

A Poor Wise Man

by

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Chapter 1

The city turned its dreariest aspect toward the railway on blackened walls, irregular and ill-paved streets, gloomy warehouses, and over all a gray, smoke-laden atmosphere which gave it mystery and often beauty. Sometimes the softened towers of the great steel bridges rose above the river mist like fairy towers suspended between Heaven and earth. And again the sun tipped the surrounding hills with gold, while the city lay buried in its smoke shroud, and white ghosts of river boats moved spectrally along.

Sometimes it was ugly, sometimes beautiful, but always the city was powerful, significant, important. It was a vast melting pot. Through its gates came alike the hopeful and the hopeless, the dreamers and those who would destroy those dreams. From all over the world there came men who sought a chance to labor. They came in groups, anxious and dumb, carrying with them their pathetic bundles, and shepherded by men with cunning eyes.

Raw material, for the crucible of the city, as potentially powerful as the iron ore which entered the city by the same gate.

The city took them in, gave them sanctuary, and forgot them. But the shepherds with the cunning eyes remembered.

Lily Cardew, standing in the train shed one morning early in March, watched such a line go by. She watched it with interest. She had developed a new interest in people during the year she had been away. She had seen, in the army camp, similar shuffling lines of men, transformed in a few hours into ranks of uniformed soldiers, beginning already to be actuated by the same motive. These aliens, going by, would become citizens. Very soon now they would appear on the streets in new American clothes of extraordinary cut and color, their hair cut with clippers almost to the crown, and surmounted by derby hats always a size too small.

Lily smiled, and looked out for her mother. She was suddenly unaccountably glad to be back again. She liked the smoke and the noise, the movement, the sense of things doing. And the sight of her mother, small, faultlessly tailored, wearing a great bunch of violets, and incongruous in that work-a-day atmosphere, set her smiling again.

How familiar it all was! And heavens, how young she looked! The limousine was at the curb, and a footman as immaculately turned out as her mother stood with a folded rug over his arm. On the seat inside lay a purple box. Lily had known it would be there. They would be ostensibly from her father, because he had not

been able to meet her, but she knew quite well that Grace Cardew had stopped at the florist's on her way downtown and bought them.

A little surge of affection for her mother warmed the girl's eyes. The small attentions which in the Cardew household took the place of loving demonstrations had always touched her. As a family the Cardews were rather loosely knitted together, but there was something very lovable about her mother.

Grace Cardew kissed her, and then held her off and looked at her.

"Mercy, Lily!" she said, "you look as old as I do."

"Older, I hope," Lily retorted. "What a marvel you are, Grace dear." Now and then she called her mother "Grace." It was by way of being a small joke between them, but limited to their moments alone. Once old Anthony, her grandfather, had overheard her, and there had been rather a row about it.

"I feel horribly old, but I didn't think I looked it."

They got into the car and Grace held out the box to her. "From your father, dear. He wanted so to come, but things are dreadful at the mill. I suppose you've seen the papers." Lily opened the box, and smiled at her mother.

"Yes, I know. But why the subterfuge about the flowers, mother dear? Honestly, did he send them, or did you get them? But never mind about that; I know he's worried, and you're sweet to do it. Have you broken the news to grandfather that the last of the Cardews is coming home?"

"He sent you, all sorts of messages, and he'll see you at dinner."

Lily laughed out at that.

"You darling!" she said. "You know perfectly well that I am nothing in grandfather's young life, but the Cardew women all have what he likes to call *savoir faire*. What would they do, father and grandfather, if you didn't go through life smoothing things for them?"

Grace looked rather stiffly ahead. This young daughter of hers, with her directness and her smiling ignoring of the small subterfuges of life, rather frightened her. The terrible honesty of youth! All these years of ironing the wrinkles out of life, of smoothing the difficulties between old Anthony and Howard, and now a third generation to contend with. A pitilessly frank and unconsciously cruel generation. She turned and eyed Lily uneasily.

"You look tired," she said, "and you need attention. I wish you had let me send Castle to you."

But she thought that Lily was even lovelier than she had remembered her. Lovely rather than beautiful, perhaps. Her face was less childish than when she had gone away; there was, in certain of her expressions, an almost alarming maturity. But perhaps that was fatigue.

"I couldn't have had Castle, mother. I didn't need anything. I've been very happy, really, and very busy."

"You have been very vague lately about your work."

Lily faced her mother squarely.

"I didn't think you'd much like having me do it, and I thought it would drive grandfather crazy."

"I thought you were in a canteen."

"Not lately. I've been looking after girls who had followed soldiers to camps. Some of them were going to have babies, too. It was rather awful. We married quite a lot of them, however."

The curious reserve that so often exists between mother and daughter held Grace Cardew dumb. She nodded, but her eyes had slightly hardened. So this was what war had done to her. She had had no son, and had thanked God for it during the war, although old Anthony had hated her all her married life for it. But she had given her daughter, her clear-eyed daughter, and they had shown her the dregs of life.

Her thoughts went back over the years. To Lily as a child, with Mademoiselle always at her elbow, and life painted as a thing of beauty. Love, marriage and birth were divine accidents. Death was a quiet sleep, with heaven just beyond, a sleep which came only to age, which had wearied and would rest. Then she remembered the day when Elinor Cardew, poor unhappy Elinor, had fled back to Anthony's roof to have a baby, and after a few rapturous weeks for Lily the baby had died.

"But the baby isn't old," Lily had persisted, standing in front of her mother with angry, accusing eyes.

Grace was not an imaginative woman, but she turned it rather neatly, as she told Howard later.

"It was such a nice baby," she said, feeling for an idea. "I think probably God was lonely without it, and sent an angel for it again."

