

The Spenders

A Tale of the Third Generation.

By HARRY LEON WILSON.

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CHAPTER XXVIII.

Uncle Peter Bines Comes to Town with His Man.

One day in December Peter Bines of Montana City dropped in on the family—came with his gaunt length of limb, his kind, brown old face with eyes sparkling shrewdly far back under his grizzled brows, with his rough, resonant, musical voice, the spring of youth in his step, and the fresh, confident strength of the big hills in his bearing.

He brought Billy Brue with him, a person whose exact social status some of Percival's friends were never able to fix with any desirable certainty. Thus, Percival had presented the old man, the morning after his arrival, to no less a person than Herbert Delancey Livingston, with whom he had smoked a cigar of unusual excellence in the cafe of the Hightower Hotel.

"If you fancy that weed, Mr. Bines," said Livingston, graciously, to the old man, "I've a spare cigar of hundred I'd like to let you have. The things were sent me, but I find them rather stiffish. If your man's about the hotel I'll give him a card to my man, and let him fetch them."

"My man?" queried Uncle Peter, and, sighting Billy Brue at that moment, "why, yes, here's my man, now. M. Brue, shake hands with Mr. Livingston. Billy, go up to the address he gives you, and get some of these se-gars. You'll relish 'em as much as I do. Now don't talk to any strangers, don't get run over, and don't lose yourself."

Livingston had surrendered a wavering and uncertain hand to the warm, reassuring clasp of Mr. Brue.

"He ain't much fur style, Billy ain't," Uncle Peter explained when that person had gone upon his errand, "he ain't a mite gaudy, but he's got friendly feelings."

The dazed son of the Livingstons had thereupon made a conscientious tour of his clubs in a public hansom, solely for the purpose of relating this curious adventure to those best qualified to marvel at it.

The old man's arrival had been quite unexpected. Not only had he sent no word of his coming, but he seemed, indeed, not to know what his reasons had been for doing a thing so unusual.

"I thought I'd just drop in on you all and say 'howdy,'" had been his first avowal, which was lucid as far as it went. Later he involved himself in explanations that were both obscure and conflicting. Once it was that he had felt a sudden great longing for the life of a gay city. Then it was that he would have been content in Montana City, but that he had undertaken the winter in New York out of consideration for Billy Brue.

"Just think of it," he said to Percival, "that poor fellow ain't ever been east—never before, never now. It was for him to be holed up out there in his hills all his life. He hadn't got any chance to improve his mind."

"He'd better improve his whiskers first, though he does," suggested Percival. "He'll be gold-brickered if he wears 'em scrambled that way around this place."

But in neither of these explanations did the curious old man impress Percival as being wholly ingenious.

There he remarked casually one day that he had lately met Higbee, who was on his way to San Francisco.

"I only had a few minutes with him while they changed engines at Green River but he told me all about you folks—what a fine time you was havin', yachts and card parties, and all like that. Higbee said a man had ought to come to New York every now and then, just to keep from gettin' rusty."

Back of this Percival imagined for a time that he had discovered Uncle Peter's true reason for descending upon them. Higbee would have regaled him with wild tales of the New York dissipations, and Uncle Peter had come promptly on to pull him up. Percival could hear the story as Higbee would word it, with the improving moral incident of his own son snatched as a brand from the infernal underpinning to live a life of impecunious usefulness in far Chicago. But, when he tried to hold this belief, and to prove it from his observations, he was bound to admit its falsity.

Peter had shown no inclination to act the part of an evangel from the virtuous west. He had delivered no homilies, no warnings as to the peril of a life of idleness, nor the least sign of any disposition even to criticize.

On the contrary, indeed, he appeared to joy immensely in Percival's way of life. He manifested a willingness and a capacity for unbending in boon companionship that were, both of them, entirely new to his accomplished grandson. By degrees, and by virtue of being never at all censorious, he familiarized himself with the young man's habits and diversions. He listened delightedly to the tales of his large gambling losses, of the bouts at poker, the fruitless venture in Texas oil land, the disastrous corner in wheat, engineered by Burnam, and the uniformly unsuccessful efforts to "break the bank" in Forty-fourth street. He never tired of hearing whatever Percival had to say, and he seemed to relate to him those to relate to him, and he really enjoyed them, the young man came to confide freely in him, and to associate with him without restraint.

