

The Perfect Life, F. Scott Fitzgerald

I

When he came into the dining room, a little tired, but with his clothes hanging cool and free on him after his shower, the whole school stood up and clapped and cheered until he slunk down into his seat. From one end of the table to the other, people leaned forward and smiled at him.

"Nice work, Lee. Not your fault we didn't win."

Basil knew that he had been good. Up to the last whistle he could feel his expended energy miraculously replacing itself after each surpassing effort. But he couldn't realize his success all at once, and only little episodes lingered with him, such as when that shaggy Exeter tackle stood up big in the line and said, "Let's get that quarter! He's yellow." Basil shouted back, "Yellow your gra'mother!" and the linesman grinned good-naturedly, knowing it wasn't true. During that gorgeous hour bodies had no weight or force; Basil lay under piles of them, tossed himself in front of them without feeling the impact, impatient only to be on his feet dominating those two green acres once more. At the end of the first half he got loose for sixty yards and a touchdown, but the whistle had blown and it was not allowed. That was the high point of the game for St. Regis. Outweighed ten pounds to the man, they wilted down suddenly in the fourth quarter and Exeter put over two touchdowns, glad to win over a school whose membership was only one hundred and thirty-five.

When lunch was over and the school was trooping out of the dining hall, the Exeter coach came over to Basil and said:

"Lee, that was about the best game I've ever seen played by a prep-school back, and I've seen a lot of them."

Doctor Bacon beckoned to him. He was standing with two old St. Regis boys, up from Princeton for the day.

"It was a very exciting game, Basil. We are all very proud of the team and—ah—especially of you." And, as if this praise had been an indiscretion, he hastened to add: "And of all the others."

He presented him to the two alumni. One of them, John Granby, Basil knew by reputation. He was said to be a "big man" at Princeton—serious, upright, handsome, with a kindly smile and large, earnest blue eyes. He had graduated from St. Regis before Basil entered.

"That was pretty work, Lee!" Basil made the proper deprecatory noises. "I wonder if you've got a moment this afternoon when we could have a little talk."

"Why, yes, sir." Basil was flattered. "Any time you say."

"Suppose we take a walk about three o'clock. My train goes at five."

"I'd like to very much."

He walked on air to his room in the Sixth Form House. One short year ago he had been perhaps the most unpopular boy at St. Regis—"Bossy" Lee. Only occasionally did people forget and call him "Bossy" now, and then they corrected themselves immediately.

A youngster leaned out of the window of Mitchell House as he passed and cried,

"Good work!" The negro gardener, trimming a hedge, chuckled and called, "You almost beatum by y' own self." Mr. Hicks the housemaster cried, "They ought to have given you that touchdown! That was a crime!" as Basil passed his door. It was a frosty gold October day, tinged with the blue smoke of Indian summer, weather that set him dreaming of future splendors, triumphant descents upon cities, romantic contacts with mysterious and scarcely mortal girls. In his room he floated off into an ambulatory dream in which he walked up and down repeating to himself tag ends of phrases: "by a prep-school back, and I've seen a lot of them."... "Yellow your gra'mother!"... "You get off side again and I'll kick your fat bottom for you!"

Suddenly he rolled on his bed with laughter. The threatened one had actually apologized between quarters—it was Pork Corrigan who only last year had chased him up two flights of stairs.

At three he met John Granby and they set off along the Grunwald Pike, following a long, low red wall that on fair mornings always suggested to Basil an adventurous quest like in "The Broad Highway." John Granby talked awhile about Princeton, but when he realized that Yale was an abstract ideal deep in Basil's heart, he gave up. After a moment a far-away expression, a smile that seemed a reflection of another and brighter world, spread over his handsome face.

"Lee, I love St. Regis School," he said suddenly. "I spent the happiest years of my life here. I owe it a debt I can never repay." Basil didn't answer and Granby turned to him suddenly. "I wonder if you realize what you could do here."

"What? Me?"

"I wonder if you know the effect on the whole school of that wonderful game you played this morning."

"It wasn't so good."

"It's like you to say that," declared Granby emphatically, "but it isn't the truth. However, I didn't come out here to sing your praises. Only I wonder if you realize your power for good. I mean your power of influencing all these boys to lead clean, upright, decent lives."

"I never thought about that," said Basil, somewhat startled; "I never thought about _"

Granby slapped him smartly on the shoulder.

"Since this morning a responsibility has come to you that you can't dodge. From this morning every boy in this school who goes around smoking cigarettes behind the gym and reeking with nicotine is a little bit your responsibility; every bit of cursing and swearing, or of learning to take the property of others by stealing milk and food supplies out of the pantry at night is a little bit your responsibility."

He broke off. Basil looked straight ahead, frowning.

"Gee!" he said.

"I mean it," continued Granby, his eyes shining. "You have the sort of opportunity very few boys have. I'm going to tell you a little story. Up at Princeton I knew two boys who were wrecking their lives with drink. I could have said, 'It's not my affair,' and let them go to pieces their own way, but when I looked deep into my own heart I found I couldn't. So I went to them frankly and put it up to them fairly and squarely, and those two boys haven't—at least one of them hasn't—touched

a single drop of liquor from that day to this."

