

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Bassett

Stella Gibbons

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About the Book

The Tower Guesthouse lies nestled between the beech woods of Buckinghamshire. It is run by the unlikely partnership of balmy Miss Padsoe and young, cockney Miss Baker - divided by class and age, they are determined to dislike each other. Through their tale and the interwoven tribulations of two young lovers, Gibbons's sparkling novel explores the heart of friendship and what unites us.

About the Author

Stella Gibbons was born in London in 1902. She went to the North London Collegiate School and studied journalism at University College, London. She then spent ten years working for various newspapers, including the *Evening Standard*. Stella Gibbons is the author of twenty-five novels, three volumes of short stories and four volumes of poetry. Her first publication was a book of poems, *The Mountain Beast* (1930), and her first novel *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932) won the Femina Vie Heureuse Prize in 1933. Amongst her works are *Christmas at Cold Comfort Farm* (1940), *Westwood* (1946), *Conference at Cold Comfort Farm* (1959) and *Starlight* (1967). She was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 1950. In 1933 she married the actor and singer Allan Webb. They had one daughter. Stella Gibbons died in 1989.

ALSO BY STELLA GIBBONS

Cold Comfort Farm

Enbury Heath

Nightingale Wood

My American

Christmas at Cold Comfort Farm

The Rich House

Ticky

The Bachelor

Westwood

The Matchmaker

Conference at Cold Comfort Farm

Here Be Dragons

White Sand and Grey Sand

The Charmers

Starlight

TO
AUNTIE RU

STELLA GIBBONS

Bassett

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

"I never mean to marry; it is so disagreeable."

(THE HEIR OF REDCLYFFE.)

"But still, you will be an old maid—and that's so dreadful!"

(EMMA.)

PART I

CHAPTER I

THERE IS A simplicity which comes from living too much in the world, as well as a simplicity which comes from living out of the world.

Miss Hilda Baker was neither a wise nor a sophisticated woman, although she had earned her living for twenty-one years in the office of a small firm that sold paper patterns in the West End of London, and had bought her clothes at the big stores, and spent some of her three pounds fifteen shillings a week in visits to famous London theatres.

Museums and galleries, dens and historic haunts of peace lay all about Miss Baker, yet she lived as narrowly as a mouse in its hole; and went backwards and forwards between her lodgings and the offices in Reubens House, Strand, for twenty-one years without much change being made in her dark ordinary face.

She dressed neatly and badly in ugly little hats and ugly little necklaces. She took great interest in her clothes, saying that in business it was a good investment to be smart, and that a woman owed it to herself to look nice; each season she planned the wardrobe that she would buy, and never bought it but much enjoyed the planning.

Nor had Miss Baker wistful secret longings for beauty and love and for a richer, wider life. She had never walked in a beautiful garden that was not a public garden nor kissed a man on the mouth with all her heart. She never thought about God and she was vague about the facts of sex and reproduction. She lived in one room, for she was an orphan; and she had few friends.

Sensitive and intelligent people will refuse to believe that Miss Baker could be happy. However, Miss Baker was happy.

She had managed to save one hundred and eighty pounds in twenty-one years out of a salary which had risen from eight shillings a week (her parents had been living in those days) to three pounds and fifteen shillings a week. Then, when she was thirty-eight, an uncle who was a grocer died and left her two hundred pounds, and she at once put it into her Savings Bank account and it rather worried her because she did not know what to do with it.

Three hundred and eighty pounds seemed an enormous sum of money to Miss Baker (and indeed, it is quite a large sum, if one stops thinking snobbishly about money, and realises for what a long time such a sum would keep one in roof and food).

"It quite worries me," said Miss Baker to her friend Miss Worrall, the head pattern-cutter, as they sat one Saturday afternoon, a few weeks after Christmas, in the Charing Cross Lyons' Corner House, after having been to see Ronald Colman at the Tivoli. "It's a lot of money, three hundred and eighty pounds is. I feel I ought to be doing something with it, somehow."

