



Lily sank with a sigh into one of the shabby leather chairs.

"How delicious to have a place like this all to one's self! What a miserable thing it is to be a woman." She leaned back in a luxury of discontent. Selden was rummaging in a cupboard for the cake.

"Even women," he said, "have been known to enjoy the privileges of a flat."

"Oh, governesses--or widows. But not girls--not poor, miserable, marriageable girls!"

"I even know a girl who lives in a flat." She sat up in surprise. "You do?"

"I do," he assured her, emerging from the cupboard with the sought-for cake.

"Oh, I know--you mean Gerty Farish." She smiled a little unkindly. "But I said marriageable--and besides, she has a horrid little place, and no maid¹, and such queer things to eat. Her cook does the washing and the food tastes of soap. I should hate that, you know."

"You shouldn't dine with her on wash-days," said Selden, cutting the cake. They both laughed, and he knelt by the table to light the lamp under the kettle², while she measured out the tea into a little tea-pot of green glaze. As he watched her hand, polished as a bit of old ivory, with its slender pink nails, and the sapphire bracelet slipping over her wrist, he was struck with the irony of suggesting to her such a life as his cousin Gertrude Farish had chosen. She was so evidently the victim of the civilization which had produced her, that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate.

¹ servant

² bouilloire

She seemed to read his thought. "It was horrid of me to say that of Gerty," she said with charming compunction. "I forgot she was your cousin. But we're so different, you know: she likes being good, and I like being happy. And besides, she is free and I am not. If I were, I daresay I could manage to be happy even in her flat. It must be pure bliss³ to arrange the furniture just as one likes, and give all the horrors to the ash-man. If I could only do over my aunt's drawing-room I know I should be a better woman."

"Is it so very bad?" he asked sympathetically.

She smiled at him across the tea-pot which she was holding up to be filled.

"That shows how seldom⁴ you come there. Why don't you come oftener?"

"When I do come, it's not to look at Mrs. Peniston's furniture."

"Nonsense," she said. "You don't come at all--and yet we get on so well when we meet. What I want is a friend who won't be afraid to say disagreeable ones when I need them. Sometimes I have fancied you might be that friend--I don't know why, except that you are neither a prig nor a bounder, and that I shouldn't have to pretend with you or be on my guard against you." Her voice had dropped to a note of seriousness, and she sat gazing up at him with the troubled gravity of a child.

"You don't know how much I need such a friend," she said. "My aunt is full of copy-book axioms⁵, but they were all meant to apply to conduct in the early fifties. I always feel that to live up to them would include wearing book-muslin with gigot sleeves. And the other women--my best friends--well, they use me or abuse me; but they don't care a straw what happens to me. I've been about too long--people are getting tired of me; they are beginning to say I ought to marry."


There was a moment's pause, during which Selden meditated one or two replies calculated to add a momentary zest to the situation; but he rejected them in favour of the simple question: "Well, why don't you?"

She coloured and laughed. "Ah, I see you are a friend after all, and that is one of the disagreeable things I was asking for."

³ happiness

⁴ rarely

⁵ quotes



"It wasn't meant to be disagreeable," he returned amicably. "Isn't marriage your vocation? Isn't it what you're all brought up for?"

She sighed. "I suppose so. What else is there?"

"Exactly. And so why not take the plunge and have it over?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "You speak as if I ought to⁶ marry the first man who came along."

"I didn't mean to imply that you are as hard put to it as that. But there must be some one with the requisite qualifications."

She shook her head wearily. "I threw away one or two good chances when I first came out⁷--I suppose every girl does; and you know I am horribly poor--and very expensive. I must have a great deal⁸ of money."

Selden had turned to reach for a cigarette-box on the mantelpiece. He offered the box, and she took out three or four cigarettes, putting one between her lips and slipping the others into a little gold case attached to her long pearl chain.

"Have I time? Just a whiff, then." She leaned forward, holding the tip of her cigarette to his. As she did so, he noted, with a purely impersonal enjoyment, how evenly the black lashes were set in her smooth white lids, and how the purplish shade beneath them melted into the pure pallor of the cheek.

She began to saunter about the room, examining the bookshelves between the puffs of her cigarette-smoke. Some of the volumes had the ripe tints of good tooling and old morocco, and her eyes lingered on them caressingly, not with the appreciation of the expert, but with the pleasure in agreeable tones and textures that was one of her inmost susceptibilities. Suddenly her expression changed from desultory enjoyment to active conjecture, and she turned to Selden with a question.

"Don't you ever mind⁹," she asked suddenly, "not being rich enough to buy all the books you want?"

He followed her glance about the room, with its worn furniture and shabby

⁶ should

⁷ Was introduced to society

⁸ A lot

⁹ Does it ever bother you



walls.

"Don't I just? Do you take me for a saint on a pillar?"

"And having to work--do you mind that?"

"Oh, the work itself is not so bad--I'm rather fond¹⁰ of the law."

"No; but the being tied down: the routine--don't you ever want to get away, to see new places and people?"

"Horribly--especially when I see all my friends rushing to the steamer."

She drew a sympathetic breath. "But do you mind enough--to marry to get out of it?"

Selden broke into a laugh. "God forbid!" he declared.

She rose with a sigh, tossing her cigarette into the grate.

"Ah, there's the difference--a girl must, a man may if he chooses."

She surveyed him critically. "Your coat's a little shabby¹¹--but who cares? It doesn't keep people from asking you to dine. If I were shabby no one would have me: a woman is asked out as much for her clothes as for herself. The clothes are the background, the frame, if you like: they don't make success, but they are a part of it. Who wants a dingy¹² woman? We are expected to be pretty and well-dressed till we drop--and if we can't keep it up alone, we have to go into partnership."

Reading Guide

❧ What words are used to describe Lily (Adjectives, similes, metaphors, adverbs...)? Choose 3 personal adjectives that describe her.

❧ What differences are there between Lily and Gerty Farish? Between Lily and Selden?

❧ Selden thinks Lily is a victim of society. Do you agree with this?

❧ What image is given of women in this extract?

¹⁰ I like

¹¹ Worn out

¹² Poorly dressed