"But I don't think anybody in school drinks," objected Basil. "At least there was a fellow named Bates that got fired last year--"

"It doesn't matter," John Granby interrupted. "Smoking leads to drinking and drinking leads to other things."

For an hour Granby talked and Basil listened; the red wall beside the road and the apple-heavy branches overhead seemed to become less vivid minute by minute as his thoughts turned inward. He was deeply affected by what he considered the fine unselfishness of this man who took the burdens of others upon his shoulders. Granby missed his train, but he said that didn't matter if he had succeeded in planting a sense of responsibility in Basil's mind.

Basil returned to his room awed, sobered and convinced. Up to this time he had always considered himself rather bad; in fact, the last hero character with which he had been able to identify himself was Hairbreadth Harry in the comic supplement, when he was ten. Though he often brooded, his brooding was dark and nameless and never concerned with moral questions. The real restraining influence on him was fear--the fear of being disqualified from achievement and power.

But this meeting with John Granby had come at a significant moment. After this morning's triumph, life at school scarcely seemed to hold anything more--and here was something new. To be perfect, wonderful inside and out--as Granby had put it, to try to lead the perfect life. Granby had outlined the perfect life to him, not without a certain stress upon its material rewards such as honor and influence at college, and Basil's imagination was already far in the future. When he was tapped last man for Skull and Bones at Yale and shook his head with a sad sweet smile, somewhat like John Granby's, pointing to another man who wanted it more, a burst of sobbing would break from the assembled crowd. Then, out into the world, where, at the age of twenty-five, he would face the nation from the inaugural platform on the Capitol steps, and all around him his people would lift up their faces in admiration and love...

As he thought he absent-mindedly consumed half a dozen soda crackers and a bottle of milk, left from a pantry raid the night before. Vaguely he realized that this was one of the things he was giving up, but he was very hungry. However, he reverently broke off the train of his reflections until he was through.

Outside his window the autumn dusk was split with shafts of lights from passing cars. In these cars were great football players and lovely débutantes, mysterious adventuresses and international spies--rich, gay, glamorous people moving toward brilliant encounters in New York, at fashionable dances and secret cafés, or on roof gardens under the autumn moon. He sighed; perhaps he could blend in these more romantic things later. To be of great wit and conversational powers, and simultaneously strong and serious and silent. To be generous and open and self-sacrificing, yet to be somewhat mysterious and sensitive and even a little bitter with melancholy. To be both light and dark. To harmonize this, to melt all this down into a single man--ah, there was something to be done. The very thought of such perfection crystallized his vitality into an ecstasy of ambition. For a moment longer his soul followed the speeding lights toward the metropolis; then resolutely he arose, put out his cigarette on the window sill, and turning on his reading lamp, began to note down a set of requirements for the perfect life.

II

One month later George Dorsey, engaged in the painful duty of leading his mother around the school grounds, reached the comparative seclusion of the tennis courts

and suggested eagerly that she rest herself upon a bench.

Hitherto his conversation had confined itself to a few hoarse advices, such as "That's the gym,"..."That's Cuckoo Conklin that teaches French. Everybody hates him."..."Please don't call me 'Brother' in front of boys." Now his face took on the preoccupied expression peculiar to adolescents in the presence of their parents. He relaxed. He waited to be asked things.

"Now, about Thanksgiving, George. Who is this boy you're bringing home?"

"His name is Basil Lee."

"Tell me something about him."

"There isn't anything to tell. He's just a boy in the Sixth Form, about sixteen."

"Is he a nice boy?"

"Yes. He lives in St. Paul, Minnesota. I asked him a long time ago."

A certain reticence in her son's voice interested Mrs. Dorsey.

"Do you mean you're sorry you asked him? Don't you like him any more?"

"Sure I like him."

"Because there's no use bringing anyone you don't like. You could just explain that your mother has made other plans."

"But I like him," George insisted, and then he added hesitantly: "It's just some funny way he's got to be lately."

"How?"

"Oh, just sort of queer."

"But how, George? I don't want you to bring anyone into the house that's queer."

"He isn't exactly queer. He just gets people aside and talks to them. Then he sort of smiles at them."

Mrs. Dorsey was mystified. "Smiles at them?"

"Yeah. He gets them off in a corner somewheres and talks to them as long as they can stand it, and then he smiles"—his own lips twisted into a peculiar grimace—"like that."

"What does he talk about?"

"Oh, about swearing and smoking and writing home and a lot of stuff like that. Nobody pays any attention except one boy he's got doing the same thing. He got stuck up or something because he was so good at football."

"Well, if you don't want him, don't let's have him."

"Oh, no," George cried in alarm. "I've got to have him. I asked him."

