

"Simon Says..."

BY ISOBEL ANDREWS

MRS. WILSON, sitting in the window seat, listening to the voices, wished she could go home. She had just popped in as she so often did, to return the cup of sugar, and here she was, landed on the window seat with the room full of visitors, sitting like a bump on a log, not knowing what to say, what to do. Sitting for the last half hour like this, dull, heavy, with the rest of them all at it, nineteen to the dozen, and she with never a chance to get a word in edgeways.

Mrs. Wilson sat with her back to the sea. All day, all week, indeed, the high summer wind had swept across the bay, tearing at the rocks and throwing the sand against the houses. Mrs. Wilson, feeling the grit under the surreptitious forefinger drawn quickly across the cracked brown varnish of the sill, nodded—not a duster near it for weeks, and the rest of the house the same way most likely. Her housewifely soul shrank and quivered at the thought. She became so preoccupied with the idea of all the window sills in all the rooms of the big, old, rambling wooden house sharing the same shameful undusted state that she forgot the voices just as she had forgotten the quiet evening sea that lay behind her uncompromising shoulders.

The sea was divided from the house by the road, by the untidy fringe of lupin and flax, and by the beach between the house and the sea.

All day the wind had blown, all week indeed, and now, unreasonably and suddenly the sea had become docile. The ferry steamer, caught up in a mirror image of itself, doubled itself in the water, creating a false lovely picture which seemed to skim over the grey pale sea, moving and glowing in a pool of light, as though the sun in its last shining had concentrated its waning rays towards this one focus solely for the purpose of illuminating and translating the prosaic, fussy, busy little ship. Behind the movement of light on water, the harbour hills were already dark.

"A light," said dear Simon, "a light that never was on land or sea."

"Dear Simon," said Renata, raising her glass towards him, opening her wide, guileless, selfish eyes, "Dear Simon, it's amazing, isn't it, positively amazing, how there are times when the cliché is the only possible sentiment."

Mrs. Wilson wondered when they would bring the baby in, and she sat squarely in the window seat, her eyes on the door.

The high, clear, precise voices of the women chimed and fluted, pausing now and again to make some slight obeisance, some fleeting acknowledgment of the men's deeper tones. But the obeisance was mere routine, an indulgent waiving of privilege, conceding, as mothers to children—yes, dear, yes, now it's your turn. And then as the bass notes for a moment, as bass notes do, as the bass notes for a moment groped, faltered, searched for the right word, pondered perhaps on the logic of the as yet unuttered phrase, or even surely, permissibly, paused to draw breath, as the bass notes faltered, the women's voices swept in again and the contest was over, once more lost when scarcely begun.



"Old Age Creeping On," said Mrs. Wilson brightly

Mrs. Wilson turned her eyes to the small crystal tumbler in her hand. She watched the bubbles rise in a tiny beaded thread, and as they reached the surface, break. The sea behind her, and the hills behind the sea threw back the sunset into the room so that the light flowed over the eager earnest faces, merging nose, lip, cheek, brow; washing them clear of shadow and of line until the faces were masks enlivened only by the curved parenthesis of an eyebrow, the dot dash dot flicker of life behind an eye.

"Rome," said Virginia, "Rome. Grossly overrated. Ruskin and all the guidebooks—such a lot to answer for. It rained. All the time. Imagine!" and her fine dark eyes raised themselves for a moment so that they were all conscious of tragedy. In Rome. And it had rained. All the time.

"Oh, we started off with the best of intentions. We were determined to see everything. But everything. The perfect tourists. Baedeker and unashamed. I actually paddled across the Coliseum in the rain. But it was too much. Much too much."

Virginia slid one delicate knee over the other. She held her tumbler between her stiffened palms, holding the hands away from her body, the long elegant fingers pointing straight and parallel, towards the window. She regarded her drink intently, her chin held forward a little, her head slanted to the left, her eyelids cast down as though she was seeking to draw the innermost meaning of life and time from the glass, like a seer.

"You see," she said softly, "there were—smells."

Sighing a little, with an almost imperceptible shrug of her thin immaculate shoulders, Rome was dismissed. The long jet ear-rings trembled as she moved. A little sudden bubble of quiet hung on the air.

