BOOTH TARKINGTON

THE HERITAGE OF HATCHER IDE

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EAN 8596547186076

DigiCat, 2022
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SCIENTIFIC DIGGING into buried towns sometimes finds previous foundations, one beneath another, making it clear that the ancient communities had every one in turn been overwhelmed by a newer that built upon the ruins. As he works downward, the excavator thus reveals clues to the history of the town's dead periods; but a living city, as it spreads, leaves upon the surface some vestiges of the previous stages of its life, relics as eloquent to the interested eye as if the city were already being dug for, which it must be in the end.

So with this American city of the great central plain, the very location of the skyscrapers, of the Statehouse and the Courthouse and the old "New Market Building", betokens the site of the earliest settlement. Where stood the pioneers' straggling cabins, the store and the blacksmith shop, here still to-day is the community's middle, and here the price of land has always been highest. Not till the last decade of the Nineteenth Century, though, did that increasing price acquire such momentum as to begin to force upward the skyscrapers and noticeably distend the city's middle, swelling it northward. A few blocks to the south the railroads crossed the town from east to west, making a South Side and a North Side; but the South Siders had to cross the tracks to reach the city's middle, where all the great business was, and they had to cross the tracks again to go home afterward, so the North Side became the affluent side.

Affluence, following broad streets northward for residence, before the Civil War, seemed to be establishing itself permanently just north of the business heart of the city. In the late ’Sixties and early ’Seventies its domain so spread that the outer boundaries of the “best residence section” were more than a mile north of the banks, the shops and the three and four story office buildings. Then were built the big brick houses, imposing and comfortable, that took throngs of workmen more than a year to finish; and the owning families settled down among old trees and new clipped lawns to be imposing and comfortable forever, like their houses.

These families were not “new rich”. They were the ablest descendants of the ablest pioneers, and it was their intelligence, energy and sound thrift that had slowly built a prosperous town. They it was who had held the state for the Union throughout the Civil War; had sent forth many who came not home; had sent forth privates and corporals who came home captains and majors; had sent forth colonels who came home generals. Ancestrally almost all of the families were of Revolutionary stock, British in remote origin, with able, industrious and patriotic Germans second to these in number.

Good stock and strong backbones were needed, not only to win the War but to confront the great business collapse that came eight years later with the “Panic of ’73”. That was what is now called a “Major Depression”; but the country and its citizens were sturdy then; they knew how to bear adversity, how to meet it manfully and to survive it by a time-proven process, the tightening of belts.

Some of the brick houses changed owners; but of the families that moved out, and temporarily down, most were building again before the end of the ’Seventies. Independent, every man free to make his own way, and doing it, they led their town back into prosperous ways, and, through the ’Eighties and early ’Nineties, in spite of minor depressions, steadily enlarged it. The big new houses, like the older, were solid, imposing and comfortable; but the inhabitants of neither were given over to luxury or to living upon their heritages. They knew one another well; they intermarried, spread cousinships and were indeed a caste but never a caste of snobs. As citizens of the Republic and in their businesses and professions, and in their manners, they were democratic. To describe them conveniently a phrase was sometimes used, though seldom by themselves; they were called the “best people”, and, in spite of every human frailty among them, they were.

They organized charities and built hospitals, founded associations to bring music, painting and sculpture before those of their fellow-citizens who could or would enjoy such things. They entered together into literary clubs, into clubs for theatricals and dances; they believed in dignity, in refinement, in tactfulness; they believed in deference to wisdom, learning, achievement, talent, historical greatness, and to the good life. They went to church, took the children with them, willing or no; they asked the minister to dinner and were delighted with his broadmindedness when he told a story with a quoted damn in it.

