A GUEST AT CHRISTMAS

By JOHN STRANGE WINTER,

Author of "Booties' Baby," "The Truth Tellers," "Beautiful Jim," "Grip," "Heart and Sword," "The Binks Family," &c.

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I.

For many years the many branches of the Parker family had lived on an off-chance. The Parkers were none of them blessed with an over-abundance, no, nor for the matter of that, an abundance of this world's goods; and it was therefore in a sense unfortunate that they all were possessed of positions which needed keeping up.

There were many ramifications of the Parker family. There were the Jex-Parkers, who lived at Addington lodge, an old and rather dilapidated manor house which had been the original cradle of the race. There were the Wallis-Parkers, at the rectory; the Ormond-Parkers, in Regent's park; the Wellesley-Parkers, who had a small property in Suffolk; and the Graham-Parkers, who put in time by living in more or less fashionable places out of the season, and pretended that they did it because they hated society.

The Graham-Parkers were only a mother and two daughters, no longer very young, and certainly neither very prepossessing nor very pleasant. The Wellesley-Parkers were quite the best off of the whole family. Their property was small and their income not large, but they only had one child, a son, who had done well in his youthful days and was now fast showing himself a credit to his kinsfolk in the calling of a barrister.

The Ormond-Parkers lived in Regent's place. Captain Ormond-Parker had in his youth been in a line regiment for a short time, had then married, and, finding married cares and responsibilities incompatible with the expenses of military life had retired and had afterward amused himself for a short time by playing at soldiering in the militia. After a time this palled upon him, and he, with his wife and four daughters, withdrew from the giddy mazes of country society to a life in London, Regent's park being their stronghold. As their train was small and they knew a spare bedroom would be an expensive luxury in so large a family as the Parkers, they did not keep up very much intercourse with the rest of the family, excepting young Trevor Wellesley-Parker, whom they welcomed with open arms to their hearth and home, which they persisted in calling airly a pied-a-terre. Indeed, to be quite candid, from the beginning, only the brothers at Addingham, of all the large Parker family, were on anything like intimate terms. There were, as I have said, the Wallis-Parkers at the rectory, and the Jex-Parkers at the lodge. As they were brothers, and all the others were but cousins, both to them and each other, it was not unnatural that, being so near to each other, these two of all the clan should have been near in heart as well as in domicile.

Now, as I said just now, all these branches of Parkers had an off-chance. One day they might all be rich beyond the dream of avarice, or if not rich—actually rich, and rolling in money—they might each and all of them find themselves one day in comfortable and easy circumstances. For they had an aunt.

She was a Parker, too. Plain Mary Anne Parker, as she was fond of saying, trimmed up with no fine first name. "Mary Anne Parker I was born," this lady said more times than once, "and Mary Anne Parker I shall die. If you think it makes Parker sound better to flavour it with Ormund, or Graham, or Jex, why, it won't hurt anyone; only don't expect me to follow the fashion, that's all."

Now, plain Mary Anne Parker was old; she was also rich. A convenient and obliging godmother had, some thirty years before the time at which this story opens, left her a tidy sum—just over a million—and Mary Anne had lived her own life without troubling about her relations ever since. She had, curiously enough, a fancy to live entirely out of England. She had a fine villa on the Riviera, a flat in Paris and a slim yacht, called The Fly, in which this indomitable old lady went whither her fancy carried her. She never invited any of her relations to visit her, although there were seven girls at the lodge and three others at the rectory, to say nothing of all the other branches of the family, who would dearly have loved to fill the position of favorite niece to so gilded and powerful an aunt.

Only one of the four girls in Regent's park hinted as much when Aunt Mary Anne was paying a flying visit to London. "My dear," returned Aunt Mary Anne, in definite tones which were unmistakable in their sincerity, "you wouldn't like it at all; you would hate it. In the first place, I never by any chance speak a word of English. I haven't a single English servant. I am occupied from morning till night, in my own way, and have neither time nor inclination for entertaining. There are no young gallants coming gallivanting about the chateau, and my yacht master is sixty and is as grumpy as a bear. If my money was Parker money," she added significantly, "I should fel it my duty to share it with all the other Parkers; but not a penny of my money came from the Parkers, but all from a friend of my sainted mother's, who loathed every Parker that ever was born, excepting the one that she married, and that did not last long. She would have loved me better if I hadn't been born a Parker; but in the natural order of things that couldn't be helped, so I take it as my own special cross and bear it; and I bear it without trying to gloss it over with a fine first name. So, there!"

