The Younger Set

By ROBERT W. CHAMBERS,

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I've a villainous habit of muttering mushy nothings"—

"You did say something!"

"No; only ghoulish gabble, the mere murky mouthings of a meager mind."

"You did. It's rude not to repeat it when I ask you."

"I didn't mean to be rude."

"Then repeat what you said to yourself."

"Do you wish me to?" he asked, raising his eyes so gravely that the smile faded from lip and voice when she answered: "I beg your pardon, Captain Selwyn. I did not know you were serious."

"Oh, I'm not," he returned lightly. "I'm never serious. No man who soliloquizes can be taken seriously. Don't you know, Miss Erroll, that the crowning absurdity of all tragedy is the soliloquy?"

Her smile became delightfully uncertain. She did not quite understand him, though her instinct warned her that for a second something had menaced their understanding.

Riding forward with him through the crisp sunshine of mid-December, the word "tragedy" still sounding in her ears, her thoughts reverted naturally to the only tragedy besides her own which had ever come very near to her—his own.

Could he have meant that? Did people mention such things after they had happened? Did they not rather conceal them, hide them deeper and deeper with the aid of time and the kindly years for a burial past all recollection?

Troubled, uncomfortably intent on evading every thought or train of ideas evoked, she put her mount to a gallop. But thought kept pace with her.

She was, of course, aware of the situation regarding Selwyn's domestic affairs. She could not very well have been kept long in ignorance of the facts, so Nina had told her carefully, leaving in the young girl's mind only a bewildered sympathy for man and wife whom a dreadful and incomprehensible catastrophe had overtaken, only an impression of something new and fearsome which she had hitherto been unaware of in the world and which was to be added to her small but unhappily growing list of sad and incredible things.

Returning from their gallop Miss Erroll had very little to say. Selwyn, too, was silent and absentminded. She thought of her brother, and the old hurt at his absence on that night throbbed again. Forgive? Yes. But how could she forget it?

"What is it?" she asked.

"I wish you knew Gerald well," she said impulsively. "He is such a dear fellow, and I think you'd be good for him—and, besides," she hastened to add, with instinctive loyalty lest he misconstrue: "Gerald would be good for you. We were a great deal together—at one time."

He nodded, smilingly attentive.

"Of course when he went away to school it was different," she added. "And then he went to Yale. That was four more years, you see."

"Did he row—your brother Gerald?"

"No," she said. She did not add that he had broken training. That was her own sorrow, to be concealed even from Gerald. "No; he played polo sometimes. He rides beautifully, Captain Selwyn, and he is so clever when he cares to be—at the traps, for example—and—oh—anything. He once swam—oh, dear, I forget. Was it five or fifteen or fifty miles? Is that too far? Do people swim those distances?"

"Some of those distances," replied Selwyn.

"Well, then, Gerald swam some of those distances, and everybody was amazed. I do wish you knew him well."

"I mean to," he said. "I must look him up at his rooms or his club or perhaps at Neergard & Co.'s."

"Will you do this?" she asked so earnestly that he glanced up surprised.

"Yes," he said, and after a moment, "I'll do it today, I think—this afternoon. Are you having a good time?" he asked condescendingly, but without intention.

"Heavenly! How can you ask that, with every day filled and a chance to decline something every day? If you'd only go to one—just one—of the dances and teas and dinners you'd be able to see for yourself what a good time I am having. I don't know why I should be so delightfully lucky, but everybody asks me to dance, and every man I meet is particularly nice, and nobody has been very horrid to me—perhaps because I like everybody."

She rode on beside him. They were walking their horses now, and as her silken coated mount paced forward through the sunshine she sat at ease, straight as a slender amazon in her habit, ruddy hair glistening at the nape of her neck, the scarlet of her lips always a vivid contrast to that wonderful unblemished skin of snow.

He thought to himself quite impersonally: "She's a real beauty, that youngster. No wonder they ask her to dance and nobody is horrid. Men are likely enough to go quite mad about her, as Nina predicts. Probably some of 'em have already—that chucklehead youth who was there Tuesday gulping up the tea"— And, "What was his name?" he asked aloud.