They read Emerson, Carlyle, Herbert Spencer, Darwin, Matthew Arnold, John Ruskin, Thoreau, Tennyson, Robert

Browning, Robert Burns and Owen Meredith; they read Shelley, Keats, Wordsworth, Tom Moore and Byron; they read Lowell, Oliver Wendell Holmes and Thomas Bailey Aldrich; they read Washington Irving, Walter Scott, Victor Hugo, Poe, Bulwer Lytton, Robert Louis Stevenson and Bret Harte; they read George Eliot, Jane Austen, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Joel Chandler Harris, Thomas Nelson Page, Lew Wallace and George W. Cable; they read Shakespeare and Goethe; they read Howells, Henry James, Mark Twain, George Meredith and Thomas Hardy; they read Tolstoi, Alphonse Daudet, Victor Cherbuliez, the elder Dumas, Balzac, Zola, Gautier and Flaubert. They read Thackeray and Dickens; most of all they read Dickens, made his people a part of their daily talk. Many of the girls wanted to be “Jane Eyre” and the children learned “declamations” from Longfellow, Whittier, William Cullen Bryant, James Whitcomb Riley and Eugene Field.

The painters they most admired were Raphael, Murillo, Leonardo da Vinci, Rembrandt, Sir Joshua Reynolds, David, Greuze, Meissonier, Jean François Millet, Burne-Jones, Alma Tadema and William M. Chase. They thought Gustave Doré the greatest of all illustrators; they had Landseer engravings on their walls, and on top of their bookshelves there were usually the head of Dante in black plaster and a small cream-colored Venus of Milo. The composers they liked were Verdi, Balfe, Arthur Sullivan, Schubert, Beethoven, Chopin, Liszt, Johann Strauss, Wagner, and Stephen Foster. The actors who filled the “standing room” semicircle were Edwin Booth, Irving and Terry, Sarah Bernhardt, Mme. Modjeska, Salvini and Joseph Jefferson. Thus to the arts the “best

people”, leaders of the public taste, were even then by no means indifferent; many were enthusiasts.

These ablest people of the city, the most prosperous and the most useful in spreading prosperity to others, were not without assailants. Sometimes it happened that one or another of them moved into the histrionic intricacies of politics, perhaps going so far as to aspire to the governorship of the state or a curule chair in Washington; and there were campaigns, too, when the members of the caste were stirred to favor a mayoralty or congressional candidate for his probity, intelligence or general worth. Such episodes always inspired the obvious incitements: the “best people” were hotly called “North Side Silk Stockings!” “North Side Dudes!” “The Idle Rich!” and later, as a reproach bitterly conveying everything, simply “The Rich!” Those thus accused were seldom more than distantly aware of being made oratorical targets; when they heard that a candidate rousing a South Side meeting called them the “Purse-proud silk-hat element that exploit you” they said it was only the old game, laughed and forgot.

In this period, when still were alive a few of the “early settlers”, men and women who in their youth had seen Indians on the city’s site, there were already professional and business firms of the third generation, grandfathers the founders, grandsons coming in after college to begin at the beginning. Of these the most notably successful were the Linleys at the law, the Ides in real estate and the Gilpins with their rolling mill. It was Governor Linley who built the thirty-room stone-trimmed brick house on Sheridan Avenue in Eighteen sixty-six. The house was of course called

palatial, which may have gratified him; but he was as old as the century and had a short occupancy, though he lived to see his grandson christened there by Bishop Hatcher, a month after the house-warming party.

Other families were as ambitious as the Linleys to have space about them at home. The Ides and the Gilpins, building at about the same time in the next block, were only a little less elaborate than the Linleys. The first and second generations of the Ides had kept their attention upon real estate, acquired a great deal of it for themselves and profitably acted as agents for others; but the third head of the family, Oliver Ide, young and commercially imaginative at the time when the country was recovering from the shock of ’Seventy-three, added a trust and investment business that presently became more important to the firm than real estate. The Ides, a broad-shouldered, strong stock, had qualifications—caution in the handling of money, especially in the handling of other people’s money; they were of immaculate probity, had quiet foresightedness and a sense of honor that was a known and quoted standard for their fellow-citizens.

More, they were generous; and, when the Gilpins lost their rolling mill and their fine new house in ’Seventy-three, it was Oliver Ide who risked the better part of his own fortune to get the rolling mill back for them, though neither he nor they could put them again into their house. It had been bought by a newcomer, a jovial adventurous fat young man, Sheffley Lash, who’d built and sold a spur railroad in far west mining country, to his great advantage. Lash settled himself in the Gilpins’ house, faced it with

flamboyantly carved limestone, and, when he and his partner, Erdvynn, had bought the Gas Works, the Old Jamaica Wholesale Drug Company, the Bragg and Dorcy Distillery Company, and the National House (renamed Hotel Lash), visibly enjoyed being known as “the richest man in town”.