Naturally, Basil was unaware of this conversation when, one morning, a week later, the Dorseys' chauffeur relieved them of their bags in the Grand Central station.

There was a slate-pink light over the city and people in the streets carried with them little balloons of frosted breath. About them the buildings broke up through many planes toward heaven, at their base the wintry color of an old man's smile, on through diagonals of diluted gold, edged with purple where the cornices floated past the stationary sky.

In a long, low, English town car—the first of the kind that Basil had ever seen—sat a girl of about his own age. As they came up she received her brother's kiss perfunctorily, nodded stiffly to Basil and murmured, "how-d'y'-do" without smiling. She said nothing further but seemed absorbed in meditations of her own. At first, perhaps because of her extreme reserve, Basil received no especial impression of her, but before they reached the Dorseys' house he began to realize that she was one of the prettiest girls he had ever seen in his life.

It was a puzzling face. Her long eyelashes lay softly against her pale cheeks, almost touching them, as if to conceal the infinite boredom in her eyes, but when she smiled, her expression was illumined by a fiery and lovely friendliness, as if she were saying, "Go on; I'm listening. I'm fascinated. I've been waiting—oh, ages—for just this moment with you." Then she remembered that she was shy or bored; the smile vanished, the gray eyes half closed again. Almost before it had begun, the moment was over, leaving a haunting and unsatisfied curiosity behind.

The Dorseys' house was on Fifty-third Street. Basil was astonished first at the narrowness of its white stone front and then at the full use to which the space was put inside. The formal chambers ran the width of the house, artificial sunlight bloomed in the dining-room windows, a small elevator navigated the five stories in deferential silence. For Basil there was a new world in its compact luxury. It was thrilling and romantic that a foothold on this island was more precious than the whole rambling sweep of the James J. Hill house at home. In his excitement the feel of school dropped momentarily away from him. He was possessed by the same longing for a new experience, that his previous glimpses of New York had aroused. In the hard bright glitter of Fifth Avenue, in this lovely girl with no words to waste beyond a mechanical "How-d'y'-do," in the perfectly organized house, he recognized nothing, and he knew that to recognize nothing in his surroundings was usually a guaranty of adventure.

But his mood of the last month was not to be thrown off so lightly. There was now an ideal that came first. A day mustn't pass when he wasn't, as John Granby put it, "straight with himself"—and that meant to help others. He could get in a good deal of work on George Dorsey in these five days; other opportunities might turn up, besides. Meanwhile, with the consciousness of making the best of both worlds, he unpacked his grip and got ready for luncheon.

He sat beside Mrs. Dorsey, who found him somewhat precipitately friendly in a Midwestern way, but polite, apparently not unbalanced. He told her he was going to be a minister and immediately he didn't believe it himself; but he saw that it interested Mrs. Dorsey and let it stand.

The afternoon was already planned; they were going dancing—for those were the great days: Maurice was tangoing in "Over the River," the Castles were doing a swift stiff-legged walk in the third act of "The Sunshine Girl"—a walk that gave the modern dance a social position and brought the nice girl into the café, thus beginning a profound revolution in American life. The great rich empire was feeling its oats and was out for some not too plebeian, yet not too artistic, fun.

By three o'clock seven young people were assembled, and they started in a limousine for Emil's. There were two stylish, anæmic girls of sixteen—one bore an impressive financial name—and two freshmen from Harvard who exchanged private jokes and were attentive only to Jobena Dorsey. Basil expected that presently everyone would begin

asking each other such familiar questions as "Where do you go to school?" and "Oh, do you know So-and-So?" and the party would become more free and easy, but nothing of the sort happened. The atmosphere was impersonal; he doubted if the other four guests knew his name. "In fact," he thought, "it's just as if everyone's waiting for some one else to make a fool of himself." Here again was something new and unrecognizable; he guessed that it was a typical part of New York.

They reached Emil's. Only in certain Paris restaurants where the Argentines step untiringly through their native coils does anything survive of the dance craze as it existed just before the war. At that time it was not an accompaniment to drinking or love-making or hailing in the dawn—it was an end in itself. Sedentary stockbrokers, grandmothers of sixty, Confederate veterans, venerable statesmen and scientists, sufferers from locomotor ataxia, wanted not only to dance but to dance beautifully. Fantastic ambitions bloomed in hitherto sober breasts, violent exhibitionism cropped out in families modest for generations. Nonentities with long legs became famous overnight, and there were rendezvous where they could renew the dance, if they wished, next morning. Because of a neat glide or an awkward stumble careers were determined and engagements were made or broken, while the tall Englishman and the girl in the Dutch cap called the tune.

As they went into the cabaret sudden anxiety attacked Basil—modern dancing was one of the things upon which John Granby had been most severe.

He approached George Dorsey in the coat room.

"There's an extra man, so do you suppose I'd be all right if I only danced when there's a waltz? I'm no good at anything else."

"Sure. It's all right with me." He looked curiously at Basil. "Gosh, have you sworn off everything?"

"No, not everything," answered Basil uncomfortably.