"Whose name?" she inquired, roused by his voice from smiling retrospection.

"That chucklehead—the young man who continued to haunt you so persistently when you poured tea for Nina on Tuesday. Of course they all haunted you," he explained politely as she shook her head in sign of noncomprehension, "but there was one who—ah—gulped at his cup."

"Please—you are rather dreadful, aren't you?"

"Yes. So was he. I mean the infatuated chinless gentleman whose facial ensemble remotely resembled the features of a pleased and placid lizard of the reptilian period."

"Oh, George Fane! That is particularly disagreeable of you, Captain Selwyn, because his wife has been very nice to me—Rosamund Fane—and she spoke most cordially of you"—

"Which one was she?"

"The Dresden china one. She looks—she simply cannot look as though she were married. It's most amusing, for people always take her for somebody's youngest sister who will be out next winter. Don't you remember seeing her?"

"No, I don't. But there were dozens coming and going every minute whom I didn't know. Still, I behaved well, didn't I?"

"Pretty badly—to Kathleen Lawn, whom you cornered so that she couldn't escape until her mother made her go without any tea."

"Here comes Mr. Fane now with a strikingly pretty girl. How beautifully they are mounted," smilingly returning Fane's salute, "and she—oh, so you do know her, Captain Selwyn? Who is she?"

Crop raised mechanically in dazed salute, Selwyn's light touch on the bridle had tightened to a clutch, which brought his horse up sharply.

"What is it?" she asked, drawing bridle in her turn and looking back into his white, stupefied face.

"Pain," he said, unconscious that he spoke. At the same instant the stunned eyes found their focus and found her beside his stirrup, leaning wide from her seat in sweet concern, one gloved hand resting on the pommel of his saddle.

"Are you ill?" she asked. "Shall we dismount? If you feel dizzy, please lean against me."

"I am all right," he said coolly, and as she recovered her seat he set his horse in motion. His face had become very red now. He looked at her, then beyond her with all the deliberate concentration of aloof indifference.

Confused, conscious that something had happened which she did not comprehend and sensitively aware of the preoccupation which, if it did not ignore her, accepted her presence as of no consequence, she permitted her horse to set his own pace.

Neither self command nor self control was lacking now in Selwyn; he simply was too self absorbed to care what she thought—whether she thought at all. And into his consciousness, throbbing heavily under the rushing reaction from shock, crowded the crude fact that Alixe was no longer an apparition evoked in sleeplessness, in sunlit brooding, in the solitude of crowded avenues and swarming streets; she was an actual presence again in his life.

Chapter 4

SELWYN had truly enough expected to encounter Alixe again somewhere, though what he had been preparing to see heaven alone knew, but certainly not the supple, laughing girl he had known, that smooth, slender, dark eyed, dainty visitor who had played at marriage with him through a troubled and unreal dream and was gone when he awoke—so swift the brief two years had passed, as swift in sorrow as in happiness.

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Luncheon had not been served when they returned. Without lingering on the landing, as usual, they exchanged a formal word or two. Then Eileen mounted to her own quarters and Selwyn walked nervously through the library, where he saw Nina evidently prepared for some midday festivity, for she wore hat and furs and the brougham was outside.

"Oh, Phil," she said, "Eileen probably forgot that I was going out. It's a directors' luncheon at the exchange. Please tell Eileen that I can't wait for her. Where is she?"

"Dressing, I suppose. Nina, I"—

"One moment, dear. I promised the children that you would lunch with them in the nursery. Do you mind? I did it to keep them quiet. I was weak enough to compromise between a fox hunt or fudge, so I said you'd lunch with them. Will you?"

"Certainly. And, Nina, what sort of a man is this George Fane?"

"Fane?"

"Yes—the chinless gentleman, with gentle brown and protruding eyes and the expression of a tame brontosaurus."

"Why—how do you mean, Phil? What sort of man? He's a banker. He isn't very pretty, but he's popular."

"Oh, popular!" he nodded, as close to a sneer as he could ever get.