The Lashes and the Erdvynns, gay young couples, had a liking for what was known as high living. They gave “champagne suppers” and drove behind docked and jingling horses; Mrs. Lash and Mrs. Erdvynn went to Paris, not to see the Mona Lisa but for clothes. The “best people” never took the Lashes and Erdvynns quite to their hearts. There existed a feeling that there was such a thing as being too fashionable and a little too rich.

The Erdvynns, with an increasing family, built the last of the substantial houses that went up in the affluent neighborhood that had then spread more than a mile north of business. This was in Eighteen ninety-five; and the city, though it grew, was physically almost spotless, for the newer expansion had been accompanied by the discovery of adjacent natural gas. Downtown and Uptown, the sky was blue; trees and foliage, clean green, flourished; snow and white linen stayed white; the air was pure, and autopsies revealed unblackened lungs.

Before the end of the century the great phase of the Growth had begun; unlimited immigration and the doubtful blessing of “industrial progress” were already creating their immensities. The last of natural gas burned blue and went out; soft coal and its heavy dust sputtered oilily into flame, instead—and the smoke began to come. There were an East

Side and a West Side now, as well as a South Side; but the old North Side lost that appellation. It wasn't north enough, came to be too near the middle of the city, and year by year business took block after block of its broad streets.

Apartment houses, too, appeared here and there upon these thoroughfares; and established families, their shrubberies, lawns and peace encroached upon, were at first resentful; then, one after another, put their ground upon the market. There began a migration. New houses of stone or brick, roofed with a tile or slate, were built a mile and a mile-and-a-half and even two miles north of the old North Side; but that migration didn't go far enough, for, after the turn into the Twentieth Century, the "automotive age" was swiftly preparing its destructions.

Downtown, squeezed upward, business clustered the skyscrapers in the smoke from themselves and from the tall industrial chimneys that were rising on the city's rim to the east and west and south. Everybody thought that the cheaper the coal the better, and from all the crowding multitudes of dwelling houses, and from the schools, churches, hospitals, groceries, drug stores, saloons, north, south, east and west, rolled forth the brown-black smoke to thicken the clouds that pulsated from skyscrapers, apartment houses, factories and freight yards. The migration from the old North Side continued; migration from the newer houses to the north began, for the smoke was now upon both.

Almost abruptly the town had become a horseless city, and, as the automobile made distances inconsequent, new suburbs appeared. The city first swallowed its old suburbs,

then closed the gaps between itself and the new ones. Before the Great War the Growth was gigantically at work, and, after the hesitation that followed the return of the soldiers, it resumed its enormities, uproariously cheering for itself in the noise and dust and smoke that it was making. Optimism trumpeted unceasingly through soot-grimed horns of gold: the Growth would go on illimitably. The National Debt was shrinking; the people of the city, and all Americans, would be richer and richer forever.

II

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AS EARLY as Nineteen-hundred and five the Aldriches, a farming family whose sons “went east to college”, had sold land to smoked-out “North Siders”. Beyond the northernmost suburb of that day, the Aldrich farm lay higher than the plain where spread the city; and it was found that at the edges of the low plateau, and between the trunks of old forest trees, there was such a thing as a View. Sunrises, sunsets and even horizons could be known again from here; and far to the southwest in the haze could sometimes be discerned the faint blue dome of the capitol.

Through the old forest groves ran a rough country road, called by the Aldriches “Butternut Lane”, and along this irregular sylvan highway landscaping began and costly houses in new fashions displaced the thickets. Family followed family, vacating the sooty brick houses in the region that now began to be called “downtown”; and, though farther from the city there was here and there “real country life” in bankers’ farm houses, Butternut Lane finally had most of the elderly survivors of the Nineteenth Century’s caste of the ablest and the greater number of their descendants. By the end of the first decade after the Great War, Butternut Lane was, in fact, the successor to the old North Side and the Twentieth Century’s home of the “best people”. All in all, though more loosely united and with many a newcomer among them, they still were that.