The floor was already crowded. All ages and several classes of society shuffled around tensely to the nervous, disturbing beats of "Too Much Mustard." Automatically the other three couples were up and away, leaving Basil at the table. He watched, trying to pretend to himself that he disapproved of it all but was too polite to show it. However, with so much to see, it was difficult to preserve that attitude, and he was gazing with fascination at Jobena's active feet when a good-looking young man of about nineteen sat down beside him at the table.

"Excuse me," he said with exaggerated deference. "This Miss Jobena Dorsey's table?"

"Yes, it is."

"I'm expected. Name's De Vinci. Don't ask me if I'm any relation to the painter."

"My name's Lee."

"All right, Lee. What'll you have? What are you having?" The waiter arrived with a tray, and De Vinci looked at its contents with disgust. "Tea—all tea..Waiter, bring me a double Bronx..How about you, Lee? Another double Bronx?"

"Oh, no, thanks," said Basil quickly.

"One then, waiter."

De Vinci sighed; he had the unmistakable lush look of a man who has been drinking hard for several days.

"Nice dog under that table over there. They oughtn't to let people smoke if they're going to bring dogs in here."

"Why?"

"Hurts their eyes."

Confusedly Basil deliberated this piece of logic.

"But don't talk to me about dogs," said De Vinci with a profound sigh; "I'm trying to keep from thinking of dogs."

Basil obligingly changed the subject for him by asking him if he was in college.

"Two weeks." For emphasis De Vinci held up two fingers. "I passed quickly through Yale. First man fired out of '15 Sheff."

"That's too bad," said Basil earnestly. He took a deep breath and his lips twisted up in a kindly smile. "Your parents must have felt pretty badly about that."

De Vinci stared at him as if over a pair of spectacles, but before he could answer, the dance ended and the others came back to the table.

"Hello there, Skiddy."

"Well, well, Skiddy!"

They all knew him. One of the freshmen yielded him a place next to Jobena and they began to talk together in lowered voices.

"Skiddy De Vinci," George whispered to Basil. "He and Jobena were engaged last summer, but I think she's through." He shook his head. "They used to go off in his mother's electric up at Bar Harbor; it was disgusting."

Basil glowed suddenly with excitement as if he had been snapped on like an electric torch. He looked at Jobena—her face, infinitely reserved, lightened momentarily, but this time her smile had gone sad; there was the deep friendliness but not the delight. He wondered if Skiddy De Vinci cared about her being through with him. Perhaps, if he reformed and stopped drinking and went back to Yale, she would change her mind.

The music began again. Basil stared uncomfortably into his cup of tea.

"This is a tango," said George. "You can dance the tango, can't you? It's all right; it's Spanish."

Basil considered.

"Sure you can," insisted George. "It's Spanish, I tell you. There's nothing to stop your dancing if it's Spanish, is there?"

One of the freshmen looked at them curiously. Basil leaned over the table and asked Jobena to dance.

She made a last low-voiced remark to De Vinci before she rose; then, to atone for the slight rudeness, she smiled up at Basil. He was light-headed as they moved out on the floor.

Abruptly she made an outrageous remark and Basil started and nearly stumbled, doubtful that he had heard aright.

"I'll bet you've kissed about a thousand girls in your time," she said, "with that mouth."

"What!"

"Not so?"

"Oh, no," declared Basil. "Really, I—"

Her lids and lashes had drooped again indifferently; she was singing the band's tune:

"Tango makes you warm inside;
You bend and sway and glide;
There's nothing far and wide—"

What was the implication—that kissing people was all right; was even admirable? He remembered what John Granby had said: "Every time you kiss a nice girl you may have started her on the road to the devil."

He thought of his own past—an afternoon on the Kampf's porch with Minnie Bibble, a ride home from Black Bear Lake with Imogene Bissel in the back seat of the car, a miscellany of encounters running back to games of post office and to childish kisses that were consummated upon an unwilling nose or ear.

That was over; he was never going to kiss another girl until he found the one who would become his wife. It worried him that this girl whom he found lovely should take the matter so lightly. The strange thrill he had felt when George spoke of her "behaving disgustingly" with Skiddy De Vinci in his electric, was transformed into indignation—steadily rising indignation. It was criminal—a girl not yet seventeen.

Suddenly it occurred to him that this was perhaps his responsibility, his opportunity. If he could implant in her mind the futility of it all, the misery she was laying up for herself, his visit to New York would not have been in vain. He could go back to school happy, knowing he had brought to one girl the sort of peace she had never known before.

In fact, the more he thought of Jobena and Skiddy De Vinci in the electric, the madder it made him.

At five they left Emil's to go to Castle House. There was a thin rain falling and the streets were gleaming. In the excitement of going out into the twilight Jobena slipped her arm quickly through Basil's.

"There's too many for the car. Let's take the hansom."

She gave the address to a septuagenarian in faded bottle green, and the slanting doors closed upon them, shutting them back away from the rain.

