

The Younger Set

By ROBERT W. CHAMBERS,
Author of "The Fighting Chance," Etc.

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Neergard's progress had now reached this stage. His programme was simple—to wallow among the wealthy until satiated, then to marry into that agreeable community and found the house of Neergard. And to that end he had already bought a building site on Fifth avenue, but held it in the name of the firm, as though it had been acquired for purposes merely speculative.

Chapter 13

ABOUT that time Boots Lansing very quietly bought a house on Manhattan Island. It was a small, narrow, three storied house of brick, rather shabby on the outside and situated on a modest block between Lexington and Park avenues, where the newly married of the younger set were arriving in increasing numbers, prepared to pay the penalty for all love matches.

It was an unexpected move to Selwyn; he had not been aware of Lansing's contemplated desertion, and that morning, returning from his final interview with Neergard, he was astonished to find his comrade's room bare of furniture and a hasty and exclamatory note on his own table:

Phil! I've bought a house! Come and see it! You'll find me in it! Carpetless floors and unpapered walls! It's the happiest day of my life!

BOOTS!
House Owner!

And Selwyn, horribly depressed, went down after a solitary luncheon and found Lansing sitting on a pile of dusty rugs, ecstatically inspecting the cracked ceiling.

"I'm going to have the entire thing done over, room by room, when I can afford it. Look there, Phil! That's to be your room."

"Thanks, old fellow—not now."
"Why, yes! I expected you'd have your room here, Phil!"

"It's very good of you, Boots, but I can't do it."

Lansing faced him. "Won't you found Lansing sitting on a pile of dusty rugs."

Selwyn, smiling, shook his head, and the other knew it was final.

"Well, the room will be there, furnished the way you and I like it. When you want it make smoke signals or wigwag."

"I will, thank you, Boots."
Lansing said unaffectedly, "How soon do you think you can afford a house like this?"

"I don't know. You see, I've only my income now."
"Plus what you make at the office."
"I've left Neergard."

"What?"

"This morning, for good."
"The deuce!" he murmured, looking at Selwyn; but the latter volunteered no further information, and Lansing, having given him the chance, cheerfully switched to the other track.

"Shall I see whether the Air Line has anything in your line, Phil? No? Well, what are you going to do?"

"I don't exactly know what I shall do. If I had capital—enough—I think I'd start in making bulk and dense powders—all sorts; gun cotton, nitro powders—"

"You mean you'd like to go on with your own invention—chaos?"

"I'd like to keep on experimenting with it if I could afford to. Perhaps I will. But it's not yet a commercial possibility—if it ever is to be. I wish I could control it; the ignition is simultaneous and absolutely complete, and there is not a trace of ash, not an unburned or partly burned particle. But it's not to be trusted, and I don't know what happens to it after a year's storage."

"Anyway," said Lansing, "you're nothing to worry over."

"No, nothing," assented Selwyn listlessly.

After a silence Lansing added, "But you do a lot of worrying all the same, Phil."

Selwyn flushed up and denied it.

"Yes, you do! I don't believe you realize how much of the time you are out of spirits."

"Does it impress you that way," asked Selwyn, mortified, "because I'm really all right?"

"Of course you are, Phil. I know it, but you don't seem to realize it. You're morbid, I'm afraid."

"You've been talking to my sister!"

"What of it? Besides, I knew there was something the matter."

"You know what it is, too. And isn't it enough to subdue a man's spirits occasionally?"

"No," said Lansing, "if you mean your—mistake—two years ago. That isn't enough to spoil life for a long time. I've wanted to tell you so for a long time."

And as Selwyn said nothing: "For heaven's sake, make up your mind to

enjoy your life! You are fitted to enjoy it. Get that absurd notion out of your head that you're done for, that you've no home life in prospect, no family life, no children."

"Do you mean to say, Boots, that you think a man who has made the ghastly mess of his life that I have ought to feel free to marry?"

"Think it! Man, I know it. Certainly you ought to marry if you wish, but, above all, you ought to feel free to marry. That is the essential equipment of a man. He isn't a man if he feels that he isn't free to marry. He may not want to do it, he may not be in love. That's neither here nor there. The main thing is that he is free as a man should be to take any good opportunity, and marriage is included in the list of good opportunities."

Sitting there in the carpetless room piled high with dusty, linen shrouded furniture, Selwyn looked around, an involuntary smile twitching his mouth.

"What about your marrying," he said, "after this talk about mine? What about it, Boots? Is this new house the first modest step toward the matrimony you laud so loudly?"

"Sure," said that gentleman airily. "That's what I'm here for."

"Really?"

"Well, of course, idiot. I've always been in love."

"You mean you actually have somebody in view?"

"No, son. I've always been in love with—love. I'm a sentimental sentry on the ramparts of reason. I'm properly armed for trouble now, so if I'm challenged I won't let my chance slip by me."

After a little while Selwyn went away, first to look up a book which he was having bound for Eileen, then to call on his sister, who, with Eileen, had just returned from a week at Silverside with the children preliminary to moving the entire establishment there for the coming summer.

"Silverside is too lovely for words!" exclaimed Nina as Selwyn entered the library. "Nobody wanted to come away. Eileen made straight for the surf, but it was an Arctic sea, and as soon as I found out what she was doing I made her come out."

"I should think you would," he said. "Nobody can do that and thrive."

"She seems to," said Nina. "She was simply glorious after the swim, and I hated to put a stop to it. And you should see her drying her hair and helping Plunket to roll the tennis courts—that hair of hers blowing like gold flames and her sleeves rolled to her armpits—and you should see her down in the dirt playing marbles with Billy and Drina shooting away excitedly and exclaiming 'Ten dubs!' and 'Nuckle down, Billy!' like any gamblin you ever heard of—totally unspooled, Phil, in spite of all the success of her first winter! And do you know that she had no end of men seriously entangled? Phil!"