"It wasn't so much the rain. Or even the smells," said a bass, said Phillip,

easily and unexpectedly claiming the bubble as his own. "It wasn't so much the rain, or the smells. It was the fountains, and the murals, and looking at that ceiling . . . crick in the neck . . . We were tired, before it was half done."

His voice trailed and another bubble hung this time so close to Mrs. Wilson that she had taken it almost before she realised it was there.

"So tired," said Phillip.

"Old Age Creeping On," said Mrs. Wilson suddenly, brightly, and in defiant desperation.

Ever since she had entered the room the high, clear, precise tones had flickered and darted, the light brittle laughter had splintered itself against the high old plaster ceiling. To Mrs. Wilson the words were foreign, the topics unfamiliar, the voices fluent in a language impossible for Mrs. Wilson to understand. So that she had continued to sit in the window seat, holding the glass carefully as though afraid it would break, and she simply hadn't a word to say. An odd chance, a strange predicament for Mrs. Wilson, of all people, to experience. Thankfully, then, she recognised and pounced on the theme, the recognisable, familiar suddenly cherished theme that Phillip in all innocence had provided.

"So tired . . ." said Phillip.

"Old Age creeping on," said Mrs. Wilson, and she looked round on the company as though waiting for approval, or applause, or above all, response.

For a moment it seemed as though she had not spoken at all. For a moment, wildly, madly, she felt as though she had been placed on the window seat at least three months ago. Placed there gently, kindly, firmly. Introduced—my neighbour, Mrs. Wilson—and then left like an ornament, forgotten, waiting to be remembered, picked up, commented on and finally dusted.

To Mrs. Wilson at that moment it seemed as though her voice was booming in a high cave, the echoes bouncing and tumbling against the jagged dripping walls. The kindly faces had turned towards her, at first muted in surprise, then with the lifting polite eyebrows, came the expressions of concerted, consciously encouraging, hypocritical interest.

"It comes to all of us," said Mrs. Wilson, reckless now, the weight of the room's attention balanced simultaneously towards her, seeing the hands, the heads, the upheld momentarily static glasses, stationary between lap and lip, the bright forward questioning glances, the slanted torsos, the kindly willingness to pause, to please, to listen, to pretend.

Darling, said Renata afterwards, darling, it was awful; there she was sitting up in the window seat straight as a die, whatever a die may be, and telling us that Old Age is Creeping On, and that It Comes to All of Us. I mean, darling, what could we do but turn and stare and not utter, because I swear if I had met Virginia's eye at that moment I'd have collapsed, positively and utterly collapsed.

"Time Marches On," said Mrs. Wilson, intoxicated, it would seem, by the heady wine of success.

As though drawn by the same string, motivated by the same finger, the puppet heads moved once more, the eyes slid sideways under secret lids seeking the conspiratorial glance, the shared discretion.

Then the glasses were raised, lipped and lowered. The gentle kindly animation wavered and was gone.

Darling, said Renata, I nearly died. Simon saved them. Dear Simon, with his intermittent, all too frequently conquerable bass.

"It's Later Than You Think," said Simon. He was looking at his watch, and he merely meant what he said. It really was later than he had imagined it to be.

"It's Later Than You Think," said dear Simon, slipping his watch back in his pocket and looking out on the now darkened sea.

Mrs. Wilson looked at him with pleasure and regard.

"It is, indeed," she said. "It is indeed."

She glowed across the room at dear Simon. In a moment they had all become her very dear friends.

But there was the woman in the corner. A pale woman with a stole and fluttering, restless hands.

"I am old, I am old," she cried, and she made the words a chant.

Renata went on her knees on the carpet. To Mrs. Wilson's unbelieving eye it seemed as though Renata was humbling herself at the feet of dear Simon.

Renata pulled at the cuffs of dear Simon's trousers.

"Dear Simon," she said, "dear Simon, you're talking nonsense. Because you haven't even started to roll them. Oh, Mr. Prufrock, you're only pretending."

Mrs. Wilson continued to sit on the window seat, with her back to the sea. But she did not speak again till they brought the baby. After everybody had said all that anybody ever says about a baby, they brought the white bundle and laid it beside Mrs. Wilson on the window seat. The baby regarded Mrs. Wilson with clear, unmarvelling eyes. Mrs. Wilson leant forward. Starfish hands clasped the rough assurance of Mrs. Wilson's proffered forefinger.

"There now," said Mrs. Wilson. "There now . . . there now . . ."