"But it is still upstairs," Lily had insisted. She had had a curious instinct for truth, even then. But there Grace's imagination had failed her, and she sent for Mademoiselle. Mademoiselle was a good Catholic, and very clear in her own mind, but what she left in Lily's brain was a confused conviction that every person was two persons, a body and a soul. Death was simply a split-up, then. One part of you, the part that bathed every morning and had its toe-nails cut, and went to dancing school in a white frock and thin black silk stockings and carriage boots over pumps, that part was buried and would only come up again at the Resurrection. But the other part was all the time very happy, and mostly singing.

Lily did not like to sing.

Then there was the matter of tears. People only cried when they hurt themselves. She had been told that again and again when she threatened tears over her music lesson. But when Aunt Elinor had gone away she had found Mademoiselle, the deadly antagonist of tears, weeping. And here again Grace remembered the child's wide, insistent eyes.

"Why?"

"She is sorry for Aunt Elinor."

"Because her baby's gone to God? She ought to be glad, oughtn't she?"

"Not that," said Grace, and had brought a box of chocolates and given her one, although they were not permitted save one after each meal.

Then Lily had gone away to school. How carefully the school had been selected! When she came back, however, there had been no more questions, and Grace had sighed with relief. That bad time was over, anyhow. But Lily was rather difficult those days. She seemed, in some vague way, resentful. Her mother found her, now and then, in a frowning, half-defiant mood. And once, when Mademoiselle had ventured some jesting remark about young Alston Denslow, she was stupefied to see the girl march out of the room, her chin high, not to be seen again for hours.

Grace's mind was sub-consciously remembering those things even when she spoke.

"I didn't know you were having to learn about that side of life," she said, after a brief silence.

"That side of life is life, mother," Lily said gravely. But Grace did not reply to that. It was characteristic of her to follow her own line of thought.

"I wish you wouldn't tell your grandfather. You know he feels strongly about some things. And he hasn't forgiven me yet for letting you go."

Rather diffidently Lily put her hand on her mother's. She gave her rare caresses shyly, with averted eyes, and she was always more diffident with her mother than with her father. Such spontaneous bursts of affection as she sometimes showed had been lavished on Mademoiselle. It was Mademoiselle she had hugged rapturously on her small feast days, Mademoiselle who never demanded affection, and so received it.

"Poor mother!" she said, "I have made it hard for you, haven't I? Is he as bad as ever?"

She had not pinned on the violets, but sat holding them in her hands, now and then taking a luxurious sniff. She did not seem to expect a reply. Between Grace and herself it was quite understood that old Anthony Cardew was always as bad as could be.

"There is some sort of trouble at the mill. Your father is worried."

And this time it was Lily who did not reply. She said, inconsequentially:

"We're saved, and it's all over. But sometimes I wonder if we were worth saving. It all seems such a mess, doesn't it?" She glanced out. They were drawing up before the house, and she looked at her mother whimsically.

"The last of the Cardews returning from the wars!" she said. "Only she is unfortunately a she, and she hasn't been any nearer the war than the State of Ohio."

Her voice was gay enough, but she had a quick vision of the grim old house had she been the son they had wanted to carry on the name, returning from France.

The Cardews had fighting traditions. They had fought in every war from the Revolution on. There had been a Cardew in Mexico in '48, and in that upper suite of rooms to which her grandfather had retired in wrath on his son's marriage, she remembered her sense of awe as a child on seeing on the wall the sword he had worn in the Civil War. He was a small man, and the scabbard was badly worn at the end, mute testimony to the long forced marches of his youth. Her father had gone to Cuba in '98, and had almost died of typhoid fever there, contracted in the marshes of Florida.

Yes, they had been a fighting family. And now -

Her mother was determinedly gay. There were flowers in the dark old hall, and Grayson, the butler, evidently waiting inside the door, greeted her with the

familiarity of the old servant who had slipped her sweets from the pantry after dinner parties in her little-girl years.

"Welcome home, Miss Lily," he said.

Mademoiselle was lurking on the stairway, in a new lace collar over her old black dress. Lily recognized in the collar a great occasion, for Mademoiselle was French and thrifty. Suddenly a wave of warmth and gladness flooded her. This was home. Dear, familiar home. She had come back. She was the only young thing in the house. She would bring them gladness and youth. She would try to make them happy. Always before she had taken, but now she meant to give.

Not that she formulated such a thought. It was an emotion, rather. She ran up the stairs and hugged Mademoiselle wildly.

"You darling old thing!" she cried. She lapsed into French. "I saw the collar at once. And think, it is over! It is finished. And all your nice French relatives are sitting on the boulevards in the sun, and sipping their little glasses of wine, and rising and bowing when a pretty girl passes. Is it not so?"

"It is so, God and the saints be praised!" said Mademoiselle, huskily.

Grace Cardew followed them up the staircase. Her French was negligible, and she felt again, as in days gone by, shut from the little world of two which held her daughter and governess. Old Anthony's doing, that. He had never forgiven his son his plebeian marriage, and an early conversation returned to her. It was on Lily's first birthday and he had made one of his rare visits to the nursery. He had brought with him a pearl in a velvet case.

"All our women have their own pearls," he had said. "She will have her grandmother's also when she marries. I shall give her one the first year, two the second, and so on." He had stood looking down at the child critically. "She's a Cardew," he said at last. "Which means that she will be obstinate and self-willed." He had paused there, but Grace had not refuted the statement. He had grinned. "As you know," he added. "Is she talking yet?"

"A word or two," Grace had said, with no more warmth in her tone than was in his.

"Very well. Get her a French governess. She ought to speak French before she does English. It is one of the accomplishments of a lady. Get a good woman, and for heaven's sake arrange to serve her breakfast in her room. I don't want to have to be pleasant to any chattering French woman at eight in the morning."

"No, you wouldn't," Grace had said.

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