

Democracy An American Novel

by

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Chapter I

FOR reasons which many persons thought ridiculous, Mrs. Lightfoot Lee decided to pass the winter in Washington. She was in excellent health, but she said that the climate would do her good. In New York she had troops of friends, but she suddenly became eager to see again the very small number of those who lived on the Potomac. It was only to her closest intimates that she honestly acknowledged herself to be tortured by ennui. Since her husband's death, five years before, she had lost her taste for New York society; she had felt no interest in the price of stocks, and very little in the men who dealt in them; she had become serious. What was it all worth, this wilderness of men and women as monotonous as the brown stone houses they lived in? In her despair she had resorted to desperate measures. She had read philosophy in the original German, and the more she read, the more she was disheartened that so much culture should lead to nothing--nothing.

After talking of Herbert Spencer for an entire evening with a very literary transcendental commission-merchant, she could not see that her time had been better employed than when in former days she had passed it in flirting with a very agreeable young stock-broker; indeed, there was an evident proof to the contrary, for the flirtation might lead to something--had, in fact, led to marriage; while the philosophy could lead to nothing, unless it were perhaps to another evening of the same kind, because transcendental philosophers are mostly elderly men, usually married, and, when engaged in business, somewhat apt to be sleepy towards evening. Nevertheless Mrs. Lee did her best to turn her study to practical use. She plunged into philanthropy, visited prisons, inspected hospitals, read the literature of pauperism and crime, saturated herself with the statistics of vice, until her mind had nearly lost sight of virtue. At last it rose in rebellion against her, and she came to the limit of her strength. This path, too, seemed to lead nowhere. She declared that she had lost the sense of duty, and that, so far as concerned her, all the paupers and criminals in New York might henceforward rise in their majesty and manage every railway on the continent. Why should she care? What was the city to her? She could find nothing in it that seemed to demand salvation. What gave peculiar sanctity to numbers? Why were a million people, who all resembled each other, any way more interesting than one person? What aspiration could she help to put into the mind of this great million-armed monster that would make it worth her love or respect? Religion? A thousand powerful churches were doing their best, and she could see no chance for a new faith of which she was to be the inspired prophet. Ambition? High popular ideals? Passion for whatever is lofty and pure? The very words irritated her. Was she not herself devoured by ambition, and was she not now eating her heart out because she could find no one object worth a sacrifice?

Was it ambition--real ambition--or was it mere restlessness that made Mrs. Lightfoot Lee so bitter against New York and Philadelphia, Baltimore and Boston, American life in general and all life in particular? What did she want? Not social position, for she herself was an eminently respectable Philadelphian by birth; her father a famous clergyman;

and her husband had been equally irreproachable, a descendant of one branch of the Virginia Lees, which had drifted to New York in search of fortune, and had found it, or enough of it to keep the young man there. His widow had her own place in society which no one disputed. Though not brighter than her neighbours, the world persisted in classing her among clever women; she had wealth, or at least enough of it to give her all that money can give by way of pleasure to a sensible woman in an American city; she had her house and her carriage; she dressed well; her table was good, and her furniture was never allowed to fall behind the latest standard of decorative art. She had travelled in Europe, and after several visits, covering some years of time, had returned home, carrying in one hand, as it were, a green-grey landscape, a remarkably pleasing specimen of Corot, and in the other some bales of Persian and Syrian rugs and embroideries, Japanese bronzes and porcelain. With this she declared Europe to be exhausted, and she frankly avowed that she was American to the tips of her fingers; she neither knew nor greatly cared whether America or Europe were best to live in; she had no violent love for either, and she had no objection to abusing both; but she meant to get all that American life had to offer, good or bad, and to drink it down to the dregs, fully determined that whatever there was in it she would have, and that whatever could be made out of it she would manufacture. "I know," said she, "that America produces petroleum and pigs; I have seen both on the steamers; and I am told it produces silver and gold. There is choice enough for any woman."