"He has a very popular wife too. Haven't you met Rosamund? People like him. He's about everywhere; very useful, very devoted to pretty women. But I'm really in a hurry, Phil." Her voice dwindled and died away through the hall; the front door clanged.

He went to his quarters, drove out Austin's man, arranged his own fresh linen, took a sulky plunge and, an unlighted cigarette between his teeth, completed his dressing in sullen introspection.

When he had tied his scarf and bitten his cigarette to pieces he paced the room once or twice, squared his shoulders, breathed deeply and, unbending his eyebrows, walked off to the nursery.

"Hello, you kids!" he said, with an effort. "I've come to luncheon. Very nice of you to want me, Drina."

"I wanted you, too," said Billy. "I'm to sit beside you."

"So am I," observed Drina, pushing Winthrop out of the chair and sliding in close to Selwyn. She had the cat, Kit-Ki, in her arms. Kit-Ki, divining nourishment, was purring loudly.

Josephine and Clemence in pinafores and stick-out skirts sat wriggling, with Winthrop between them; the five dogs sat in a row behind. Katie and Bridget assumed the functions of Hibernian Hebes, and luncheon began with a clatter of spoons.

It being also the children's dinner, supper and bed occurring from 5 to 6, meat figured on the card, and Kit-Ki's purring increased to an ecstatic and wheezy squeal, and her rigid tail as she stood up on Drina's lap was constantly brushing Selwyn's features.

"The cat is shedding, too," he remarked as he dodged her caudal appendage for the twentieth time. "It will go in with the next spoonful of cranberry sauce, Drina, if you're not careful about opening your mouth."

After luncheon Selwyn and Miss Erroll met in the living room, a big square, sunny place, in golden greens and browns, where a bay window overlooked the park.

Kneeling on the cushions of the deep window seat, she flattened her delicate nose against the glass, peering out through the lace hangings.

"Everybody and his family are driving," she said over her shoulder. "The rich and great are cornering the fresh air supply."

For awhile she kneeled there, silently intent on the passing pageant with all the unconscious curiosity of a child. Presently, without turning: "They speak of the younger set—but what is its limit? So many, so many people! The hunting crowd—the silly crowd—the wealthy set—the dreadful yellow set—then all those others made out of metals—copper and coal and iron and"— She shrugged her youthful shoulders, still intent on the passing show.

"Then there are the intellectuals—the artistic, the illuminated, the musical sorts. I—I wish I knew more of them. They were my father's friends—some of them." She looked over her shoulder to see where Selwyn was and whether he was listening, smiled at him and turned, resting one hand on the window seat. "So many kinds of people," she said, with a shrug.

"You asked me," he said, "whether I know Sudbury Gray. I do slightly. What about him?" And he waited, remembering Nina's suggestion as to that wealthy young man's eligibility.

"He's one of the nicest men I know," she replied frankly.

"Yes, but you don't know Boots Lansing."

"The gentleman who was bucked out of his footwear? Is he attractive?"

"Rather. Shrieks rent the air when Boots left Manila."

"Feminine shrieks?"

"Exclusively. The men were glad enough. He has three months' leave this winter, so you'll see him soon."

She thanked him mockingly for the promise, watching him from amused eyes. After a moment she said:

"I ought to arise and go forth with timbrels and with dances; but, do you know, I am not inclined to revels? There has been a little—just a very little bit—too much festivity so far, not that I don't adore dinners and gossip and dances, not that I do not love to pervade bright and glittering places. Oh, no; only—I"—

She looked shyly a moment at Selwyn. "I sometimes feel a curious desire for other things. I have been feeling it all day."

"What things?"

