

HOME

BY BANNISTER MERWIN



AFRAIL little figure came fluttering into the post-office—a figure of a woman in rusty black. Under her green bonnet gray hair, with its yellow tinge, was scarcely distinguishable from the outlines of her seamed face. Her nose looked pinched; her mouth was a vague line; her eyes wandered aimlessly, resting no more than an instant on any one point. One could not say that those light-blue eyes were expressionless; but the meaning in them came and went with flickering uncertainty, like the light of a candle that is almost gone.

The new minister, looking up over his glasses from the letter he was reading, found himself wondering whether the November wind had blown her in from the street in spite of herself; for, once over the sill, she had hesitated. He intercepted a swift, troubled glance, that seemed to say:

"I know who you are—or I ought to; but my poor mind is too busy to think it out just now."

Then she darted forward to the letter-slit, and tremulously mailed the letter which she had clutched so closely to her breast. As it rustled into the box on the other side of the partition, she laughed softly to herself, and hurried out into the wind, to be blown, as the minister put it to himself, Heaven knew where else—to the butcher's or grocer's, perhaps, or—home. And what kind of a home?

The postmaster, from his little window of "general delivery", broke in on the minister's thoughts. Being cer-

tain that every human being is curious about every other human being, the postmaster saw a pleasurable opportunity to anticipate a question.

"That's the widow Varnum," he said. "You'll see her at church every Sunday—rain or shine."

"The widow Varnum?" repeated the minister.

"She's been like that for twenty years, to *my* knowledge," the postmaster went on, settling himself on his elbows. "Just a little—you know." He tapped his temple with an inky forefinger. "Not enough to harm, of course. She's right enough to do dressmaking, and earn her living."

"Pathetic!" said the minister.

"Ye-es, I suppose it is. But you get used to it after a while. And then, as I say, she's harmless."

"The pathos is hers, not ours," remarked the minister incisively.

"Oh, well!" The postmaster nodded his recognition of the view-point of the specialist in human suffering. "It all came of losing her son," he continued. "Twenty-five years ago, or more, he was killed in an accident somewheres out West. She don't realize he's dead. Every few days she writes a letter to him and brings it here. Sometimes they're addressed to Chicago, and sometimes to Denver, and sometimes to New York. She never stamps them. Years ago I used to give them back to her, but now I just tear them up. She's better off for not knowing," he added, as a concession to the ministerial mind.

"Yes," the clergyman slowly admitted.