Yet, as has been already said, Mrs. Lee's first experience was not a success. She soon declared that New York might represent the petroleum or the pigs, but the gold of life was not to be discovered there by her eyes.

Not but that there was variety enough; a variety of people, occupations, aims, and thoughts; but that all these, after growing to a certain height, stopped short. They found nothing to hold them up. She knew, more or less intimately, a dozen men whose fortunes ranged between one million and forty millions. What did they do with their money? What could they do with it that was different from what other men did? After all, it is absurd to spend more money than is enough to satisfy all one's wants; it is vulgar to live in two houses in the same street, and to drive six horses abreast. Yet, after setting aside a certain income sufficient for all one's wants, what was to be done with the rest? To let it accumulate was to own one's failure; Mrs. Lee's great grievance was that it did accumulate, without changing or improving the quality of its owners. To spend it in charity and public works was doubtless praiseworthy, but was it wise? Mrs. Lee had read enough political economy and pauper reports to be nearly convinced that public work should be public duty, and that great benefactions do harm as well as good.

And even supposing it spent on these objects, how could it do more than increase and perpetuate that same kind of human nature which was her great grievance? Her New York friends could not meet this question except by falling back upon their native commonplaces, which she recklessly trampled upon, averring that, much as she admired the genius of the famous traveller, Mr. Gulliver, she never had been able, since she became a widow, to accept the Brobdingnagian doctrine that he who made two blades of grass grow where only one grew before deserved better of mankind than the

whole race of politicians. She would not find fault with the philosopher had he required that the grass should be of an improved quality; "but," said she, "I cannot honestly pretend that I should be pleased to see two New York men where I now see one; the idea is too ridiculous; more than one and a half would be fatal to me."

Then came her Boston friends, who suggested that higher education was precisely what she wanted; she should throw herself into a crusade for universities and art-schools. Mrs. Lee turned upon them with a sweet smile; "Do you know," said she, "that we have in New York already the richest university in America, and that its only trouble has always been that it can get no scholars even by paying for them? Do you want me to go out into the streets and waylay boys? If the heathen refuse to be converted, can you give me power over the stake and the sword to compel them to come in? And suppose you can? Suppose I march all the boys in Fifth Avenue down to the university and have them all properly taught Greek and Latin, English literature, ethics, and German philosophy. What then? You do it in Boston. Now tell me honestly what comes of it. I suppose you have there a brilliant society; numbers of poets, scholars, philosophers, statesmen, all up and down Beacon Street. Your evenings must be sparkling. Your press must scintillate. How is it that we New Yorkers never hear of it? We don't go much into your society; but when we do, it doesn't seem so very much better than our own. You are just like the rest of us. You grow six inches high, and then you stop. Why will not somebody grow to be a tree and cast a shadow?"

The average member of New York society, although not unused to this contemptuous kind of treatment from his leaders, retaliated in his blind, common-sense way. "What does the woman want?" he said. "Is her head turned with the Tuleries and Marlborough House? Does she think herself made for a throne? Why does she not lecture for women's rights? Why not go on the stage? If she cannot be contented like other people, what need is there for abusing us just because she feels herself no taller than we are? What does she expect to get from her sharp tongue? What does she know, any way?"

Mrs. Lee certainly knew very little. She had read voraciously and promiscuously one subject after another. Ruskin and Taine had danced merrily through her mind, hand in hand with Darwin and Stuart Mill, Gustave Droz and Algernon Swinburne. She had even laboured over the literature of her own country. She was perhaps, the only woman in New York who knew something of American history. Certainly she could not have repeated the list of Presidents in their order, but she knew that the Constitution divided the government into Executive, Legislative, and Judiciary; she was aware that the President, the Speaker, and the Chief Justice were important personages, and instinctively she wondered whether they might not solve her problem; whether they were the shade trees which she saw in her dreams.