Uncle Peter begged to be introduced at the temple of chance, and spent a number of late evenings there with his popular grandson. He also frequently made himself one of the party, and he was particularly keenly the stock jokes as to his grandson's proneness to lose.

"Your pa," he would say, "never could learn to stay out of a jackpot, which he had jacks or better; he'd come in and draw four cards to an ace any time, and then call it 'hard luck' when he didn't draw out. And he just loved straightening them in the middle; said anybody could fill them that's open at both ends; but, after all, I guess that's the only way to have fun at the game. If a man ain't got the spirit to overplay aces-up when he gets 'em, he might as well be clerkin' in a bank for all the fun he'll have out of the game."

The old man's endurance of late suppers and later hours, and his unsuspected disposition to "cut loose," became twin marvels to Percival. He could not avoid contrasting the old man's behavior with that of his preaching. After a few weeks he was forced to the charitable conclusion that Uncle Peter's faculties were falling. "The exposure and hardships of a winter before had undoubtedly impaired his mental powers."

"I can't make him out," he confided to his mother. "He never wants to go home nights; he can drink more than can without batting an eye, and show up fresher in the morning, and he behaves like a young fellow just out of college. I don't know where he would bring up if he didn't have me to watch over him."

"I think it's just awful—at his time of life, too," said Mrs. Bines. "I think that's it. He's getting old, and he's come alone into his second childhood. A couple of months at this rate, and I'm afraid I'll have to ring up one of those nice shiny black wagons to take him off to the foolish-house."

"Can't you talk to him, and tell him better?"

"I could. I know it all by heart—all the things to say to a man on the downward path. Heaven knows I've heard them often enough, but I'd feel ashamed to talk that way to Uncle Peter. If he were my son, now, I'd cut off his allowance and send him back to make something of himself. Like Silly Higbee with Little Hennerly; but I'm afraid all I can do is to watch him and see that he doesn't get into any mischief, or anything."

"You're carryin' on the same way yourself," ventured his mother.

"That's different," replied her perspicacious son.

Uncle Peter had refused to live at the Hightower after three days in that splendid and populous caravansary.

"It suits me well enough," he explained to Percival, "but I have to look after Billy Brue, and this ain't any place for Billy. You see Billy ain't city broke yet. Look at him now over there, the way he goes around butting into strangers. He does that way because he's all the time looking down at his new patent-leather shoes—first pair he ever had. He'll be plumb stoop-shouldered if he don't hurry up and get the new kicked off of 'em. I'll have to get him a nice warm box-stall in some place that ain't so much on the bandwagon as this one. The ceilings here are too high fur Billy. And I found him shootin' with the bell-boy this mornin'. The boy thinks Billy, bel'm from the west, is a stage robber, or something like he reads about in the 'Cap' Collier libber, and follows him around every chance he gets. And Billy laps up too many of them little striped drinks; and them French-cooked dishes ain't so good fur him, either. He caught on to the bill-of-fare right away. Now he won't order anything but them allas—they dishes that has 'a la' something or other after 'em."

He explained, when Percival looked puzzled, "He knows they'll always be something all fussed up with red, white and blue gravy, and a little paper bouquet stuck into 'em. I never knew Billy was such a fancy eater before."

So Uncle Peter and his charge had established themselves in an old-fashioned but very comfortable hotel down on one of the squares, a dingy monument to the time when New York had been hurriedly built, and he found the place unchanged. The carpets and hangings were a bit faded but the rooms were genuine, were "made to sit in," and the cuisine was held, by a few knowing old epicures who still frequented the place, to be superior even to that of the more pretentious Hightower. Strangers who chanced in to order a meal not infrequently became enraged, and left before their food was served, in utter dissatisfaction behind them as they went. But the elect knew that these delays betokened the presence of an artistic conscience in the kitchen, and that the food served was worth tarrying for. "They know how to make you come back hungry for some more the next day," said Uncle Peter Bines.

From this headquarters the old man went forth to join in the diversions of his grandson. And here he kept a watchful eye upon the uncertain Billy Brue; at least approximately. Between them, his days and nights were occupied to crowding. But Uncle Peter had already put in some hard winters, and was not wanting in fortitude.

