

My Lady Nicotine

by

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A Study in Smoke=

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MY LADY NICOTINE.

CHAPTER I. - MATRIMONY AND SMOKING COMPARED.

The circumstances in which I gave up smoking were these:

I was a mere bachelor, drifting toward what I now see to be a tragic middle age. I had become so accustomed to smoke issuing from my mouth that I felt incomplete without it; indeed, the time came when I could refrain from smoking if doing nothing else, but hardly during the hours of toil. To lay aside my pipe was to find myself soon afterward wandering restlessly round my table. No blind beggar was ever more abjectly led by his dog, or more loath to cut the string.

I am much better without tobacco, and already have a difficulty in sympathizing with the man I used to be. Even to call him up, as it were, and regard him without prejudice is a difficult task, for we forget the old selves on whom we have turned our backs, as we forget a street that has been reconstructed. Does the freed slave always shiver at the crack of a whip? I fancy not, for I recall but dimly, and without acute suffering, the horrors of my smoking days. There were nights when I awoke with a pain at my heart that made me hold my breath. I did not dare move. After perhaps ten minutes of dread, I would shift my position an inch at a time. Less frequently I felt this sting in the daytime, and believed I was dying while my friends were talking to me. I never mentioned these experiences to a human being; indeed, though a medical man was among my companions, I cunningly deceived him on the rare occasions when he questioned me about the amount of tobacco I was consuming weekly. Often in the dark I not only vowed to give up smoking, but wondered why I cared for it. Next morning I went straight from breakfast to my pipe, without the smallest struggle with myself. Latterly I knew, while resolving to break myself of the habit, that I would be better employed trying to sleep. I had elaborate ways of cheating myself, but it became disagreeable to me to know how many ounces of tobacco I was smoking weekly. Often I smoked cigarettes to reduce the number of my cigars.

On the other hand, if these sharp pains be excepted, I felt quite well. My appetite was as good as it is now, and I worked as cheerfully and certainly harder. To some slight extent, I believe, I experienced the same pains in my boyhood, before I smoked, and I am not an absolute stranger

to them yet. They were most frequent in my smoking days, but I have no other reason for charging them to tobacco. Possibly a doctor who was himself a smoker would have pooh-poohed them. Nevertheless, I have lighted my pipe, and then, as I may say, hearkened for them. At the first intimation that they were coming I laid the pipe down and ceased to smoke--until they had passed.

I will not admit that, once sure it was doing me harm, I could not, unaided, have given up tobacco. But I was reluctant to make sure. I should like to say that I left off smoking because I considered it a mean form of slavery, to be condemned for moral as well as physical reasons; but though now I clearly see the folly of smoking, I was blind to it for some months after I had smoked my last pipe. I gave up my most delightful solace, as I regarded it, for no other reason than that the lady who was willing to fling herself away on me said that I must choose between it and her. This deferred our marriage for six months.

I have now come, as those who read will see, to look upon smoking with my wife's eyes. My old bachelor friends complain because I do not allow smoking in the house, but I am always ready to explain my position, and I have not an atom of pity for them. If I cannot smoke here neither shall they. When I visit them in the old inn they take a poor revenge by blowing rings of smoke almost in my face. This ambition to blow rings is the most ignoble known to man. Once I was a member of a club for smokers, where we practised blowing rings. The most successful got a box of cigars as a prize at the end of the year. Those were days! Often I think wistfully of them. We met in a cozy room off the Strand. How well I can picture it still. Time-tables lying everywhere, with which we could light our pipes. Some smoked clays, but for the Arcadia Mixture give me a brier. My brier was the sweetest ever known. It is strange now to recall a time when a pipe seemed to be my best friend.

My present state is so happy that I can only look back with wonder at my hesitation to enter upon it. Our house was taken while I was still arguing that it would be dangerous to break myself of smoking all at once. At that time my ideal of married life was not what it is now, and I remember Jimmy's persuading me to fix on this house, because the large room upstairs with the three windows was a smoker's dream. He pictured himself and me there in the summer-time blowing rings, with our coats off and our feet out at the windows; and he said that the closet at the back looking on to a blank wall would make a charming drawing-room

for my wife. For the moment his enthusiasm carried me away, but I see now how selfish it was, and I have before me the face of Jimmy when he paid us his first visit and found that the closet was not the drawing-room. Jimmy is a fair specimen of a man, not without parts, destroyed by devotion to his pipe. To this day he thinks that mantelpiece vases are meant for holding pipe-lights in. We are almost certain that when he stays with us he smokes in his bedroom--a detestable practice that I cannot permit.