"It wouldn't worry me," said Miss Worrall, who was very envious of Miss Baker's three hundred and eighty pounds and thought that Miss Baker was not properly grateful about it. "I think it's lovely. Why, just think, Hilda, if you were to be sacked to-morrow, you could live on it for months."

"I'm afraid of it Dribbling Away," said Miss Baker ominously. "You know. A bit here and a bit there and before you know where it is, it's all gone and nothing to show for it. Like it is sometimes when you go out shopping."

"You might go abroad," suggested Miss Worrall.

"I've been. With one of those Lunn's tours. Eight years ago. You remember. I can't say I liked it much, either.

Geneva was all right, but the other places looked so foreign. There wasn't anything to do except look at things. I wasn't sorry to get home. East, west, home's best. Besides, Lily, if I went abroad I should lose my job. Jobs aren't so easy to get, nowadays."

"They might keep it open for you. You've been there longer than anyone."

"Oh yeah?" said Miss Baker, putting a penny under her plate for the waitress. Miss Worrall put twopence. She earned four pounds fifteen a week; and graded her charities accordingly.

"Well ... they might. You never know."

"Yes, I do know. They wouldn't. Besides, I don't want to go abroad. Wasting a lot of money on looking at things."

"You might buy a little car."

"I can't drive one. No idea how they work."

"If it was me, I should buy clothes," said Miss Worrall, in a soft, gloatingly voluptuous voice. Miss Worrall already wore more clothes, and beads too, than one would have thought it possible to arrange on one smallish woman, but this did not prevent her from wanting to buy more. "Lily has a lovely taste in clothes, but a bit too dressy for me," Miss Baker would say of her friend.

"Oh, well ... I must think it over, that's all," said Miss Baker. They parted without having decided what was to be done with the blessed money: Miss Baker darted into the Tube which took her back to Camden Town and Miss Worrall went back to Catford, where she lived with an old mother with whom she quarrelled and argued from morning till night.

Miss Baker continued to think it over for the next few days.

What went on in Miss Baker's head, however, can hardly be described as thinking. A series of exclamations which took the form of "Oo, that's an idea!" and, "Ooo, I could never stand that," went in at one end of her mind and out

at the other, but she decided nothing. She kept on thinking over the blessed money until it was a regular nuisance: and she stood in a draught which whined through the hot cutting-room, and that gave her neuralgia: at least, she said it was neuralgia, but Miss Worrall (who liked exciting and disagreeable things to happen) said that it was probably a decayed tooth right up at the back of her head, and that she ought to go to the dentist and let him see to it; he would probably say that it had to come out. Miss Worrall hoped that he would, though of course she did not say that she hoped he would.

So one evening Miss Baker asked if she might go home an hour earlier because she had to go and see the dentist, and having got permission, off she went.

She was not feeling at all cheerful.

It was partly because her face ached, and partly because she felt she ought to do something about that blessed money, and she could not make up her mind what: and partly because it was a nasty evening: so black, so despairingly sunk in winter that all the shop windows and streets seemed lit up in defiance of the night, as though the sun had gone for good, and the world was to be artificially lit for evermore. Also, it had been raining all day; and that made umbrellas and heavy coats smell stuffy and horrid, and everybody pushed snarlingly for the buses and tubes.

"Glad to get home, and no error," thought Miss Baker crossly, hanging from the roof of the carriage.

Her dentist lived in Camden Town, on a corner quite close to her lodgings: she got there punctually, and sat in the waiting-room with one or two other cross and frightened people, waiting her turn and looking at the jokes in *The Humorist*. There was a copy of a sixpenny paper called *Town and Country* on the table with the others, and Miss Baker picked it up, hoping that there might be a tale in it. She always enjoyed a tale.

There was no tale; but there was, among other features, a column entitled "The Helping Hand."

