, and he had bent his head to it and was hurrying when a fleck of snow like a knife-point stung him on the cheek. "Hah!" cried Mr. Mapleson, his face beaming, "a white Christmas, eh?" And with a quick look upward, as if to assure himself, he critically examined the sky.

Afterward he chuckled, a silvery tinkle, and tightly clutching the bundles in his arms Mr. Mapleson hurried on, his slender feet padding the pavement like a bunny cottontail's. A little agitated you would have thought him, a little feverish perhaps; and yet, after all, why not? Remember, Christmas comes but once a year; and as the slight figure passed swiftly under a street lamp standing near his door, there was a glow in the gray furrowed face that one would have wagered sprang from a heart filled only with kindliness, with the night's spirit of goodwill.

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