"I—don't know—exactly, substantial things. I'd like to learn about things. My father was the head of the American School of Archaeology in Crete. My mother was his intellectual equal, I believe. Do you know about my parents?" she asked. "They were lost in the Argolis, off Cyprus. You have heard. I think they meant that I should go to college—as well as Gerald. I don't know. Perhaps after all it is better for me to do what other young girls do. Besides, I enjoy it, and my mother did, too, when she was my age, they say. She was very much gayer than I am. My mother was a beauty and a brilliant woman. But there were other qualities. I—have her letters to father when Gerald and I were very little and her letters to us from London. I have missed her more this winter, it seems to me, than even in that dreadful time"—

She sat silent, chin in hand, delicate fingers restlessly worrying her red lips; then in quick impulse:

"You will not mistake me, Captain Selwyn? Nina and Austin have been perfectly sweet to me and to Gerald."

"I am not mistaking a word you utter," he said.

"No, of course not, only there are times—moments"—

Her voice died; her clear eyes looked out into space while the silent seconds lengthened into minutes. One slender finger had slipped between her lips and teeth; one burnished strand of hair lay neglected against her cheek.

"You said you were going to look up Gerald," she observed.

"I am now. What are you going to do?"

"I? Oh, dress, I suppose! Nina ought to be back now, and she expects me to go out with her."

She nodded a smiling termination of their duet and moved toward the door. Then on impulse she turned, a question on her lips—left unuttered through instinct. It had to do with the identity of the pretty woman who had so directly saluted him in the park—a perfectly friendly, simple and natural question. Yet it remained unuttered.

"Don't forget Gerald."

She turned again to the doorway. A maid stood there holding a note on a salver.

"For Captain Selwyn, please," murmured the maid.

Miss Erroll passed out.

Selwyn took the note and broke the seal:

My Dear Selwyn—I'm in a beastly fix—an I. O. U. due tonight and pas de quoi! Obviously I don't want Neergard to know, being associated, as I am, with him in business. As for Austin, he's a peppery old boy, bless his heart, and I'm not very secure in his good graces at present. Fact is, I got into a rather stiff game last night, and it's a matter of honor. So can you help me to tide it over? I'll square it on the 1st of the month. Yours sincerely, GERALD ERROLL.

P. S.—I've meant to look you up for ever so long and will the first moment I have free.

Below this was pencilled the amount due, and Selwyn's face grew very serious.

The letter he wrote in return ran:

Dear Gerald—Check inclosed to your order. By the way, can't you lunch with me at the Lenox club some day this week? Write, wire or telephone when. Yours, SELWYN.

When he had sent the note away by the messenger he walked back to the bay window, hands in his pockets, a worried expression in his gray eyes. This sort of thing must not be repeated. The boy must halt in his tracks and face sharply the other way. Besides, his own income was limited—much too limited to admit of many more loans of that sort.

He ought to see Gerald at once, but somehow he could not in decency appear personally on the heels of his loan. A certain interval must elapse between the loan and the lecture. In fact, he didn't see very well how he could admonish and instruct until the loan had been canceled—that is, until the first of the new year.

Pacing the floor, disturbed, uncertain as to the course he should pursue, he looked up presently to see Miss Erroll descending the stairs, fresh and sweet in her radiant plumage. As she caught his eye she waved a silvery chinchilla muff at him—a marching salute—and passed on, calling back to him, "Don't forget Gerald!"

"No," he said, "I won't forget Gerald." He stood a moment at the window watching the brougham below, where Nina awaited Miss Erroll. Then abruptly he turned back into the room and picked up the telephone receiver, muttering, "This is no time to mince matters for the sake of appearances." And he called up Gerald at the offices of Neergard & Co.

"Is it you, Gerald?" he asked pleasantly. "It's all right about that matter. I've sent you a note by your messenger. But I want to talk to you about another matter—something concerning myself. I want to ask your advice, in a way. Can you be at the Lenox by 6? You have an engagement at 8? Oh, that's all right. I won't keep you. It's understood, then—the Lenox at 6. Goodby!"

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There was the usual early evening influx of men at the Lenox who dropped in for a glance at the ticker or for a cocktail or a game of billiards or a bit of gossip before going home to dress.

Selwyn sauntered over to the basket, inspected a yard or two of tape, then strolled toward the window, nodding to Bradley Harmon and Sandon Craig.