Since her extreme youth Miss Parker had never been to Addingham and knew very little of the two groups of Parkers who lived there. On occasions when she had been compelled by business to find herself in London—always a time of penance—she had seen old members of each family, but there intercourse had stopped. So you may judge of the surprise with which the squire, Mr. Jex-Parker, received the following epistle, dated December 16th, and written from the Chateau de Bettigny, Alpes Maritimes:

"My Dear Thomas," it ran. "I have no doubt that you will be surprised to receive this letter from me; but as you are the head of my family I think it only right that I should first communicate to you a definite conclusion at which I have just arrived. I am, as you are presumably aware, a fairly rich woman——"

"Fairly rich!" echoed Mrs. Jex-Parker, almost hysterically, as her husband reached this point of the letter.

"And I have no fancy, not being a Catholic, or for the matter of that, belonging to any particular creed—having long ago found out the hollowness of them all—that my money should, when I shall have no longer any use for it, fall into the hands of what here is called 'Holy Church.' I feel that I am not as young as I was, and that life is, in a certain sense, uncertain, though I am good for twenty or thirty years yet; and I should like to see some of my various relations during the next few years. I propose, *therefore*, to spend a Christmas with each branch of the family, beginning with you, if you and your wife have no objection. By the time that I have thus visited each branch I shall have made up my mind how best to dispose of my property. I believe that my cousins on my mother's side are looking to benefit to

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a considerable extent under my will; but as I feel you and all the other Parkers deserve some compensation and alleviation for having been born Parkers I shall not do more for the Vansittarts than leave them an earnest of my good will.

"Please advise me whether it will be convenient to receive me, with a maid, an inoffensive creature, who cannot speak a word of English, but who is essential to my every-day comfort, and will give herself no airs. And believe me, your affectionate aunt—MARY ANNE."

The squire of Addingham came to the end of the letter and laid it down beside his plate. Then he looked over the top of his spectacles very solemnly at the stout, motherly lady at the other end of the table.

"Well?" he said.

"Well?" said Mrs. Jex—I forgot to say that in the family each lady was called by the first half of her name. "Well?" she repeated.

"What's to be done?" said Mr. Jex. "She has asked to come. She's worth millions—millions! We can't fly in the face of Providence. There is nothing—absolutely noting—to be done—nothing."

"What is she like?" asked Rosamond, the eldest of the three girls.

"I saw her once," chimed in Daisy, "but I was only eight or nine ,and I forget."

"Perhaps she is jolly enough," suggested Eva, hopefully.

"Gad! she's a gay old girl, too!" cried Jack, the heir of the old house. "I put ashore at Nice once, and I went along the coast on a little voyage of discovery and, gad! she's got a reputation out there—no mistake about it!"

"For what?" asked Mrs. Jex, sharply. "She must be seventy, if she's a day."

"Oh, more than that!" asserted the squire in positive tones. "She was years older than my father—five, I think. And I'm fifty-three, and he would have been—let me see—um—um—yes, seventy-five. Aunt Mary Anne isn't a day short of eighty."

"And lively at that," said Jack.

"You might explain, Jack," cried Rosamond.

"Yes, I might; but what's never spoken can never be repeated. I'll not split on the old girl."

"That's all nonsense," said his mother. "Miss Parker is peculiar—many rich people are—and perhaps it's because they haven't got to consider other people's whims and caprices that makes them give way more or less to their own. But she's not more than that. And she's had chances enough of altering her state, if she chose, and has still—a woman with all that money. The important question is, how are we to receive her? Shall we put ourselves out, make a fuss, or let her take us just as we are?"

"Just as we are, or rather, just as we should receive any ordinary lady who wasn't likely to leave us a penny," said Daisy.

"It won't do to seem too well-off, too comfortable," cried Eva.

"She'll be an awful tie on us, of course," said Rosamond, "especially when all the boys are at home. I suppose we shan't be able to make any sort of noise. Oh, it's horrid! If only she had come any other time but Christmas."

"Well, she has chosen to come now," remarked Mrs. Jex, "and we cannot refuse her. That's one of the advantages of being rich: you can descend upon any of your relations without an invitation; you are bound by none of the ordinary conventionalities of society."

"And, by Jove!" muttered Jack Jex to Daisy, who sat behind him, "so the mater'll find when she comes to tackle Aunt Mary Anne Parker."

II.