Underneath this heading there were given details about partnerships, described by a lady who signed herself "Phœbe," and who conducted this column from the safe retreat of an obscure side-street in Holborn. She it was who put, by letter, untrained but willing spinsters in touch with energetic gentlewomen with some capital; and set them off on a glorious career of breeding chickens in St. Ives or running an arts and crafts shop in Newcastle-on-Tyne. Nor did she ever hear (except sometimes indirectly and long years afterwards) whether the partnership had been a success, or whether the ladies had slit each other's throats within the first half-hour of meeting. She sowed ruin and rapture among the readers of *Town and Country*, but herself remained (perhaps wisely) invisible and anonymous.

Miss Baker read "The Helping Hand" with her mind running vaguely on that blessed money; a partnership of some kind had been one of the things she had thought she might do with it.

None of them sounded interesting until she came to No. 7, which said:

"A reader who owns a large furnished house near Reading would like to meet with another lady, with some capital, with the object of turning the house into a guest house. My reader assures me that the house is within easy reach of Reading by bus and suggests that some of the students at Reading University might be glad of the chance to live in beautiful country outside the town. The house has a large garden. If any reader is interested will she please write to Box E. A. P., care of this office, and I shall be delighted to forward letters to my reader living near Reading."

Miss Baker, at the end of her reading, raised her head and threw a bold and steady stare round the waiting-room. Several people were looking at her, in the hopeless way people do look at other people in dentists' waiting-rooms, but she did not mind a bit. She tore out the paragraph,

folded it up and put it in her bag, and replaced the copy of *Town and Country* on the table.

Everybody felt shocked, but nobody had the spirit even to raise their eyebrows, and Miss Baker's turn being next, she was shortly borne away by the dentist's maid and seen no more that night.

But when she got home (for there was no more the matter with her tooth than neuralgia, which she had caught from standing in that draught) she wrote to the lady who lived just outside Reading.

It was all done on the spur of the moment. Something seemed to come over her, as she said to Miss Worrall afterwards. It had to be.

She told the lady living near Reading that she had some money but she did not say how much. She said that she liked the idea of the large garden and the students. She added that her mother had kept a boarding-house in Wandsworth for thirty years, and suggested that it might be her mother coming out in her, and left the other lady to make all plans.

After the letter was written and posted, she felt more comfortable in her mind: she had begun to do something about that blessed money.

"There'll be lots of others writing. There always are, for those things," said Miss Worrall, on being told about it. "You'll never hear from her, don't you fret your fat."

"Hundreds of other people haven't got three hundred and eighty pounds (well, it's really three hundred and seventy nine and sixteen shillings, now, I took out four shillings when I was a bit short at the end of last week) to invest," said Miss Baker. "I bet you I hear from her."

And so she did, a week later, on another dark evening when she had hurried home to nurse her neuralgia, which refused to go away.

The letter came by the nine o'clock post. Miss Baker, sitting over her little gas fire mending her stockings, heard

the postman's knock and went down into the hall to see if there was anything for her.

One letter lay on the mat, looking very white in the dimness of the narrow hall, and Miss Baker picked it up and saw that it was, indeed, for her.

"Ah, 'e don't forget you. One of the faithful kind, 'e is," said her landlord Mr. Peeley, who had come up from the depths to see if there was anything for him. "When's it going to be?" Mr. Peeley had made this joke for fifteen years, this being the length of time that Miss Baker had lived in Mr. and Mrs. Peeley's house. Miss Baker replied that it would be either the fifth of November or the first of April next year, and went upstairs with her letter to her room.

She stood under the faintly popping gas, and looked at the envelope for a little while, before she opened it. It was a thin grey envelope, addressed in a thin grey writing.

The postmark was "Bassett."

She had never heard of such a place: but as she did not know the writing, she concluded that it must be from the lady near Reading, and opened it with a feeling of excitement.

"The Tower,
Crane Hill,
Bassett, Bucks.