As he turned his face to the window and his back to the room Harmon came up rather effusively, offering an unusually thin, flat hand and further hospitality, pleasantly declined by Selwyn.

Selwyn quietly rose and stepped out of the circle.

"Horrible thing, a cocktail," observed Harmon after giving his own order and seating himself opposite Selwyn. "I don't usually do it. Here comes the man who persuades me—my own partner."

Selwyn looked up to see Fane approaching, and instantly a dark flush overspread his face.

"You know George Fane, don't you?" continued Harmon easily. "Well, that's odd. I thought, of course—Captain Selwyn, Mr. Fane. It's not usual, but it's done."

They exchanged formalities—dry and brief on Selwyn's part, gracefully urbane on Fane's.

Sandon Craig and Billy Fleetwood came wandering up and joined them. One or two other men, drifting by, adhered to the group.

Selwyn, involved in small talk, glanced sideways at the great clock and gathered himself together for departure.

Fleetwood was saying to Craig, "Certainly it was a stiff game—Bradley, myself, Gerald Erroll, Mrs. Delmour-Carnes and the Ruthvens."

"Were you hit?" asked Craig, interested.

"No; about even. Gerald got it good and plenty, though. The Ruthvens were ahead, as usual."

Selwyn, apparently hearing nothing, quietly rose and stepped out of the circle, paused to set fire to a cigarette and then strolled off toward the visitors' room, where Gerald was now due. He found young Erroll just entering the room and greeted him with nervous cordiality.

"If you can't stay and dine with me," he said, "I won't put you down. You know, of course, I can only ask you once in a year, so we'll stay here and chat a bit."

"Right you are," said young Erroll, flinging off his very new and very fashionable overcoat—a wonderfully handsome boy, with all the attraction that a quick, warm, impulsive manner carries. "And I say, Selwyn, it was awfully decent of you to"—

"Bosh! Friends are for that sort of thing, Gerald. Sit here." He looked at the young man hesitatingly, but Gerald calmly took the matter out of his jurisdiction by nodding his order to the club attendant.

"Lord, but I'm tired," he said, sinking back into a big armchair. "I was up till daylight, and then I had to be in the office by 9, and tonight Billy Fleetwood is giving—oh, something or other. By the way, the market isn't doing a thing to the shorts. You're not in, are you, Selwyn?"

"No, not that way. I hope you are not either, are you, Gerald?"

"Oh, it's all right," replied the young fellow confidently, and, raising his glass, he nodded at Selwyn, with a smile.

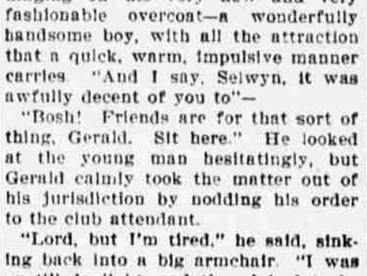
"You were mighty nice to me anyhow," he said, setting his glass aside and lighting a cigar. "You see, I went to a dance, and after awhile some of us cleared out, and Jack Ruthven offered us trouble, so half a dozen of us went there. I had the worst cards a man ever drew to a kicker. That was all about it."

"Do you mind saying whether you banked my check and drew against it?" asked Selwyn.

"Why, no; I just indorsed it over."

"To—to whom, if I may venture?"

"Certainly," he said, with a laugh. "To Mrs. Jack"— Then in a flash for the first time the boy realized what he was saying and stopped aghast, scarlet to his hair.



"You were mighty nice to me anyhow," he said.

Selwyn's face had little color remaining in it, but he said very kindly: "It's all right, Gerald. Don't worry"—

"I'm a beast!" broke out the boy. "I beg your pardon a thousand times."

"Granted, old chap. But, Gerald, may I say one thing—or perhaps two?"

"Go ahead. Give it to me good and plenty."

"It's only this: Couldn't you and I see one another a little oftener? Don't be afraid of me. I'm no wet blanket. I'm not so very aged either. I know something of the world; I understand something of men. I'm pretty good company, Gerald. What do you say?"

"I say sure!" cried the boy warmly.

