

The Storyteller

PAYING AN OLD SCORE

It was one of those days when the elemental forces of both the inorganic and organic worlds seem to conspire to thwart a single tiny atom—man. The heavens had disgorged themselves of floods of rain, making the pavements wet and slippery. Two of the people whom I had gone to Indianapolis to see were out of town, and the rest were too busy or cross to talk freely with me.

I sat in the lobby of the Blank House meditating on the perversity of nature and human nature, scowling over the failure of my plans and the chagrin which I knew my clients would experience when I made my report. For a long time I was too absorbed with my own troubles to take the slightest interest in the throngs of men who scuffled across the marble floor, or sat in the easy chairs, smoking, reading, screaming, regretting, hoping, fearing. At last I looked up, and began to wonder whether any one of them was as miserable as I. 'What were they all struggling after?' I asked myself, cynically. How absurd they seemed—fussing, fuming, caressing and pluming themselves! Of course they would fail in the long run, no matter what they were struggling after. Nature always 'wins the game' at last, however ardently the gamblers play. I made these comments in a general way as I swept my eyes over the mass, and then began to single out individuals and to say to myself, 'That old fellow all huddled up in the corner has got his solar plexus blow! Anybody can see that! He'll never stand up for another round.' 'That nabob over there with his back to me (the stout man with the Prince Albert and two rolls of fat over his collar) is a millionaire; I can tell it even from a rear view! Nothing is so demonstrative as success. Its capacity for self-revelation is infinite. But no matter! That blood-vessel in the left lobe of his brain is getting too thin! Some day while he is sitting in his office like a spider waiting for his prey—click! the vessel will burst and all is over!' 'And that young swell in his dress suit (going to a reception I suppose) thinks the world is his oyster, does he? Well—so did I when I was his age.'

Suddenly my attention was attracted to a stout old gentleman of three score and ten, or thereabouts, who sat right next to me in an easy, rocking-chair. He had just taken his hat off, and was rubbing his bald head with a silk handkerchief; after he had made it shine like a door-knob he polished his spectacles, then he smoothed his knees caressingly with his hands, and finally rubbed them together in that universal gesture by which men give silent expression to absolute contentment. I now looked at his face; it was wrinkled, but ruddy and rubicund, and was lighted by a happy smile. The smile that exasperated me. I was in one of those moods when even harmony is discord, when even the song of a bird rasps the nerves like the filing of a saw. What was this old fool smiling at? A man of his years ought to know better than to assume that silly grin! There's nothing in life to make a man genuinely happy, and it is sheer hypocrisy to try to appear so!

Blissfully unconscious of the cynical comments of mine, the old man smiled on, and after a while polished his forehead again, then his spectacles, then caressed his knee, then rubbed his hands together as before. My lip curled, I had hard work to keep from telling him what I thought. But after he had repeated this pantomime as many as six times my mood began to change and I at last found myself unconsciously smiling with him. I suppose, if he had cried, I should have wept with him—so mysteriously do these instruments in the great human orchestra tune each other to their own keys. In a surprisingly short time my interest in the old man had become so deep that I actually forgot my own troubles and determined to find out what had made him so happy.

'Excuse me,' said I, touching his arm, 'but I cannot restrain my curiosity any longer. I am suffering from a horrible attack of the blues, and you seem so happy that I would like to share your pleasure.'

He turned suddenly, eyed me sharply (and I noticed that his eyes could pierce as well as twinkle), and replied: 'How did you know I was happy?'

'Oh—you have been rubbing your hands together and smiling in a perfectly unmistakable way,' I said.

'Have I?' I didn't know it. But say, stranger, you hit the nail on the head—I am happy. And if you want to hear about it, I'll just read you a chapter out of my life,' he said.

'I do,' I answered eagerly.

'It may be a long one and a dull one—to you.'

'I'll take my chances. It couldn't be so dull as my own thoughts.'

'Well, here goes!' he said, lighting a cigar and settling himself in an easy attitude.