Aunt Mary Anne arrived at Addingham on the day previous to Christmas Eve. As it fell out, two of the Parker boys—Geoffry, from the lodge, and Lionel, from the rectory—travelled down by the same train. Miss Parker, who hated crowds, and could not endure being hustled or incommoded in any way, had engaged a compartment for her own use; but, with characteristic prudence she consigned her maid to a third-class carriage. This carriage happened to be the one chosen by the two boys bound for Addingham, as their haven from the Christmas crowd; and when Aunt Mary Anne, with her accustomed dignity, descended from her reserved compartment at her destination, she beheld a very tearful and trembling French-woman coming towards her hanging on the arm of a fine young man, standing well over six feet in his socks.

In a moment Aunt Mary Anne forgot her dignity, and relapsing into an unknown tongue, demanded the cause of her grief. The young man took off his cap:

"Is this poor lady a friend of yours, madam?" he asked. "I'm sorry I can't speak anything but English and a little bad French."

"Bless me, young gentleman, I'm an English-woman myself," burst out Aunt Mary Anne, rather indignantly.

"Well, I thought you looked English," said the lad, ingeniously. "But this poor lady is terribly out of it."

"She's not a lady, she's my maid," said Aunt Mary Anne, then went on to say a few forcible words to the shuddering waiting-woman, who replied with flashing eyes, and gestures of unconcealed fury. "A harmless creature—a Corsican by birth. She says she has been grossly insulted, and that you are her salvation. What has happened?"

"Well, it was really not much. There were some holiday-making cads in the carriage, and when they found she couldn't speak a word of English they began to pull her about a bit, that was all."

"H'm. And where did you come in?" demanded Aunt Mary Anne.

The lad laughed. "I? Oh, well, I just told 'em I'd chuck 'em out of the window if they didn't drop it, that was all. Nothing, I assure you. But you are standing in a full draught. Can't I do anything to assist you?"

"Young gentleman," said Aunt Mary Anne, holding out her hand to the lad, "I am oblig'd to you, extremely obliged to you. My name is Parker——"

"Well, oddly enough, so's mine," said he, smiling at her.

"Are you going home?" Aunt Mary Anne demanded.

"Yes to the lodge."

"You're a Parker of the lodge?" incredulously.

'I am," wondering what she meant.

"Bless me! Why, is this your father? Bless me! You must have taken after your mother's family. I never saw her."

The next moment the squire had hurried up, full of apologies for being so tardy. "My dear Aunt Mary Anne, I can't say enough. One of the horses cast a shoe in the avenue. I had to stop. I was afraid to drive three miles over these frozen roads with a loose shoe. I'm afraid you have been waiting."

"Not at all all. At least, we have been here a few minutes, but only long enough to become acquainted. I hear this is one of your boys, Thomas?"

"Yes, this is Geoffrey, my second son. And this is Dick's son, Lionel," indicating his nephew, who had not yet spoken.

For a moment Geoffrey Parker stared at the old lady, a surprised smile gradually overspreading his countenance. "Why, are you Aunt Mary?" he exclaimed.

"Why shouldn't I be?" she demanded.

"I don't know why you shouldn't, but I didn't expect you were," he replied. Then he audaciously bent his head down and kissed her on either cheek. "Welcome to Addingham, anyway, Aunt Mary Anne," he said. "And now I think we've been standing here long enough."

Aunt Mary Anne allowed herself to be hurried off to the carriage, which was waiting at the gate of the little country station. Here she was comfortably installed in the warmest corner of the shabby but commodious omnibus.

Thus they arrived at the lodge, after dropping Lionel and his portmanteau at the rectory gate, and, so when Mrs. Jex, anxious and hospitable, ran out to greet the important guest on whose pleasure so much depended, she saw to her astonishment her favorite boy, Geoffrey, sitting next to his formidable aunt.

"Why, Geoff," she cried, "we didn't expect you until to-morrow."

"Lal and I got a chance of getting off to-day, so we both jumped at it," he replied. "It was a bit of luck to find someone else at the station who had to be met."

Then he turned to help Aunt Mary Anne out of the carriage, and Mrs. Jex held out both hands with a cordiality which was, it must be confessed, somewhat tempered by awe and anxiety.

"Welcome to Addingham, Miss Parker," she said.

"If I might be called 'Aunt Mary Anne,' I should like it better," the arrival snapped out.

"Oh, we would much prefer to call you so," began Mrs. Jex, when Geoffrey broke in with a laugh.

"In fact, we always do."

"Do you, my boy?" said Aunt Mary Anne, looking up at him with her bright old eyes. Then she turned back again to Mrs. Jex. "Oh, how cold it is. Tell me, is it always like this in winter? I haven't spent a winter in England since I was twenty."