DEAR MISS BAKER,

After much *earnest* thought I have decided that yours is the most *suitable* letter I have received as a result of the notice which appeared in *Town and Country*. *I am sure that the house could be made a success*. It is not damp. Some of the letters were *most unsuitable*. There was one from a Mr. Arthur Craft. Frequent buses, but rather a *long walk* to them!!! It is so difficult, in these days, to know what to do for the best. Mr. Craft suggested a *Club*. I have a geyser and there are beautiful views. Perhaps we could lay out the tennis court again in the field behind the house. We are six miles from the station, but the buses run past the bottom of the hill. I thought that we might take Indians (not Negroes of course) as guests. Is afternoon tea included do you know? I believe not. Perhaps you will let me know what you think. Or perhaps it would be better if you came down one Saturday. It is easier to go to Reading and take the bus. I could meet you, if we decided

to meet in Town, at half past three in the Clock Department. Perhaps you would suggest a day, if Saturday doesn't suit you. (This Saturday is no good for me I am afraid, as I have my W.I.) But of course, they close on Saturday afternoons. Will you let me know, by return if possible, whether you will meet me as arranged.

Yours faithfully,

ELEANOR AMY PADSOE.

P.S.—It is on clay soil, but some of it is on chalk. *Very healthy!!!*"

Miss Baker read this three times, in some bewilderment.

If a person had earned their living in London for twenty-one years, they acquire a kind of rat-like neatness of behaviour. They can skip quickly from place to place, pop in and out of tea shops, board buses and make sharp little plans which are carried out rat! tat! as deftly as an automatic ticket machine pops out a ticket at Leicester Square tube station. The more obscure and ordinary the person, the more necessary it is that they should acquire this rat-like deftness. They may be simple as daisies mentally, but physically they are deft as rats, flicking themselves neatly in and out of their London holes.

Miss Baker was like this. So she was much taken aback by Miss Padsoe's letter, and muttered to herself that she could not make head or tail of it. A dark thought flitted across her mind. Was Miss Padsoe all there?

"Anyway, I'd better go down on Sunday and chance it," she decided, wondering what Miss Padsoe's W.I. was. "If she's out, she's out, that's all. It won't do any harm to go, and it will make a nice change for me."

So she took out a writing-pad, and wrote firmly to Miss Padsoe, announcing that she would come down to see her next Sunday morning, but that Miss Padsoe was not to bother about giving her any lunch, because she would have a big breakfast and would not want any. (She said this for manners' sake but did not really mean it.) They would talk over everything when they met. She stamped the letter

(Miss Baker was one of the people who always have stamps) and popped out to post it.

The night was colder than it had been when she came home at half-past six. A pure cold smell was wandering through the London streets, drifting between the smell of smoke and wet stones; it was the smell of the snow that was on its way from the steppes of Russia. The papers promised England a snowy week-end.

Miss Baker posted her letter, and popped home to bed in her narrow creaking bedstead. She had arranged four old cushions on top of the mattress to make it softer, but they did not: and when she put out the gas, the street lamp's light fell on her wall through the curtains with a disturbing glare. But she was used to these things, nor did the melancholy clanging of the distant trams keep her awake.

In Buckinghamshire the leaves slowly whitened with rime under the moonless sky. The wet pavements of London frosted over. The snow was coming.

CHAPTER II

SHE CAUGHT A train on Sunday morning, which got into Reading just before eleven. The snow had come, and the fog too: and the streets in London were masked with greasy yellow paste, and gritty layers of dirty white lay along ledges and sloping roofs.

There was the same sight in Reading, as Miss Baker came out of the station into the Sunday hush; greasy, mean streets, dirty snow. The loudest sound was the bells pealing for church. This sound is only melancholy when it is heard at six o'clock on a winter's evening; when it is heard on a Sunday morning, across the snowy roofs of an unfamiliar town, it is a pleasant sound, making quietness more quiet. Miss Baker was quite enjoying it, in spite of her neuralgia.

"Can I get a bus to Bassett?" asked Miss Baker of a taxi-driver who was standing outside the station admiring a gorgeous, enormous, bright-blue sports car which was parked beside his own taxi.

The driver looked at Miss Baker.