"I'm tired of them," she whispered. "Such empty faces, except Skiddy's, and in another hour he won't be able to even talk straight. He's beginning to get maudlin about his dog Eggshell that died last month, and that's always a sign. Do you ever feel the fascination of somebody that's doomed; who just goes on and on in the way he was born to go, never complaining, never hoping; just sort or resigned to it all?"

His fresh heart cried out against this.

"Nobody has to go to pieces," he assured her. "They can just turn over a new leaf."

"Not Skiddy."

"Anybody," he insisted. "You just make up your mind and resolve to live a better life, and you'd be surprised how easy it is and how much happier you are."

She didn't seem to hear him.

"Isn't it nice, rolling along in this hansom with the damp blowing in, and you and I back here"—she turned to him and smiled—"together."

"Yes," said Basil abstractedly. "The thing is that everybody should try to make their life perfect. They can't start young enough; in fact, they ought to start about eleven or twelve in order to make their life absolutely perfect."

"That's true," she said. "In a way Skiddy's life is perfect. He never worries, never regrets. You could put him back at the time of the—oh, the eighteenth century, or whenever it was they had the bucks and beaux—and he'd fit right in."

"I didn't mean that," said Basil in alarm. "That isn't at all what I mean by the perfect life."

"You mean something more masterful," she supplied. "I thought so, when I saw that chin of yours. I'll bet you just take everything you want."

Again she looked at him, swayed close to him.

"You don't understand—" he began.

She put her hand on his arm. "Wait a minute; we're almost there. Let's not go in yet. It's so nice with all the lights going on and it'll be so hot and crowded in there. Tell him to drive out a few blocks more. I noticed you only danced a few times; I like that. I hate men that pop up at the first sound of music as if their life depended on it. Is it true you're only sixteen?"

"Yes."

"You seem older. There's so much in your face."

"You don't understand—" Basil began again desperately.

She spoke through the trap to the cabby:

"Go up Broadway till we tell you to stop." Sitting back in the cab, she repeated dreamily, "The perfect life. I'd like my life to be perfect. I'd like to suffer, if I could find something worth suffering for, and I'd like to never do anything low or small or mean, but just have big sins."

"Oh, no!" said Basil, aghast. "That's no way to feel; that's morbid. Why, look, you oughtn't to talk like that—a girl sixteen years old. You ought to—talk things over with yourself—you ought to think more of the after life." He stopped, half expecting to be interrupted, but Jobena was silent. "Why, up to a month ago I used to smoke as many as twelve or fifteen cigarettes a day, unless I was training for football. I used to curse and swear and only write home once in a while, so they had to telegraph sometimes to see if I was sick. I had no sense of responsibility. I never thought I could lead a perfect life until I tried."

He paused, overcome by his emotion.

"Didn't you?" said Jobena, in a small voice.

"Never. I was just like everybody else, only worse. I used to kiss girls and never think anything about it."

"What—what changed you?"

"A man I met." Suddenly he turned to her and, with an effort, caused to spread over his face a caricature of John Granby's sad sweet smile. "Jobena, you—you have the makings of a fine girl in you. It grieved me a lot this afternoon to see you smoking nicotine and dancing modern suggestive dances that are simply savagery. And the way you talk about kissing. What if you meet some man that has kept himself pure and never gone around kissing anybody except his family, and you have to tell him that you went around behaving disgustingly?"

She leaned back suddenly and spoke crisply through the panel.

"You can go back now—the address we gave you."

"You ought to cut it out." Again Basil smiled at her, straining and struggling to lift her up out of herself to a higher plane. "Promise me you'll try. It isn't so hard. And then some day when some upright and straightforward man comes along and says, 'Will you marry me?' you'll be able to say you never danced suggestive modern dances, except the Spanish tango and the Boston, and you never kissed anybody—that is, since you were sixteen, and maybe you wouldn't have to say that you ever kissed anybody at all."

"That wouldn't be the truth," she said in an odd voice. "Shouldn't I tell him the truth?"

"You could tell him you didn't know any better."

"Oh."

To Basil's regret the cab drew up at Castle House. Jobena hurried in, and to make up for her absence, devoted herself exclusively to Skiddy and the Harvard freshmen for the remainder of the afternoon. But doubtless she was thinking hard—as he had done a month before. With a little more time he could have clinched his argument by showing the influence that one leading a perfect life could exert on others. He must find an opportunity tomorrow.

But next day he scarcely saw her. She was out for luncheon and she did not appear at her rendezvous with Basil and George after the matinée; they waited in vain in the Biltmore grill for an hour. There was company at dinner and Basil began to feel a certain annoyance when she disappeared immediately afterwards. Was it possible that his seriousness had frightened her? In that case it was all the more necessary to see her, reassure her, bind her with the invisible cords of high purpose to himself. Perhaps—perhaps she was the ideal girl that he would some day marry. At the gorgeous idea his whole being was flooded with ecstasy. He planned out the years of waiting, each one helping the other to lead the perfect life, neither of them ever kissing anybody else—he would insist on that, absolutely insist on it; she must promise not even to see Skiddy De Vinci—and then marriage and a life of service, perfection, fame and love.