Here, then, was the explanation of her restlessness, discontent, ambition,--call it what you will. It was the feeling of a passenger on an ocean steamer whose mind will not give him rest until he has been in the engine-room and talked with the engineer. She wanted to see with her own eyes the action of primary forces; to touch with her own hand the massive machinery of society; to measure with her own mind the capacity of the motive

power. She was bent upon getting to the heart of the great American mystery of democracy and government. She cared little where her pursuit might lead her, for she put no extravagant value upon life, having already, as she said, exhausted at least two lives, and being fairly hardened to insensibility in the process. "To lose a husband and a baby," said she, "and keep one's courage and reason, one must become very hard or very soft. I am now pure steel. You may beat my heart with a trip-hammer and it will beat the trip-hammer back again."

Perhaps after exhausting the political world she might try again elsewhere; she did not pretend to say where she might then go, or what she should do; but at present she meant to see what amusement there might be in politics.

Her friends asked what kind of amusement she expected to find among the illiterate swarm of ordinary people who in Washington represented constituencies so dreary that in comparison New York was a New Jerusalem, and Broad Street a grove of Academe. She replied that if Washington society were so bad as this, she should have gained all she wanted, for it would be a pleasure to return,--precisely the feeling she longed for. In her own mind, however, she frowned on the idea of seeking for men. What she wished to see, she thought, was the clash of interests, the interests of forty millions of people and a whole continent, centering at Washington; guided, restrained, controlled, or unrestrained and uncontrollable, by men of ordinary mould; the tremendous forces of government, and the machinery of society, at work. What she wanted, was POWER.

Perhaps the force of the engine was a little confused in her mind with that of the engineer, the power with the men who wielded it. Perhaps the human interest of politics was after all what really attracted her, and, however strongly she might deny it, the passion for exercising power, for its own sake, might dazzle and mislead a woman who had exhausted all the ordinary feminine resources. But why speculate about her motives? The stage was before her, the curtain was rising, the actors were ready to enter; she had only to go quietly on among the supernumeraries and see how the play was acted and the stage effects were produced; how the great tragedians mouthed, and the stage-manager swore.

Chapter II

ON the first of December, Mrs. Lee took the train for Washington, and before five o'clock that evening she was entering her newly hired house on Lafayette Square. She shrugged her shoulders with a mingled expression of contempt and grief at the curious barbarism of the curtains and the wall-papers, and her next two days were occupied with a life-and-death struggle to get the mastery over her surroundings. In this awful contest the interior of the doomed house suffered as though a demon were in it; not a chair, not a mirror, not a carpet, was left untouched, and in the midst of the worst confusion the new mistress sat, calm as the statue of Andrew Jackson in the square under her eyes, and issued her orders with as much decision as that hero had ever shown. Towards the close of the second day, victory crowned her forehead. A new era, a nobler conception of duty and existence, had dawned upon that benighted and heathen residence. The wealth of Syria and Persia was poured out upon the melancholy Wilton carpets; embroidered comets and woven gold from Japan and Teheran depended from and covered over every sad stuff-curtain; a strange medley of sketches, paintings, fans, embroideries, and porcelain was hung, nailed, pinned, or stuck against the wall; finally the domestic altarpiece, the mystical Corot landscape, was hoisted to its place over the parlour fire, and then all was over. The setting sun streamed softly in at the windows, and peace reigned in that redeemed house and in the heart of its mistress.

"I think it will do now, Sybil," said she, surveying the scene.

"It must," replied Sybil. "You haven't a plate or a fan or coloured scarf left. You must send out and buy some of these old negro-women's bandannas if you are going to cover anything else. What is the use? Do you suppose any human being in Washington will like it? They will think you demented."

"There is such a thing as self-respect," replied her sister, calmly.