'When I was a little cub twelve years old my mother died, and the next thing I knew my father had married again. He didn't consult me—you understand. The woman might have suited his taste, but she didn't suit mine a little bit. I stood her for a year, and then one night I just pulled out. So far as I know even my father never took the trouble to hunt me up—I walked northward from Cincinnati until I saw the first signs of morning, and then, tired and cold, I crawled under a cock of hay and fell asleep. I'll bet the world never looked bigger and emptier and more inhospitable to any man than that ever breathed than it did to me in the gray light. I felt like a little fly on the great, pale, dead face of the universe. It makes me shudder yet. It was almost noon when I woke, stiff, hungry, and scared. At first I wished I hadn't come. Then I remembered how I had been abused and gritted my teeth. I've always found that gritting my teeth has a moral value. I don't know just why. It's like whistling—which screws your courage up, I s'pose. After that I crawled out into the highway and walked on. There was a farmhouse a little way down the road, and I thought I'd stop and ask for something to eat; but when I got to it my heart failed me. Such little boys as I was lose heart mighty easy, stranger. I've always felt for 'em. You have to feel with folks before you can feel for 'em. Well, I passed the door and then looked back. In the garden there was a little bareheaded and barefooted girl about my own age. She was looking at me, and our eyes met. When they met, something seemed to flash inside me like an electric spark. I've felt it often—when women looked at me. S'pose you have, eh?'

'Yes.'

'I thought so. Well, she smiled and I smiled, and I forgot all about being tired and miserable, and climbed right over the fence and went straight towards her. She was picking roses off a bush, and when I got close we stood and looked at each other a minute, and then she smiled again, and so did I. "Do you live here?" says I. And she said she did. "Do you think your ma would give me some bread?" says I. You ought to have seen her face! That little tow-headed girl (she wasn't as old as I was) seemed to see right through the whole business. Women are queer about that—you know. Stone walls are nothing. They can see plump through them—and then, again, they can't seem to see through a French plate-glass window. "Let's go and see," she said, and I followed her straight into the kitchen. "Ma," says she to a kind-looking woman (I remember wishing my old governor had chosen one like her), "ma, this boy is hungry. Can he have some bread and butter and a little sugar?" "I didn't ask for butter and sugar, but only for bread," says I. That made her smile, and she looked in a nice way at the little girl, and then said to me, "Who are you?" And I told her plump and fair about my stepmother. "Was she cross and did she whip you?" she asked, and I told her she did. "Are you a good boy? Do you love God and say your prayers?" she said; and I hung my head down and scratched my ankle with my toe. "You ought to," she said, and went right into the pantry and cut off four great slices of bread, and put butter and sugar on them, and I ate them like a wolf. Lord! but they tasted good! I've never tasted anything like them since. "Poor dear!" she said, when she saw me eat, and just bent over and kissed me. That kiss broke me and I put my head down on the table and cried. She patted it kindly, and when I looked up I saw two tears on the little girl's cheek.'

The old man paused to blow a ring of smoke. 'After I had eaten enough,' he continued, 'the woman made me tell my whole story and seemed to believe me. And when her husband came in to dinner she made me tell it again, and he didn't believe me. I knew he didn't, though he didn't say so. He wasn't the same kind as his wife; but he wasn't bad. He'd seen more of life, I suppose. Sometimes I think the more we see of it the less we know about it. Anyway, after dinner I helped the woman and the little girl to wash up the dishes, and then she and I went out to play. I'll never forget that afternoon. It seemed forever and it didn't seem a minute. We went into the garden and picked flowers; and then into the barn and hunted eggs; and then into a meadow where she had a playhouse in some elderberry bushes, and she served a dinner on some cracked dishes. I remember hearing a meadow lark sing as we stepped outside to go home. I had heard millions before and never thought much about them; but somehow or other that one's song went down into me and made me tremble. Why do you suppose that was? I reckon there are times when the strings in us are keyed up mighty high and the hand that strikes them at the right moment makes them jingle. Anyway, I've never heard a meadow lark sing since that day without being in that meadow and feeling that little girl beside me.'