"It's a go, then. And one thing more: Couldn't you manage to come up to the house a little oftener? Everybody misses you, of course. I think your sister is a trifle sensitive"—

"I will," said Gerald, blushing. "Somehow I've had such a lot on hand—all day at the office and something on every evening. I know perfectly well I've neglected Elly—and everybody. But the first moment I can find free"—

Selwyn nodded. "And last of all," he said, "there's something about my own affairs that I thought you might advise me on."

Gerald, proud, enchanted, stood very straight. The older man continued gravely:

"I've a little capital to invest—not very much. Suppose—and this, I need not add, is in confidence between us—suppose I suggested to Mr. Neergard"—

"Oh," cried young Erroll, delighted, "that is fine! Neergard would be glad enough. Why, we've got that Valleydale tract in shape now, and there are scores of schemes in the air—scores of them—important moves which may mean—anything!" he ended excitedly.

"Then you think it would be all right—in case Neergard likes the idea?"

Gerald was enthusiastic. After awhile they shook hands, it being time to separate. And for a long time Selwyn sat there alone in the visitors' room, absent eyed, facing the blazing fire of cannel coal.

How to be friends with this boy without openly playing the mentor; how to gain his confidence without appearing to seek it; how to influence him without alarming him! No, there was no great harm in him yet; only the impulse of inconsiderate youth; only an enthusiastic capacity for pleasure.

One thing was imperative—the boy must cut out his card playing for stakes at once, and there was a way to accomplish that by impressing Gerald with the idea that to do anything behind Neergard's back which he would not care to tell him about was a sort of treachery.

Chapter 5

THE prospect perplexed and depressed Selwyn. He was sullenly aware that in a town where the divorced must ever be reckoned with when dance and dinner lists are made out there is always some thoughtless hostess and sometimes a mischievous one, and the chances were that he and Mrs. Jack Ruthven would collide either through the forgetfulness or malice of somebody or through sheer hazard at some large affair where destiny and fate work busily together in criminal copartnership.

Their encounter was all a mistake, born of the haste of a heedless and elderly matron celebrated for managing to do the wrong thing, but who had been excessively nice to him that winter and whose position in Manhattan was not to be assailed.

"Dear Captain Selwyn," she wheezed over the telephone, "I'm short one man, and we dine at 8 and it's that now. Could you help me? It's the rich and yellow this time, but you won't mind, will you?"

He explained to Mrs. T. West Minster his absurd delight at being asked. Then he sent for a cab and sauntered into the dining room, where he was received with undisguised hostility.

"She's been civil to me," he said; "jeunesse oblige, you know, and that's why I"—

"There'll be a lot of debutantes there. What do you want to go for, you cradle robber?" protested Austin. "A lot of water bibbing, olive eating, talcum powdered debutantes"—

Eileen straightened up stiffly, and Selwyn's teasing smile and his offered hand in adieu completed her indignation.

"Oh, goodby! No, I won't shake hands. There's your cab now. I wish you'd take Austin too. Nina and I are tired of dining with the prematurely aged."

"Indeed we are," said Mrs. Gerard. "Go to your club, Austin, and give me a chance to telephone to somebody under the anaesthetic age."

Selwyn departed, laughing, but he yawned in his cab all the way to Fifty-third street, where he entered in the wake of the usual laggards and, surrendering hat and coat in the cloakroom, picked up the small, slim envelope bearing his name.

The card within disclosed the information that he was to take in Mrs. Somebody-or-other. He made his way through a great many people, found his hostess, backed off, stood on one leg for a moment like a reflective waterfowl, then found Mrs. Somebody-or-other and was absently good to her through a great deal of noise and some Spanish music, which seemed to squirt through a thicket of palms and bespatter everybody.

"Wonderful music," observed his dinner partner with singular originality; "so like 'Carmen.'"

"Is it?" he replied and took her away at a nod from his hostess, whose daughter Dorothy leaned forward from her partner's arm at the same moment and whispered: "I must speak to you, mamma. You can't put Captain Selwyn there because"—

But her mother was deaf and smil-

(Continued next week.)