"No buses to Bassett on Sundays," said the driver with relish. He saw that Miss Baker was no good for a fare, in her worn coat with ratty fur on its collar and her pot of a hat, but there was no reason why he should pretend to be sorry that no buses ran to Bassett on Sunday.

"Oh," said Miss Baker. "That's cheerful, I must say. Then how do I get there?"

"Taxi," said the taxi-driver.

"I see," said Miss Baker. The worst had come. She would either have to take a taxi out to this Bassett, or else go home again and come on a Saturday. It was true that she

had fifteen shillings in her bag, and three hundred and eighty pounds in the bank, but one hundred and eighty pounds of that money was there chiefly because she had known when not to take taxis. Why! she had only been in a taxi four times in all her life. And country taxis were not like town taxis. They were more of a Car, as you might say. They usually had a Fixed Rate. She ought to have found out about the buses before she came, but she had taken it for granted that there would be Sunday buses to Bassett. There were Sunday buses in London.

"Bassett's a out-of-the-way place," embroidered the driver, reading her soul. "Right up in the 'ills. Good ten miles away, it is. Difficult place to find, too."

"Could one walk there?" asked Miss Baker with dignity.

The taxi-driver smiled a large, patronizing, masculine smile.

"Not in this weather you couldn't. Why ... there's drifts up in them woods ... dozens of feet deep, they are. 'Ard going in this weather."

He made the beechwoods of Buckinghamshire sound as perilous as the Everglades: and so they might have been for all Miss Baker knew. To what kind of a place had she come that had snowdrifts dozens of feet deep, places right up in the hills, and no buses on Sunday?

She said no more for a second or two. She was trying to summon courage to ask the taxi-driver how much he would charge to drive her out to this Bassett. It would probably be an awful lot. It would probably be ten shillings.

In the pause a young man had come out of the station carrying a suitcase, and followed by a girl and a porter wheeling a little trunk on a truck. The young man began to heave the case into the gorgeous car, while the girl stood silently watching him, close to the open door.

"You won't take the trunk, sir?" asked the porter.

"Why not? There's plenty of room for it ... only for god's sake don't scratch my beautiful new leather," said the

young man; and the porter, much shocked but admiring the wild ways of the rich, packed the little trunk into the back seat of the car.

"How much is the fare to Bassett, then?" asked Miss Baker severely, at last.

The taxi-driver drew himself up. Now he would show pot-hat just where she got off. She annoyed him ... standin' there with her teeth stickin' out.

"Twenty-five shillin's return," lied the taxi-driver, loudly and cruelly.

"That seems a lot," said Miss Baker, who was now furious. She was sure it could not be as much as that. It was not in nature to believe that such a fare existed.

"Not for that journey, it isn't," said the taxi-driver, also becoming suddenly furious. "It's cheap, lady, that's what it is. Twenty miles there and back, in this weather."

The young man had overheard all this. He had waved the silent girl into the seat next that of the driver, and was just going to climb in beside her, but now he looked across at Miss Baker and the taxi-driver, and then came over to them, saying agreeably:

"Can I give you a lift? I'm going into Bassett."

"Oh, I say! Well, that *is* kind of you," cried Miss Baker. "But are you sure it's really all right? Not takin' you out of your way or anything?"

"No, it's quite all right. I live there. In you get ... do you mind sitting with the trunk? I think there's room for both of you."

Miss Baker cried that she did not mind at all, and that it was ever so kind of him; and then she stowed herself away beside the little trunk, and pulled up her coat collar to keep the cold wind away from her neuralgia, and off they went.

Now Miss Baker really began to enjoy herself. If there was anything she did like, it was a bit of luxury and comfort. Her life was an affair of twopences and ninepences, baked beans on toast and thrice-mended

shoes, thrice-breathed air and fifth-hand opinions. The price of this great humming car would have kept anyone in baked beans on toast (had anyone so wished to be kept) for life.