The Ides and the Linleys clung longest to Sheridan Avenue and their old North Side neighborhood. The rumble

and jar of the new mechanical traffic shook their windows by day; thundered intermittently by night. Burnt coal and burnt gas were the air they breathed; and they could seldom alight at the old carriage blocks before their houses, where still stood the obsolete black cast-iron hitching posts with horses' heads. Parked cars took all the space, and in Nineteen-sixteen, when a wedding last filled the Linley house with flowers and music, influence and police were needed to let the guests arrive at the awning's entrance.

That was when the stalwart Frederic Ide married Harriet Linley. The wedding was gay, though the gayety imperfectly covered anxieties; the bridegroom and his Best Man, the bride's brother, Victor Linley, were to leave within the same week to be made into soldiers by the training camp at Plattsburg. Young Victor Linley, mild-mannered, studious, and, like all of his tribe, fastidious of mind and delicate in body, had broken the Linley line of lawyers. A Beaux Arts student of architecture in Paris, he'd also acquired expert chauffeuring by driving an ambulance, but came home for the wedding and to join his new brother-in-law in absorbing as much of the military art as they could hastily stuff into themselves.

This, though they were peaceful young men, they did because, like their forebears of 1812, they believed that their country would and should maintain American Rights and the Freedom of the Seas, and that a nation timorously obedient to the commands of a foreign State in matters involving murder has lost its independence. So the two old-fashioned young men went not only to the camp but presently afterward to fight in a war that was to become in

no very long time the most misunderstood, mis-propagandized and innocently maligned conflict in the country's history. The Linley house began to brighten again with the return of Frederic Ide, sound and brown; and the tall plate-glass windows were radiant far into the smoky night when Major Victor Linley came home, not sound nor brown but with the four decorations he never wore except upon the days when he received them.

It was a light-hearted household then, with a baby in it of whom the father had caught little more than a glimpse before going to war. Frederic Ide, his happy wife and their first-born, lived with the Linleys until Nineteen-twenty, when Frederic finished the building of his spacious new house among the forest trees of Butternut Lane. After this departure the Linleys still clung to their house, though people laughed and said their attachment to it was absurd; asked them why they couldn't see that the old neighborhood was doomed. Realistic irony, supplanting sentiment, had become the fashion, especially among the youthful; and the Linleys were demonstrably sentimental.

There were only four of them left. Victor's twin brother had died at fourteen when the two had diphtheria together; and the youngest of his three sisters, Alice, married to an engineer, lived in Oregon. The remaining sister, Nancy, authoritatively called the "most delightful girl of her time", a delicate slight lovely creature, was frequently sought in marriage but found life at home too agreeable. She couldn't help comparing other men with her father and her brother, and she had something like a passion for the house itself, in spite of what the Growth was doing to it.

Even after the deaths of their mother and father, within a month of each other in Nineteen twenty-four, Nancy and Victor, devotedly congenial, went on living there. The next year, on a summer day, Nancy was struck down by a truck and brought home in an ambulance. As they carried her in she made a little gesture with her hand as though she waved a farewell to the house. “What a dear place it’s been!” she said to Victor, and spoke never again. After that, Victor Linley went to live at the Carlyle Club, and it was helpful that pressure of work upon a rising architect could occupy most of his daytime thoughts.

He had his share in the rushing expansions of the city as it over-built itself in those booming years, not so large a share as that of his brother-in-law, Frederic Ide. The old firm of Ide and Son had become Ide and Aldrich, a partnership of two able young men. Frederic, steady of head and hand, trustworthy in heart and judgment, was called the “brains” of the firm, and jolly big Harry Aldrich the “mixer” and “business getter”. This being what is known as an “ideal combination”, Ide and Aldrich rode happily atop the great wave that began to sink in bubble and foam in ’Twenty-nine.