Mrs. Jex laughed. "It is a very seasonable winter," she replied. "Personally, I prefer it, always provided that I can have good fires and plenty of them. Of course, it puts a stop to the hunting," she added, as she led the way into the house. "This way, Miss—Aunt Mary Anne; they are all here."

Aunt Mary Anne drew back apprehensively. "What! Have you asked all of them to meet me? Thomas, that was very unfriendly of you. Too many Parkers at a time get on my nerves. I wish I hadn't come."

"What—the family?" he exclaimed, misunderstanding her. "What, did you expect them, eh? My dear aunt, I'm barely on speaking terms with most of them, and certainly not on visiting ones."

Aunt Mary Anne breathed a sigh of relief. "I beg your pardon, Thomas. I was afraid you had, that was all. Now I can, when I have seen Margherita disposed of, resign myself to perfect enjoyment.

She turned back and spoke a few words to the maid.

"If one of you will take her up to my room and put her near a fire, and give her some hot coffee or a little hot wine and water, she will be all right until I go to look after her," she said.

Mrs. Jex cast a glance at Rosamond which said, plainly enough: "Do as she tells you; she's going to stay forever."

And, oh! what a fortnight it was that followed. Probably never before had the lodge been so thoroughly disorganized and turned upside down. Aunt Mary Anne was a revelation in more ways than one, and amid all their Christmas festivities the Jex-Parkers felt as if they were sitting on the top of a barrel of gunpowder, aye, and with lighted torches in their hands. For Aunt Mary Anne, who was certainly eighty years old, was the direct opposite of all their preconceived notions, both of her as she was and of her as they believed she ought to be. She was not old in their conception of the word; indeed, as Eva remarked in the privacy of their chamber to Daisy, she was only old in wickedness. She was up first thing in the morning. She was awake the last of anyone at night. She was here, there, and everywhere. She scoffed at old superstitions which they held sacred. She declined to go to church, and she smoked choice little cigarettes all day long, no matter who was present.

"Try one of my cigarettes, Dick," she said to the portly rector of Addingham on the evening of Christmas Day, when everybody had eaten too much and the noisy party had separated, the youngstres to clear the drawing-room for a dance. "What! Are you afraid of your wife? Is that why you look across at her? You look to me as if you smoked a churchwarden in the privacy of your own study. Oh, you do? Well, then, you can't be above trying one of my cigarettes. They're worth smoking, I can tell you, and when I come down to the rectory I will come into your study and smoke a churchwarden with you. Yes, I will. Now, what's your wife looking like that for? Does she think I can't? H'm!"

By this time the family at the lodge had already come to a belief that there was nothing of the nature which is usually called impossible of which Aunt Mary Anne was not capable; and worst of all, she was possessed of an appalling frankness of speech such as kept everyone of the two households, excepting Geoffry, on tenter-hooks of apprehension lest she should let fly some shaft of unusual bitterness or of disinterested plain speaking.

"Heaven help you, my poor dears, but you live narrow lives down here," she remarked, as she departed to her well-earned rest on Christmas night. "You've been very kind and forbearing and hospitable to me and I can see plainly enough how I get on your nerves. My! I thought that good lady down at the rectory would have had a fit when I told her I'd go and smoke a churchwarden with him."

"And will you, Aunt Mary Anne?" asked Eva.

"Will I?" Aunt Mary Anne echoed. "Why, of course I will. I'll take a pride and pleasure in doing it. Bless you, child, a woman like me loves to shock a woman like that, and perhaps I like her all the better for showing so plainly I do shock her. Now, that wily Mrs. Graham came to see me in Paris once, and she made herself sick by smoking to keep me in countenance. Good night, Bright Eyes. There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

For a minute or so after the door had closed behind her not a soul spoke a word. Then Eva, with an apprehensive glance towards the hall, said in a thrilling voice: "I'm quite sure she's mad."

"Yes. I think she's just a bit touched," rejoined Rosamond.

"Bad, as well as mad, I consider," chimed in Daisy.

"Hush—sh! Walls have ears," Eva exclaimed in a loud whisper.

"Oh! but poor Aunt Wallis," Rosamond cried. "Her face—the horror of it! Did you ever see anything to equal it? And Aunt Mary Anne never forked out the value of a farthing to any of us, nor a tip to the servant—nothing; and she's worth millions."

"The stingy old beast," said Eva, with emphasis.