They went over a bridge where the grey river slid between fragile leafless willows, and soon they were out in the country. None of the three said a word. The young man never talked while he was driving, the girl was naturally a silent girl, and Miss Baker was too busy trying to breathe through half an inch of imitation beaver fur. She was feeling so pleased at having got the better of that taxi-driver that she had forgotten to wonder how she would get back from Bassett to Reading.

Once the young man glanced round at her, and smiled; a beautiful, mocking yet kind smile that was also a little wistful. It is difficult to get all these qualities into one smile if you try to do it, but the young man's nature was a complex one and it managed the smile for him without difficulty.

"Cold?" he asked.

Miss Baker thanked him ever so, and said that she was not. She screamed at him that it was pretty country and must be lovely in the summer. The girl did not look round. "Stuck up," thought Miss Baker.

In addition to that rat-like deftness of behaviour which we have already talked about, persons who earn their livings in large cities by perching precariously on the ends of little jobs, like birds on a bough, acquire a birdlike suspiciousness of everybody. They are always desperately afraid of being cheated, mocked at, and snubbed. Miss Baker was not afraid of being mocked at, because she had no sense of humour, but she was very suspicious indeed of being cheated and snubbed. An attempt had already been made to cheat her. An attempt was now being made to snub her. She took stock of the silent girl's hat and back, and decided that her mackintosh was one of the fifteen and

elevenpenny kind, and her hat one of the eight and elevenpenny kind. What right, then, had such a hat and such a mackintosh to snub anybody?

All she could see of the girl, as she turned sometimes to look out of the window into the snowy depths of the silent woods, was a pale curve of plump cheek and an upward curl of short dark eyelash.

"Nearly there now," said the young man cheerfully. "Not cold, are you, Miss Catton?"

"No, thank you," replied Miss Catton.

("She's too fat," thought Miss Baker. "Not the type I admire. Wonder who she is. Not his style at all, I should have thought. She's poor. He's rich. Must be something in it.")

The car seemed to have come a long way from Reading, flying along narrow roads between tall beeches, occasionally crossing main roads on which the snow was threaded with car tracks. Sometimes snow fell from the branches far down in the heart of the white and silent woods, and Miss Baker saw the released branch sway back into place. There was no other movement in the woods; everything was solemn, silent, far away.

Miss Baker was not at all sure that she liked it. What would it be like to live in such a quiet place? Oh well, nothing was settled yet, and she need not stay if she did not want to; she had a good job, as jobs go, and money in the Savings Bank.

"Any particular part of Bassett do you want?" asked the young man. The car was climbing the steepest hill it had yet attempted.

"Well, if it won't take you out of your way too much, I really wanted The Tower, Crane Hill. Miss Padsoe's house. But please don't trouble if it's out of your way. I can easily Ask," and Miss Baker glanced all round into the silent woods, as though they were full of convenient peasants whom she might Ask.

"No bother. It's just at the top. This is Crane Hill. I'll drop you just at the gates, shall I?"

"Thanks ever so, if you will."

The top of the hill was crowned by another wood, but before the car reached this, the young man stopped it in front of a pair of closed white wooden gates. On them was painted "The Tower."

It was very quiet when the young man had shut off the engine of the car. The three sat still for a few seconds, listening to the silence, with their breath going up into the frosty air. It was certainly very quiet indeed. "Exquisitely quiet," thought the young man, who loved music better than anything in the world, and, next to it, silence.

"Enough to give you the creeps," thought Miss Baker, beginning to disentangle herself from the inside of the car.

"They're rich," thought the silent girl. "Much, much richer than I thought they'd be. I'm not going to like it."

"Here you are," said the young man, opening the door of the car for Miss Baker. "You'll be all right now, won't you? Good-bye."

"Good-bye, and thanks *ever* so. I don't know *what* I should have done if you hadn't been so kind."

The car moved on, and just as it left Miss Baker, the girl looked round and gave her a brief and nervous smile.

Miss Baker did not return the smile.

"Afraid of crackin' her face, I should think," muttered Miss Baker.