Ide and Aldrich sank with it, but didn’t drown—Frederic was too careful a swimmer. “We’ve all got to do what our grandfathers did after ’Seventy-three,” he said, in Nineteen thirty-one, to his partner. “The city’s been doing what it had done then—over-borrowing, over-buying, over-expanding, and, worst of all, over-building. That’s why the building trades went down first, taking the rest of us with ’em. The stock market didn’t do it; that was only the pie-crust falling down. Retrenchment, tightening the belt, everybody getting

along with less, hard economies—we'll have to do it on a bigger scale than our grandfathers did; but it's the same and only answer. Business is the life of the country and business is sick; but it'll cure itself. That'll take some time and there's already great hardship. I don't doubt that before the sickness of business is over, the city will be feeding fifteen thousand people a day. That means more taxes on top of other drains; but naturally we'll do it."

They did it. The city fed more than fifteen thousand people a day; but business had troubles in addition to its sickness and didn't make a recovery. Relapse and collapse reached depths, and Frederic was mystified when the year Nineteen Thirty-three brought new bafflements instead of an overdue convalescence. His brother-in-law, Victor Linley, gave him the detached opinion of a meditative observer.

"We're all in for it," Victor said. "When business is sick, the rest of us ail, too; and business is about to have the peculiar experience of a doctoring that systematically kicks the patient in his vitals. Of course the physicians will praise themselves for their benignity."

Frederic asked him what on earth he meant.

"Politics," Victor explained. "You business men used to think it didn't much matter when the office-seekers assaulted you from down in the South Side, and it didn't; but now, with distress and bewilderment running epidemic through a population more educated and less intelligent than it used to be when it was smaller, look out for soap-boxers! When the type, politician, first evolved, Fred, merely rudimentary cunning must have made one or two of 'em try to do what their later successors have almost all done, and

are still doing mostly, of course. I suspect that even in the stone-age somebody ambitiously climbed up on a rock and made a speech to all of the tribe that were idle enough to listen. ‘I’m your only friend,’ I think he’d shout. ‘See those rascals living in better caves than yours? Hate ’em for it; they’re your enemies! You are as worthy to have the good things of life as anybody else is, aren’t you? It follows that those swindlers must have got the best caves by oppressing and tricking you. Make me and my brothers your chieftains and we’ll drive the scoundrels out for you so that we shall *all* enjoy the best caves!’ ”

Frederic Ide, as simple in thought as in his honesty, was disturbed yet incredulous. “Nonsense about caves would do for those times,” he said. “But business must thrive or nobody can. To make things harder for us now—why, what could be worse for everybody?”

“Everybody except the successful politician, Fred. When was practical politics ever anything but the struggle for power over people and property? The politicians have their great chance at last because they have an audience that’s sorry for itself and humanly wants to blame somebody else. It’s always a relief. Good politics would be pretty stupid if now it doesn’t use the old technique; and of course you’re the mark for both the politicians and the uplifters to shoot at. They’ve both got all this convenient social-and-economic type of verbiage to use, and they will—till the politician has pretty much everything and everybody under his thumb. If you business men complain that he’s incompetently making rather a botch of affairs that used to be yours he’ll say he’s saving you from a bloody revolution. Simultaneously he’ll

announce to the people that you're the selfish few who want to starve the poor."

"That's a horrible prediction," Frederic Ide said. "You utter it lightly. Are you spending your time these days in becoming a philosophic humorist?"

"What else have I to do with it?" his brother-in-law asked, and wasn't answered.

Frederic couldn't develop a philosophic humor, himself; and, as the hard times didn't soften, found little humor in anything. His buoyant partner, Harry Aldrich, worked undespondently, for he was a sprightly and ever-hopeful soul; but Frederic bent to the burden. Not even his wife knew what miles of floor-pacing he did, what care shortened his sleep as he strove to pay his bills, to continue the expensive education of his three children and to keep the old firm on its feet. Ide and Son, and afterward Ide and Aldrich, had a large establishment. The depleted business couldn't carry so many people, and every dismissal in turn was an anguish to the head of the firm and a shock to his light-hearted but kindly partner.

Business got its head up a little now and then, but complained that "for the public good" it was being so "regulated", harried, drained and bedeviled by squads of new officials and their new rulings that the elevations could never be better than momentary. Nevertheless, there were miracles; the very people who bore the largest burdens contrived to widen the enlightenment of their city. Even in these worst of times, they enlarged the hospitals and the art museum; and they supported a symphony orchestra.