The two boys went to the theatre again that night. When they came home a little after eleven, George went upstairs to say good night to his mother, leaving Basil

to make reconnaissance in the ice box. The intervening pantry was dark and as he fumbled unfamiliarly for the light he was startled by hearing a voice in the kitchen pronounce his name:

"—Mr. Basil Duke Lee."

"Seemed all right to me." Basil recognized the drawling tone of Skiddy De Vinci. "Just a kid."

"On the contrary, he's a nasty little prig," said Jobena decisively. "He gave me the old-fashioned moral lecture about nicotine and modern dancing and kissing, and about that upright, straightforward man that was going to come along some day—you know that upright straightforward man they're always talking about. I suppose he meant himself, because he told me he led a perfect life. Oh, it was all so oily and horrible, it made me positively sick. Skiddy. For the first time in my life I was tempted to take a cocktail."

"Oh, he's just a kid," said Skiddy moderately. "It's a phase. He'll get over it."

Basil listened in horror; his face burning, his mouth ajar. He wanted above all things to get away, but his dismay rooted him to the floor.

"What I think of righteous men couldn't be put on paper," said Jobena after a moment. "I suppose I'm just naturally bad, Skiddy; at least, all my contacts with upright young men have affected me like this."

"Then how about it, Jobena?"

There was a long silence.

"This has done something to me," she said finally. "Yesterday I thought I was through with you, Skiddy, but ever since this happened I've had a vision of a thousand Mr. Basil Duke Lees, all grown up and asking me to share their perfect lives. I refuse to—definitely. If you like, I'll marry you in Greenwich tomorrow."

III

At one Basil's light was still burning. Walking up and down his room, he made out case after case for himself, with Jobena in the role of villainness, but each case was wrecked upon the rock of his bitter humiliation. "A nasty little prig"—the words, uttered with conviction and scorn, had driven the high principles of John Granby from his head. He was a slave to his own admirations, and in the past twenty-four hours Jobena's personality had become the strongest force in his life; deep in his heart he believed that what she had said was true.

He woke up on Thanksgiving morning with dark circles rimming his eyes. His bag, packed for immediate departure, brought back the debacle of the night before, and as he lay staring at the ceiling, relaxed by sleep, giant tears welled up into his eyes. An older man might have taken refuge behind the virtue of his intentions, but Basil knew no such refuge. For sixteen years he had gone his own way without direction, due to his natural combativeness and to the fact that no older man save John Granby had yet captured his imagination. Now John Granby had vanished in the night, and it seemed the natural thing to Basil that he should struggle back to rehabilitation unguided and alone.

One thing he knew—Jobena must not marry Skiddy De Vinci. That was a responsibility she could not foist upon him. If necessary, he would go to her father and tell what he knew.

Emerging from his room half an hour later, he met her in the hall. She was dressed in a smart blue street suit with a hobble skirt and a ruff of linen at her throat. Her eyes opened a little and she wished him a polite good morning.

"I've got to talk to you," he said quickly.

"I'm terribly sorry." To his intense discomfort she flashed her smile at him, just as if nothing had happened. "I've only a minute now."

"It's something very important. I know you don't like me—"

"What nonsense!" She laughed cheerfully. "Of course I like you. How did you get such a silly idea in your head?"

Before he could answer, she waved her hand hastily and ran down the stairs.

George had gone to town and Basil spent the morning walking through large deliberate snowflakes in Central Park rehearsing what he should say to Mr. Dorsey.

"It's nothing to me, but I cannot see your only daughter throw away her life on a dissipated man. If I had a daughter of my own who was about to throw away her life, I would want somebody to tell me, and so I have come to tell you. Of course, after this I cannot stay in your house, and so I bid you good-by."

At quarter after twelve, waiting anxiously in the drawing-room, he heard Mr. Dorsey come in. He rushed downstairs, but Mr. Dorsey had already entered the lift and closed the door. Turning about, Basil raced against the machine to the third story and caught him in the hall.

"In regard to your daughter," he began excitedly—"in regard to your daughter—"

"Well," said Mr. Dorsey, "is something the matter with Jobena?"

"I want to talk to you about her."

Mr. Dorsey laughed. "Are you going to ask her hand in marriage?"

"Oh, no."

"Well, suppose we have a talk after dinner when we're full of turkey and stuffing, and feeling happy."

He clapped his hand on Basil's shoulder and went on into his room.

It was a large family dinner party, and under cover of the conversation Basil kept an attentive eye on Jobena, trying to determine her desperate intention from her clothes and the expression of her face. She was adept at concealing her real emotions, as he had discovered this morning, but once or twice he saw her eyes wander to her watch and a look of abstraction come into them.

There was coffee afterward in the library, and, it seemed to Basil, interminable chatter. When Jobena arose suddenly and left the room, he moved just as quickly to Mr. Dorsey's side.