Billy Brue was a sore trouble to the old man. "I jest can't keep him of the streets nights," was his chief complaint. By day Billy Brue walked the streets in a decent orderly trance of bewilderment. He was properly puzzled and amazed by many strange matters. He never could find out what was "going on," to bring so many folks into town. They all looked like some-where constantly, but he was never able to reach the center of excitement. Nor did he ever learn how any one could reach those high chambers strung forty feet above ground between the backs of houses; nor how there could be "so many shows in town, all on one night"; nor why you should get so many good things to eat by merely buying a "bug of whiskey"; nor why a thousand people weren't run over in Broadway each twenty-four hours.

At night, Billy Brue ceased to be the astounded alien, and Percival said Dr. Von Herzlich would say, "began to mingle and cooperate with his environment."

In the course of this process he fell into adventures, some of them, perhaps, unedifying. But it may be told that his silver watch with the braided leather fob was stolen from him the second night out; also that the following week, on a Tuesday, he was seen in the streets in a deplorable state of nudity. He accepted the hospitality of an affable stranger, who had often been in Montana City. His explanation of subsequent events was entirely satisfactory, at least from the time that he returned to consciousness of them.

"I only had about \$30 in my clothes," he told Percival, "but what made me so darned hot, the first night ever found in the Early Bird mine over Silver Bow way. Gee, when I woke up I couldn't tell where I was. The cops that found me in a hallway, says, 'I must have been here a way of Peter. I says, 'All right—I'm here to go against all the games.' I says, 'but pass me when the Peter come around again.' I says, 'I'm here, and he says Peter has knocked drops. Say, honestly, I didn't know my own name till I had a chance to look me over. The clothes and my hands looked like I seen 'em before, somehow—and then I come to myself.'"

After this adventure, Uncle Peter would caution him of an evening:

"Now, Billy, don't stay out late. If you ain't been gone thru by 11, just hand what you got on you over to the first man you meet—none of 'em'll ask no questions, and then they'll take it fur home. The later it gets in New York the harder it is fur strangers to stay alive. You're all right in Wardner or Hellandgone, Billy, but in this here camp you're just a tender little bed of pansies by the wayside, and these New Yorkers are terrible careless where they step after dark."

Notwithstanding which, Mr. Brue continued to behave uniformly in a manner to make all judicious persons grieve. His place of supreme delight was the Hightower. Its marble splendors, its myriad lights, its throngs of men and women in evening dress, made for him a scene of unending fascination. The evenings when he was invited to sit in the cafe with Uncle Peter and Percival made memories long to be cherished.

He spent such an evening there at the end of the first month in New York. Half a dozen of Percival's friends sat at the table with them from time to time. There had been young Beverly Van Arsdel, who, Percival discovered, was heir to all the Van Arsdel millions, and no end of a swell. And there was big, handsome Arledge, whose father had treated him shabbily. These two young gentlemen spoke

freely about the inferiority of many things "on this side"—as they denominated this glorious land of freedom—of many things from horses to wine. The country was rapidly becoming, they agreed, no place for a gentleman to live. Eddie Arledge confessed that, from motives of economy, he had been beguiled into purchasing an American claret.

"I fancied, you know," he explained to Uncle Peter, "that it might do for an ordinary luncheon claret, but on my sacred honor, the stuff is villainous. Now you'll agree with me, Mr. Bines, I dare say, that a Bordeaux of even recent vintage is vastly superior to the very best so-called American claret."

Whereupon Beverly Van Arsdel having said, "To be sure—fancy an American Burgundy, now, or a Chablis!" Uncle Peter betrayed the first sign of irritation. Percival had detected since his coming.

"Well, you see, young man, we're not much on vintages in Montana. Whisky is mostly our drink—whisky and spring water—and if our whisky is strong, it's good enough. When we want to test a new barrel, we inject three drops of it into a jack-rabbit, and if he doesn't lick a bulldog in six seconds we turn down the goods. That's as far as our education has ever gone in vintages."

It sounded like the old Uncle Peter, but he was afterwards so good-natured that Percival concluded the irritation could have been but momentary.

(To be continued to-morrow.)

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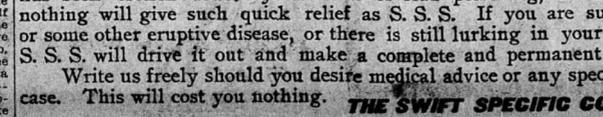
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