Sybil--Miss Sybil Ross--was Madeleine Lee's sister. The keenest psychologist could not have detected a single feature quality which they had in common, and for that reason they were devoted friends. Madeleine was thirty, Sybil twenty-four. Madeleine was indescribable; Sybil was transparent. Madeleine was of medium height with a graceful figure, a well-set head, and enough golden-brown hair to frame a face full of varying expression. Her eyes were never for two consecutive hours of the same shade, but were more often blue than grey. People who envied her smile said that she cultivated a sense of humour in order to show her teeth. Perhaps they were right; but there was no doubt that her habit of talking with gesticulation would never have grown upon her unless she had known that her hands were not only beautiful but expressive. She dressed as skilfully as New York women do, but in growing older she began to show symptoms of dangerous unconventionality. She had been heard to express a low opinion of her countrywomen who blindly fell down before the golden calf of Mr. Worth,

and she had even fought a battle of great severity, while it lasted, with one of her best-dressed friends who had been invited--and had gone--to Mr. Worth's afternoon tea-parties. The secret was that Mrs. Lee had artistic tendencies, and unless they were checked in time, there was no knowing what might be the consequence. But as yet they had done no harm; indeed, they rather helped to give her that sort of atmosphere which belongs only to certain women; as indescribable as the afterglow; as impalpable as an Indian summer mist; and non-existent except to people who feel rather than reason. Sybil had none of it. The imagination gave up all attempts to soar where she came. A more straightforward, downright, gay, sympathetic, shallow, warm-hearted, sternly practical young woman has rarely touched this planet. Her mind had room for neither grave-stones nor guide-books; she could not have lived in the past or the future if she had spent her days in churches and her nights in tombs. "She was not clever, like Madeleine, thank Heaven." Madeleine was not an orthodox member of the church; sermons bored her, and clergymen never failed to irritate every nerve in her excitable system. Sybil was a simple and devout worshipper at the ritualistic altar; she bent humbly before the Paulist fathers. When she went to a ball she always had the best partner in the room, and took it as a matter of course; but then, she always prayed for one; somehow it strengthened her faith. Her sister took care never to laugh at her on this score, or to shock her religious opinions. "Time enough," said she, "for her to forget religion when religion fails her." As for regular attendance at church, Madeleine was able to reconcile their habits without trouble. She herself had not entered a church for years; she said it gave her unchristian feelings; but Sybil had a voice of excellent quality, well trained and cultivated: Madeleine insisted that she should sing in the choir, and by this little manoeuvre, the divergence of their paths was made less evident. Madeleine did not sing, and therefore could not go to church with Sybil. This outrageous fallacy seemed perfectly to answer its purpose, and Sybil accepted it, in good faith, as a fair working principle which explained itself.

Madeleine was sober in her tastes. She wasted no money. She made no display.

She walked rather than drove, and wore neither diamonds nor brocades. But the general impression she made was nevertheless one of luxury. On the other hand, her sister had her dresses from Paris, and wore them and her ornaments according to all the formulas; she was good-naturedly correct, and bent her round white shoulders to whatever burden the Parisian autocrat chose to put upon them. Madeleine never interfered, and always paid the bills.

Before they had been ten days in Washington, they fell gently into their place and were carried along without an effort on the stream of social life.

Society was kind; there was no reason for its being otherwise. Mrs. Lee and her sister had no enemies, held no offices, and did their best to make themselves popular. Sybil had not passed summers at Newport and winters in New York in vain; and neither her face nor her figure, her voice nor her dancing, needed apology. Politics were not her strong point. She was induced to go once to the Capitol and to sit ten minutes in the gallery of the Senate. No one ever knew what her impressions were; with feminine tact

she managed not to betray herself. But, in truth, her notion of legislative bodies was vague, floating between her experience at church and at the opera, so that the idea of a performance of some kind was never out of her head. To her mind the Senate was a place where people went to recite speeches, and she naively assumed that the speeches were useful and had a purpose, but as they did not interest her she never went again. This is a very common conception of Congress; many Congressmen share it.

Her sister was more patient and bolder. She went to the Capitol nearly every day for at least two weeks. At the end of that time her interest began to flag, and she thought it better to read the debates every morning in the Congressional Record. Finding this a laborious and not always an instructive task, she began to skip the dull parts; and in the absence of any exciting question, she at last resigned herself to skipping the whole. Nevertheless she still had energy to visit the Senate gallery occasionally when she was told that a splendid orator was about to speak on a question of deep interest to his country. She listened with a little disposition to admire, if she could; and, whenever she could, she did admire. She said nothing, but she listened sharply. She wanted to learn how the machinery of government worked, and what was the quality of the men who controlled it. One by one, she passed them through her crucibles, and tested them by acids and by fire.