There she was, left outside The Tower, seemingly alone in the middle of snow-buried Buckinghamshire. She looked over the white gate into a drive that curved away between snow-covered hedges of laurel and rhododendron. It was a shadowy drive, even on this clear grey day filled with light thrown up from the snow; tall firs and beeches made it shadowy. The house could not be seen. The evergreen bushes and the still, thick trees shut it off completely from the road. On the opposite side of the road to the gate was a

screen of trees, through which, far off, more snowy hills could be seen.

Miss Baker's neuralgia had started again and she was feeling hungry. Addressing herself as Hilda my girl, Miss Baker remarked that this would not do, and stepped briskly up to the gates.

They parted at her touch, and she stepped through them.

The shadow of the old firs fell on her; it was very cold in their shade. Suddenly, high overhead in the tower that gave the house its name a light, high-pitched bell quickly struck twelve. The sound made the firs, the motionless snow-burdened laurels, the quiet air, seem lonelier.

The short drive ended in a screen of firs, and there was the house. She looked across a large lawn, covered with untrodden snow. On the opposite shore of this lake of snow stood the large house of red brick, a round tower at one end. Beds full of withered plants lay under the low windows facing the lawn and on the same side of the house as the tower, and just beneath it there was a small conservatory: Miss Baker could see the long fingers of palms spread against the frosty glass.

She found the front door at the side of the house, set in a deep gloomy porch over which grew snow-covered ivy.

There was not a sound; the large house might have been full of dead people and Miss Baker, being a Cockney, had not noticed a track of footprints in the snow, leading away from the house down the drive. They were long, narrow, elegant prints; they proved that a lady had left the house earlier that morning, and had not yet returned.

Miss Baker pulled an iron bell-handle.

It came rushing out to an alarming length in her hand, but she did not hear it ringing inside the house. She stood there waiting, with her collar pulled up about her neuralgic jaw, and her plain sallow face pinched with cold, feeling

cross but not nervous: it needs imagination to make a person nervous, and that Miss Baker had not got.

"They don't hurry themselves, I must say," she muttered after waiting two minutes; and she pulled again.

It was unfortunate, for even as the bell slid back she heard firm steps crossing a stone floor, and a blurred figure appeared behind the birds and leaves on the stained glass panels.

The figure paused. It seemed to be peering at Miss Baker before opening the door, and Miss Baker, having no friends who lived in great clean houses with maids to open the door, did not realise what a very queer thing this was for a parlourmaid to do. It seemed quite ordinary to her. It was what she would have done, if she had lived in the depths of the lonely country and someone had come on a dull snowy morning and loudly pulled the front-door bell. You never know, these days.

CHAPTER III

WHEN AT LAST the door was opened it was done so very slowly, as though the figure peering through the dull reds and blues of the stained glass were reluctant to make the movement. Miss Baker looked up into the cold suspicious face of a handsome girl in cap and apron, framed in the dark crack between open door and door-frame. It was a pity she was so much taller than Miss Baker. Miss Baker at once became furious—at this, at the slow opening of the door, at the girl's suspicious stare.

"Good morning. I've come to see Miss Padsoe. She's expecting me. I wrote to her Friday, to say I'd come to-day. I'm Miss Hilda Baker. Is Miss Padsoe in?"

There was a pause.

"No," said the girl at last. "Miss Padsoe is at church. I don't think she was expectin' you. She never said so."

She had not moved the door a fraction. A whiff of roasting meat suddenly drifted out to Miss Baker from the darkness of the hall, and reminded her that she was hungry. She became more furious still. Her face went dark and wrinkled, like a marmoset's in a rage.

"She's expecting me all right. I'll come in and wait," she said firmly, and put one ill-shod foot on to the doorstep.

The girl was forced to move back because she did not want Miss Baker on the top of her, but she did it very slowly and she never took her stare off Miss Baker's face.

"It's very funny. She never *said* anythin' about anyone comin'."

"P'raps she did, only you forgot," said Miss Baker tartly, still advancing remorselessly, yet so slowly that no onlooker