"Well, young man, what can I do for you?"

"Why—" Basil hesitated.

"Now is the time to ask me—when I'm well fed and happy."

"Why—" Again Basil stopped.

"Don't be shy. It's something about my Jobena."

But a peculiar thing had happened to Basil. In sudden detachment he saw himself from the outside—saw himself sneaking to Mr. Dorsey, in a house in which he was a guest, to inform against a girl.

"Why—" he repeated blankly.

"The question is: Can you support her?" said Mr. Dorsey jovially. "And the second is: Can you control her?"

"I forgot what it was I wanted to say," Basil blurted out.

He hurried from the library, his brain in a turmoil. Dashing upstairs, he knocked at the door of Jobena's room. There was no answer and he opened the door and glanced inside. The room was empty, but a half-packed suitcase lay on the bed.

"Jobena," he called anxiously. There was no answer. A maid passing along the hall told him Miss Jobena was having a marcel wave in her mother's room.

He hurried downstairs and into his hat and coat, racking his brains for the address where they had dropped Skiddy De Vinci the other afternoon. Sure that he would recognize the building, he drove down Lexington Avenue in a taxi, tried three doors, and trembled with excitement as he found the name "Leonard Edward Davies De Vinci" on a card beside a bell. When he rang, a latch clicked on an inner door.

He had no plan. Failing argument, he had a vague melodramatic idea of knocking him down, tying him up and letting him lie there until it blew over. In view of the fact that Skiddy outweighed him by forty pounds, this was a large order.

Skiddy was packing—the overcoat he tossed hastily over his suitcase did not serve to hide this fact from Basil. There was an open bottle of whisky on his littered dresser, and beside it a half-full glass.

Concealing his surprise, he invited Basil to sit down.

"I had to come and see you"—Basil tried to make his voice calm—"about Jobena."

"Jobena?" Skiddy frowned. "What about her? Did she send you here?"

"Oh, no." Basil swallowed hard, stalling for time. "I thought—maybe you could advise me—you see, I don't think she likes me, and I don't know why."

Skiddy's face relaxed. "That's nonsense. Of course she likes you. Have a drink?"

"No. At least not now."

Skiddy finished his glass. After a slight hesitation he removed his overcoat from the suitcase.

"Excuse me if I go on packing, will you? I'm going out of town."

"Certainly."

"Better have a drink."

"No, I'm on the water wagon—just now."

"When you get worrying about nothing, the thing to do is to have a drink."

The phone rang and he answered it, squeezing the receiver close to his ear:

"Yes... I can't talk now... Yes... At half-past five then. It's now about four... I'll explain why when I see you... Good-by." He hung up. "My office," he said with affected nonchalance... "Won't you have a little drink?"

"No, thanks."

"Never worry. Enjoy yourself."

"It's hard to be visiting in a house and know somebody doesn't like you."

"But she does like you. Told me so herself the other day."

While Skiddy packed they discussed the question. He was a little hazy and extremely nervous, and a single question asked in the proper serious tone would send him rambling along indefinitely. As yet Basil had evolved no plan save to stay with Skiddy and wait for the best opportunity of coming into the open.

But staying with Skiddy was going to be difficult; he was becoming worried at Basil's tenacity. Finally he closed his suitcase with one of those definite snaps, took down a large drink quickly and said:

"Well, guess I ought to get started."

They went out together and Skiddy hailed a taxi.

"Which way are you going?" Basil asked.

"Uptown—I mean downtown."

"I'll ride with you," volunteered Basil. "We might—we might have a drink in the—Biltmore."

Skiddy hesitated. "I'll drop you there," he said.

When they reached the Biltmore, Basil made no move to get out.

"You're coming in with me, aren't you?" he asked in a surprised voice.

Frowning, Skiddy looked at his watch. "I haven't got much time."

Basil's face fell; he sat back in the car.

"Well, there's no use my going in alone, because I look sort of young and they wouldn't give me anything unless I was with an older man."

The appeal succeeded. Skiddy got out, saying, "I'll have to hurry," and they went into the bar.

"What'll it be?"

"Something strong," Basil said, lighting his first cigarette in a month.

"Two stingers," ordered Skiddy.

"Let's have something really strong."

"Two double stingers then."

Out of the corner of his eye Basil looked at the clock. It was twenty after five. Waiting until Skiddy was in the act of taking down his drink he signalled to the waiter to repeat the order.

"Oh, no!" cried Skiddy.

"You'll have to have one on me."

"You haven't touched yours."

Basil sipped his drink, hating it. He saw that with the new alcohol Skiddy had relaxed a little.

"Got to be going," he said automatically. "Important engagement."

Basil had an inspiration.

"I'm thinking of buying a dog," he announced.

"Don't talk about dogs," said Skiddy mournfully. "I had an awful experience about a dog. I've just got over it."

"Tell me about it."

"I don't even like to talk about it; it was awful."

"I think a dog is the best friend a man has," Basil said.