A few survived her tests and came out alive, though more or less disfigured, where she had found impurities. Of the whole number, only one retained under this process enough character to interest her.

In these early visits to Congress, Mrs. Lee sometimes had the company of John Carrington, a Washington lawyer about forty years old, who, by virtue of being a Virginian and a distant connection of her husband, called himself a cousin, and took a tone of semi-intimacy, which Mrs. Lee accepted because Carrington was a man whom she liked, and because he was one whom life had treated hardly. He was of that unfortunate generation in the south which began existence with civil war, and he was perhaps the more unfortunate because, like most educated Virginians of the old Washington school, he had seen from the first that, whatever issue the war took, Virginia and he must be ruined. At twenty-two he had gone into the rebel army as a private and carried his musket modestly through a campaign or two, after which he slowly rose to the rank of senior captain in his regiment, and closed his services on the staff of a major-general, always doing scrupulously enough what he conceived to be his duty, and never doing it with enthusiasm. When the rebel armies surrendered, he rode away to his family plantation--not a difficult thing to do, for it was only a few miles from Appomatox--and at once began to study law; then, leaving his mother and sisters to do what they could with the worn-out plantation, he began the practice of law in Washington, hoping thus to support himself and them. He had succeeded after a fashion, and for the first time the future seemed not absolutely dark. Mrs. Lee's house was an oasis to him, and he found himself, to his surprise, almost gay in her company. The gaiety was of a very quiet kind, and Sybil, while friendly with him, averred that he was certainly dull; but this dulness had a fascination for Madeleine, who, having tasted

many more kinds of the wine of life than Sybil, had learned to value certain delicacies of age and flavour that were lost upon younger and coarser palates. He talked rather slowly and almost with effort, but he had something of the dignity--others call it stiffness--of the old Virginia school, and twenty years of constant responsibility and deferred hope had added a touch of care that bordered closely on sadness. His great attraction was that he never talked or seemed to think of himself. Mrs. Lee trusted in him by instinct. "He is a type!" said she; "he is my idea of George Washington at thirty."

One morning in December, Carrington entered Mrs. Lee's parlour towards noon, and asked if she cared to visit the Capitol.

"You will have a chance of hearing to-day what may be the last great speech of our greatest statesman," said he; "you should come."

"A splendid sample of our na-tive raw material, sir?" asked she, fresh from a reading of Dickens, and his famous picture of American statesmanship.

"Precisely so," said Carrington; "the Prairie Giant of Peonia, the Favourite Son of Illinois; the man who came within three votes of getting the party nomination for the Presidency last spring, and was only defeated because ten small intriguers are sharper than one big one. The Honourable Silas P.

Ratcliffe, Senator from Illinois; he will be run for the Presidency yet."

"What does the P. stand for?" asked Sybil.

"I don't remember ever to have heard his middle name," said Carrington.

"Perhaps it is Peonia or Prairie; I can't say."

"He is the man whose appearance struck me so much when we were in the Senate last week, is he not? A great, ponderous man, over six feet high, very senatorial and dignified, with a large head and rather good features?" inquired Mrs. Lee.

"The same," replied Carrington. "By all means hear him speak. He is the stumbling-block of the new President, who is to be allowed no peace unless he makes terms with Ratcliffe; and so every one thinks that the Prairie Giant of Peonia will have the choice of the State or Treasury Department. If he takes either it will be the Treasury, for he is a desperate political manager, and will want the patronage for the next national convention."

Mrs. Lee was delighted to hear the debate, and Carrington was delighted to sit through it by her side, and to exchange running comments with her on the speeches and the speakers.

"Have you ever met the Senator?" asked she.

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