Nobody thanked them; but public spirit and the American business man’s love of his city die hard.

Youth, thrown upon the world by university and high school commencements, had as bad a time as anybody did, and here and there, following a new fashion, insisted upon something’s being done for it—a natural clamor at a time when a great deal was being done for all other people whose mutual needs or desires organized them into “pressure groups” sufficiently multitudinous to interest the politicians. Political assistance for youth didn’t reach many of the young people who came home from the universities to fathers formerly prosperous but now trying to pay the interest on notes and mortgages.

In better days, when the young graduate returned to the old North Side, or, later, to Butternut Lane or other well-to-do environs, he usually hadn’t a problem to face and wasn’t one, himself. He was taken into his father’s business or perhaps an uncle’s office, or a family friend or a college friend of his own might find place for him; but the Depression had changed all that. Possession of property had become an insecure occupation of it; ownership of a business meant fear and the endless compilation of dangerous reports. To practise a profession was to work for fees that mightn’t be collected; but even in these hazards there was no room for the yearly multitude of young graduates. They came “out into the world” to face the long granite wall of opportunity denied. Nobody had even advice to give them, and, baffled, hurt and perplexed, some of them turned fitfully to “fascinating new ideologies”; some walked the streets, some went wild, and some mended the

lawnmower and cut the grass at home. Of all the sufferers from the Depression the children of “the Rich” were not the least hard-stricken and sorely bewildered.

III

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OUTSIDE THE CITY and its denser purlieus the sky was blue and the perspective neatly outlined in the clean air of a chilly bright afternoon in mid-September, Nineteen thirty-nine, the tenth year of the Depression. Down in the old “North Side”, however, no one could have been positive that the sun shone; the old “best residence section” lay ruinous in the smoke. The bad ten years had made it horrible and the surviving relics of the once imposing neighborhood grotesque. Its former character had become almost indistinguishable among dusty parking lots, “used car sales lots”, vacant automobile salesrooms, half-empty apartment buildings, languid filling-stations, outrageously-colored dirty billboards and the close ranks of small dim houses that had long since yielded their paint to the acids of the smoke.

Here and there, like degraded old aristocrats dying on their feet among sick proletarians, a few of the big thick-walled houses still stood, and the most massively pathetic of the scattered relics, the largest one left on fallen Sheridan Avenue, loomed dimly through that afternoon’s five o’clock stoking-time clouds of grime. Apparently awaiting the mercy-stroke of the wrecker, this big dirty old house, painful to the passer’s eye, occasionally to his ear, and, at meal times, to his nose, now made itself so vague in its own down-blown smoke that the fly-specked sign, “Rooms”, in one of the large, smeared plate-glass front windows could not be seen from a distance of fifty feet. Nevertheless, a

sauntering gentleman on the opposite side of Sheridan Avenue paused to gaze that way.

Something over forty and of a slight and short but symmetrical figure, he had eyes so brightly blue that the color surprised any first glance at him. The whiteness of his collar, the trimness of his black clothes, the dustlessness of his hard hat, and the glisten of the malacca walking-stick in his gray-gloved hand were no more to be expected in this neighborhood than was the clean bright-collared golden spaniel that accompanied him. What caught this rather exquisite gentleman's attention, and brought him and the spaniel to a halt, was a colloquy taking place across the street. In the marble-floored soiled vestibule outside the carved walnut front door of the shamed old house, a tallish young man was being harangued by a soiled fat woman who looked like two stuffed sacks, one upon the other, with a large unclean vegetable atop the upper and a pair of torn slippers under the lower.

The vegetable had a voice, cacklingly verbose, and the longer and louder this tireless voice talked, the more nasally reproachful and uninterruptable it became. It was accompanied by gestures with a dust-pan in the one hand and a bunch of rags in the other;—the soiled fat woman seemed to be injuredly resisting a proposal urged upon her with feeble persistence by the young man. Evidently she dramatized their relation, perhaps not without a dramatist's pleasure in effective "situation"; for the young man's brownish "country gentleman" clothes were fair provocation to evoke, for the benefit of passing traffic, a scene of wealth persecuting poverty.