"Do you?" Skiddy slapped the table emphatically with his open hand. "So do I, Lee. So do I."

"Nobody ever loves him like a dog," went on Basil, staring off sentimentally into the distance.

The second round of double stingers arrived.

"Let me tell you about my dog that I lost," said Skiddy. He looked at his watch. "I'm late, but a minute won't make any difference, if you like dogs."

"I like them better than anything in the world." Basil raised his first glass, still half full. "Here's to man's best friend—a dog."

They drank. There were tears in Skiddy's eyes.

"Let me tell you. I raised this dog Eggshell from a pup. He was a beauty—an Airedale, sired by McTavish VI."

"I bet he was a beauty."

"He was! Let me tell you—"

As Skiddy warmed to his subject, Basil pushed his new drink toward Skiddy, whose hand presently closed upon the stem. Catching the bartender's attention, he ordered two more. The clock stood at five minutes of six.

Skiddy rambled on. Ever afterward the sight of a dog story in a magazine caused Basil an attack of acute nausea. At half-past six Skiddy rose uncertainly.

"I've gotta go. Got important date. Be mad."

"All right. We'll stop by the bar and have one more."

The bartender knew Skiddy and they talked for a few minutes, for time seemed of no account now. Skiddy had a drink with his old friend to wish him luck on a very important occasion. Then he had another.

At a quarter before eight o'clock Basil piloted Leonard Edward Davies De Vinci from the hotel bar, leaving his suitcase in care of the bartender.

"Important engagement," Skiddy mumbled as they hailed a taxi.

"Very important," Basil agreed. "I'm going to see that you get there."

When the car rolled up, Skiddy tumbled in and Basil gave the address to the driver.

"Good-by and thanks!" Skiddy called fervently. "Ought to go in, maybe, and drink once more to best friend man ever had."

"Oh, no," said Basil, "it's too important."

"You're right. It's too important."

The car rolled off and Basil followed it with his eye as it turned the corner. Skiddy was going out on Long Island to visit Eggshell's grave.

IV

Basil had never had a drink before and, now with his jubilant relief, the three cocktails that he had been forced to down mounted swiftly to his head. On his way to the Dorseys' house he threw back his head and roared with laughter. The self-respect he had lost last night rushed back to him; he felt himself tingling with the confidence of power.

As the maid opened the door for him he was aware subconsciously that there was someone in the lower hall. He waited till the maid disappeared; then stepping to the door of the coat room, he pulled it open. Beside her suitcase stood Jobena, wearing a look of mingled impatience and fright. Was he deceived by his ebullience or, when she saw him, did her face lighten with relief?

"Hello." She took off her coat and hung it up as if that was her purpose there, and came out under the lights. Her face, pale and lovely, composed itself, as if she had sat down and folded her hands.

"George was looking for you," she said indifferently.

"Was he? I've been with a friend."

With an expression of surprise she sniffed the faint aroma of cocktails.

"But my friend went to visit his dog's tomb, so I came home."

She stiffened suddenly. "You've been with Skiddy?"

"He was telling me about his dog," said Basil gravely. "A man's best friend is his dog after all."

She sat down and stared at him, wide-eyed.

"Has Skiddy passed out?"

"He went to see a dog."

"Oh, the fool!" she cried.

"Were you expecting him? Is it possible that that's your suitcase?"

"It's none of your business."

Basil took it out of the closet and deposited it in the elevator.

"You won't need it tonight," he said.

Her eyes shone with big despairing tears.

"You oughtn't to drink," she said brokenly. "Can't you see what it's made of him?"

"A man's best friend is a stinger."

"You're just sixteen. I suppose all that you told me the other afternoon was a joke—I mean, about the perfect life."

"All a joke," he agreed.

"I thought you meant it. Doesn't anybody ever mean anything?"

"I like you better than any girl I ever knew," Basil said quietly. "I mean that."

"I liked you, too, until you said that about my kissing people."

He went and stood over her and took her hand.

"Let's take the bag upstairs before the maid comes in."

They stepped into the dark elevator and closed the door.

"There's a light switch somewhere," she said.

Still holding her hand, he drew her close and tightened his arm around her in the darkness. "Just for this once we don't need the light."

Going back on the train, George Dorsey came to a sudden resolution. His mouth tightened.

"I don't want to say anything, Basil—" He hesitated. "But look—Did you have something to drink Thanksgiving Day?"

Basil frowned and nodded.

"Sometimes I've got to," he said soberly. "I don't know what it is. All my family died of liquor."

"Gee!" exclaimed George.

"But I'm through. I promised Jobena I wouldn't touch anything more till I'm twenty-one. She feels that if I go on with this constant dissipation it'll ruin my life."

George was silent for a moment.

"What were you and she talking about those last few days? Gosh, I thought you were supposed to be visiting me."

"It's—it's sort of sacred," Basil said placidly... "Look here; if we don't have anything fit to eat for dinner, let's get Sam to leave the pantry window unlocked tonight."

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