"What?" he said.

His sister regarded him smilingly, then partly turned around and perched herself on the padded arm of a great chair.

"Come over here, Phil; no, close to me. I wish to put my hands on your shoulders, like that. Now look at me. Do you really love me?"

"Sure thing, Ninette."

"And you know I adore you, don't you?"

"Madly, dear, but I forgive you."

"No, I want you to be serious, because I'm pretty serious. See, I'm not smiling now. I don't feel like it, because it is a very, very important matter. Phil, this thing that has—has—almost happened. It's about Eileen. And it really has happened."

"What has she done?" he asked curiously.

His sister's eyes were searching his very diligently, as though in quest of something elusive, and he gazed serenely back, the most unsuspecting of smiles touching his mouth.

"Phil, dear, a young girl—a very young girl—is a vapid and uninteresting proposition to a man of thirty-five, isn't she?"

"Rather—in some ways."

"In what way is she not?"

"Well, to me, for example, she is acceptable as children are acceptable—a blessed, sweet, clean relief from the women of the Fanes' set, for example."

"Like Rosamund?"

"Yes. And, Ninette, you and Austin seem to be drifting out of the old circles, the sort that you and I were accustomed to. You don't mind my saying it, do you? But there were so many people in this town who had something besides millions—amusing, well bred, jolly people who had no end of good times, but who didn't gamble and ruzzle and stuff themselves and their friends, who were not eternally hanging around other people's wives. You have just asked me whether a young girl is interesting to me. I answer, yes, thank God, for the cleaner, snarer, happier hours I have spent this winter among my own kind have been spent where the younger set dominated. They are better than those who bred them, and if in time they, too, fall short they will not fall as far as their parents. And in their turn when they look around them at the younger set, whom they have taught in the light

and wisdom of their own shortcomings, they will see fresher, sweeter, lovelier young people than we see now. And it will continue so, dear, through the jolly generations. Life is all right, only, like art, it is very, very long sometimes."

Nina sat silent upon the padded arm of her chair, looking up at her brother. "Mad preacher! Mad mollah! Dear, dear fellow!" she said tenderly. "All ills of the world canst thou discount, but not thine own."

"Those, too," he insisted, laughing. "I had a talk with Boots. But anyway I'd already arrived at my own conclusion—that—I'm rather overdoing this blighted business."

"Phil!" in quick delight.

"Yes," he said, reddening nicely; "between you and Boots and myself I've decided that I'm going in for—whatever any man is going in for—life! Ninette, life to the full and up to the hilt for mine!"

"I am going to say something that is very, very serious and very near my heart," said Nina.

"I remember," he said. "It's about Eileen, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is about Eileen."

He waited, and again his sister's eyes began restlessly searching his for something that she seemed unable to find.

"You make it a little difficult, Phil. I don't believe I had better speak of it."

"Why not?"

"Why, just because you ask me 'Why not?' for example."

"Is it anything that worries you about Eileen?"

"No, not exactly. It is—it may be a phase, and yet I know that if it is anything at all it is not a passing phase. She is different from the majority, you see—very intelligent, very direct. She never forgets, for example. Her loyalty is quite remarkable, Phil. She is very intense in her—her beliefs, the more so because she is unusually free from impulse, even quite ignorant of the deeper emotions, or so I believed until—until—"

"Is she in love?" he asked.

"A little, Phil."

"Does she admit it?" he demanded, unpleasantly astonished.

"She admits it in a dozen innocent ways to me, who can understand her. But to herself she has not admitted it, I think—could not admit it yet, because—because—"

"Who is it?" asked Selwyn, and there was in his voice the slightest undertone of a growl.

"Dear, shall I tell you?"

"Why not?"

"Because—because, Phil, I think that our pretty Eileen is a little in love with—"

He straightened out to his full height, scarlet to the temples. She dropped her linked fingers in her lap, gazing at him almost sadly.

"Dear, all the things you are preparing to shout at me are quite useless. I know. I don't imagine, I don't forestall, I don't predict."

"Nina, you are madder than a March heless!"

"Air your theories, Phil, then come back to realities. The conditions remain. Eileen is certainly a little in love with you, and a little with her means something. And you evidently have never harbored any serious intentions toward the child. I can see that, because you are the most transparent man I ever knew. Now, the question is, What is to be done?"

"I am, of course, obliged to believe that you are mistaken," he said. "A man cannot choose but believe in that manner. There is no very young girl, nobody, old or young, whom I like as thoroughly as I do Eileen Erroll. She knows it; so do you, Nina. It is open and aboveboard. I should be very unhappy if anything marred or distorted our friendship. I am quite confident that nothing will."

"In that frame of mind," said his sister, smiling, "you are the healthiest companion in the world for her, for you will either cure her or she you, and it is all right either way."

"Certainly it will be all right," he said confidently.

For a few moments he paced the room, reflective, quickening his pace all the while, and his sister watched him, silent in her indecision.

"I'm going up to see the kids," he said abruptly.

(To be continued.)

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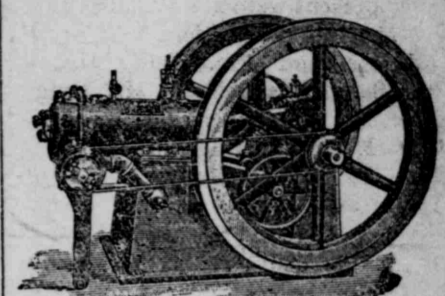
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