An accusing phrase, “You rich people”, often and loudly repeated, interested some colored women who were idling by, and a group of smutted children stopped sidewalk play to listen. The gentleman across the street leaned restfully upon his serviceable malacca stick, smiled faintly, and the golden-haired spaniel sat down. Sometimes completed sentences from the controversial vestibule reached that far: “You rich people think all the poor’s got to do’s break their backs night and day to keep you in money. You rich people don’t ’preciate the poor’s got to eat same’s you rich people.”

All at once the young man in the vestibule seemed to become discouraged. His shoulders drooped, and, as the fat woman retired with a gratified air behind the closing door, he turned, came gloomily down the broad steps between carved stone balustrades and gave to view a boy’s face good-looking and pleasant even in disappointment. His hands were deep in his pockets, and his eyes remained downcast in melancholy till he reached the sidewalk; then he glanced up, stared and murmured, “Well, look who’s here!”

He crossed the street to the blue-eyed gentleman with the spaniel, and addressed him. “What on earth are you doing here, Uncle Victor?”

“My afternoon walk for Locksie’s health,” the uncle replied. “We stopped to see how much you’d accomplish with Mrs. Schapp. We couldn’t hope it’d be a great deal.”

“No! Mrs. Schapp’s the most rancid woman I ever had an argument with. You wouldn’t have thought I was trying to collect the rent from her; you’d have thought I was asking

her for spending money to loaf on. Told me she had her bills to pay! You've never talked to her, have you, sir?"

"Yes. I used to call there on the same mercenary errand, Hatcher. Your father's given you a job as a rent collector, has he?"

Hatcher Linley Ide, the nephew, looked despairingly at his Uncle Victor Linley. "My second day at it. Zero! Everybody said it would be hell to get out of college in Depression; but I'm just finding out. Dante missed this for his Inferno—sending a lost soul out to listen forever to why people that never paid any rent aren't going to. I'm supposed to get a percentage; but I see that was just having fun with me. I think you're all crazy!"

"Yes, we are," the uncle said placidly. "People usually confirm that discovery at about your age—newly twenty-two, isn't it, Hatcher?"

"Yes, 'newly'." The nephew looked annoyed. "I suppose that means you're going to tell me I haven't any idea how young I am. Aunt Ada Ide's been saying that ever since I bought my first pipe. When does it stop? For instance, Uncle Victor, would somebody twice your age—say somebody round eighty or so—tell you that you don't yet know how young you are?"

"I hope so, Hatcher, and I'd no more know what he meant than you do when your Aunt Ada says it to you. We're all engulfed in our ignorance of our own youngness, which probably means that man never has knowledge of himself but is only a sort of cluster, subject to chemical reactions called instincts and emotions. Let's not go into it.

You were saying that all people of my age are insane. What symptom of our lunacy most frets you?”

“Why, owning so-called rental property in a section that’s gone to rats and roaches! A few years from now you won’t hear a human voice in it; the only sounds’ll be the termites chirping to their mates at evensong.”

“ ‘Mates’, Hatcher? ‘Evensong’? Then love and poetry will still be found among the ruins, you feel?”

Hatcher made an indignant gesture. “This region’s an eyesore, and I’d hate to tell you how much of it’s my father’s own property—his mortgaged very own! He owns whole half blocks of run-down houses, a third of ’em owing rent and the other two-thirds empty.”

“Yes, Hatcher. Your Grandfather Ide was a great believer in real estate for income. It’s why Ide and Aldrich still have a Real Estate Department.”

“Real Estate Department?” the nephew echoed. “Looks more like a Trash Department to me! If they’d give me some used plumbing and enough fresh paint, though, I’d rent some of Father’s vacant houses to a class of tenants that’d pay.”

“The smoke hasn’t much respect for fresh paint, Hatcher.”

“I know, I know!” Hatcher said. “You’d have to keep painting. Fresh every hour. I have an idea, though. There’s a color—a kind of grayish putty-color I’d use with a gray apple-green trim, and I’ll bet I could—” He interrupted himself. “What’s the use? Father’d say it’d only be sending good money after bad. I certainly wouldn’t waste it, myself, on that house across the street. It’s hopeless. It’s the last