Undoubtedly Aunt Mary Anne was not a success at Addingham lodge; still less was she liked at the rectory; indeed, the lady of that establishment, went, in the privacy of her confidences to her lord and master, so far as to say that she should, in the event of the old lady proposing herself as a visitor to the rectory, distinctly decline the honor.

It is true that Thomas Jex, as she always called him when speaking of him, invariably treated her with the same courtesy that he would have shown to a guest invited in the usual way, while Mrs. Jex, fat, comfortable, easy-going lady that she was, treated her from first to last with an indulgence of manner which plainly showed to those who knew her real feeling, that she shared the views of her three girls. Most decidedly, Aunt Mary Anne was not a success on this, her first visit to her relatives.

A whole fortnight dragged itself away, the young Parkers declared the very longest two weeks they had ever known, and then Aunt Mary Anne declared her intention of departing.

But on the last evening, when dinner was over and the whole party happened to be together in the drawing-room, Aunt Mary Anne spoke out. "I wanted to say a few words to you all," she said, taking her little Russian cigarette from her lips and holding it delicately between her slender old fingers, on which many diamonds twinkled bravely. "I'm going to speak plainly, for the last time, my dears. I had never seen any of you—excepting my nephew here—before, and I wanted to see you in your own home and as you are, and so I proposed myself, without any regard to your convenience, as a guest. I haven't been exactly a success——"

"I'm sure you were very welcome, Aunt Mary Anne," put in Mrs. Jex, all in a hurry, "and we have all done our best to be nice——"

"Facts are facts," said Aunt Mary Anne; "and you may be pleased to know now that I'm not usually such a hedgehog as I've seemed this last fortnight. My dear Mrs. Jex, you were not born a Parker to begin with, and you don't know what it is to be alone in the world, the only one of your generation, and rich, as I am. It's a great responsibility to be cursed with a huge fortune. It's so hard to know where to leave it justly. I've kept my family at arm's length for years, because those I did come across laid down and begged me to kick 'em—they lick-spitted to me, and that I hate."

"I'm sure we haven't!" flashed out Eva.

"Eva!" cried Mr. and Mrs. Jex in the same breath.

"Leave her alone," cried Aunt Mary Anne, "the child is right, and what is more, I like you all the better for it. When this boy hadn't a notion who I was he championed my wretched Margherita, he was nice and kind to me, and when he found out I was the rich old aunt he let me alone. You've all endured me, you've been civil, and I've enjoyed it. Now I'm going to have my Christmas. I'm going to distribute my Christmas boxes. My dears, I'm eighty years old, but I'm hale and hearty. I may live to be a hundred. I don't want you to wish I was dead. I should like"—with a curious little break in her voice—"to spend another Christmas at Addingham, so I'm going to give you each a cheque to-night. Put it by, my dears, for it will help you on in the world, and later on, when I've no more need of it, there'll be more for each of you. Here are the envelopes, you can open them by-and-bye."

For a moment there was dead silence, then Geoffry spoke. "Aunt Mary Anne," he said. "I see that you understand us, and how impossible it is for any of us, either here or at the rectory, to lick-spit, as you put it just now, for what we might get out of you. But we're glad that you like us for ourselves, and now, perhaps, you will let us like you because you are the most refreshing, amusing, not to say lucky old lady that ever existed, and not because one day you may benefit us in another way. For this," holding up the envelope, "whatever it is, thank you very much, Aunt Mary Anne."

"Margherita's champion," said Aunt Mary Anne. "You take after your mother's family. Come and kiss me. And now good-night, my dears. To-morrow, Thomas, you must take me down to smoke another churchwarden with Dick, and I must make it up to his wife if I can. But, Lord! how she snubbed me, that woman. Good-night, my dears."

Ten minutes later Eva turned, with a half-scared look, to Rosamond. "Rox, what's in yours? Do you think it's a joke?"

"Five thousand golden jokes," answered Rosamond. "What a guest for Christmas!"

[THE END.]

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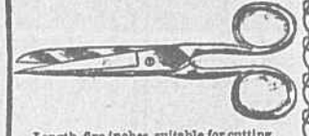

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11	for 9 " "	511	of 434 88	for 550
12	for 8 " "	568	of 486 28	for 600
13	for 7 " "	622	of 540 15	for 650
14	for 6 " "	673	of 596 64	for 700
15	for 5 " "	729	of 655 99	for 750
16	for 4 " "	785	of 718 09	for 800
17	for 3 " "	841	of 782 40	for 850
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20	for 0 " "	1,000	of 1,000 00	for 1,000

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