Two cigars a day at ninepence apiece come to £27 7s. 6d. yearly, and four ounces of tobacco a week at nine shillings a pound come to £5 17s. yearly. That makes £33 4s. 6d. When we calculate the yearly expense of tobacco in this way, we are naturally taken aback, and our extravagance shocks us more after we have considered how much more satisfactorily the money might have been spent. With £33 4s. 6d. you can buy new Oriental rugs for the drawing-room, as well as a spring bonnet and a nice dress. These are things that give permanent pleasure, whereas you have no interest in a cigar after flinging away the stump. Judging by myself, I should say that it was want of thought rather than selfishness that makes heavy smokers of so many bachelors. Once a man marries, his eyes are opened to many things that he was quite unaware of previously, among them being the delight of adding an article of furniture to the drawing-room every month, and having a bedroom in pink and gold, the door of which is always kept locked. If men would only consider that every cigar they smoke would buy part of a new piano-stool in terra-cotta plush, and that for every pound tin of tobacco purchased away goes a vase for growing dead geraniums in, they would surely hesitate. They do not consider, however, until they marry, and then they are forced to it. For my own part, I fail to see why bachelors should be allowed to smoke as much as they like, when we are debarred from it.

The very smell of tobacco is abominable, for one cannot get it out of the curtains, and there is little pleasure in existence unless the curtains are all right. As for a cigar after dinner, it only makes you dull and sleepy and disinclined for ladies' society. A far more delightful way of spending the evening is to go straight from dinner to the drawing-room and have a little music. It calms the mind to listen to your wife's niece singing, "Oh, that we two were Maying!" Even if you are not musical, as is the case with me, there is a great deal in the drawing-room to refresh you. There are the Japanese fans on the wall, which are things of beauty, though

your artistic taste may not be sufficiently educated to let you know it except by hearsay; and it is pleasant to feel that they were bought with money which, in the foolish old days, would have been squandered on a box of cigars. In like manner every pretty trifle in the room reminds you how much wiser you are now than you used to be. It is even gratifying to stand in summer at the drawing-room window and watch the very cabbies passing with cigars in their mouths. At the same time, if I had the making of the laws I would prohibit people's smoking in the street. If they are married men, they are smoking drawing-room fire-screens and mantelpiece borders for the pink-and-gold room. If they are bachelors, it is a scandal that bachelors should get the best of everything.

Nothing is more pitiable than the way some men of my acquaintance enslave themselves to tobacco.

Nay, worse, they make an idol of some one particular tobacco. I know a man who considers a certain mixture so superior to all others that he will walk three miles for it. Surely every one will admit that this is lamentable. It is not even a good mixture, for I used to try it occasionally; and if there is one man in London who knows tobaccos it is myself. There is only one mixture in London deserving the adjective superb. I will not say where it is to be got, for the result would certainly be that many foolish men would smoke more than ever; but I never knew anything to compare to it. It is deliciously mild yet full of fragrance, and it never burns the tongue. If you try it once you smoke it ever afterward. It clears the brain and soothes the temper. When I went away for a holiday anywhere I took as much of that exquisite health-giving mixture as I thought would last me the whole time, but I always ran out of it. Then I telegraphed to London for more, and was miserable until it arrived. How I tore the lid off the canister! That is a tobacco to live for. But I am better without it.

Occasionally I feel a little depressed after dinner still, without being able to say why, and if my wife has left me, I wander about the room restlessly, like one who misses something. Usually, however, she takes me with her to the drawing-room, and reads aloud her delightfully long home-letters or plays soft music to me. If the music be sweet and sad it takes me away to a stair in an inn, which I climb gayly, and shake open a heavy door on the top floor, and turn up the gas. It is a little room I am in once again, and very dusty. A pile of papers and magazines stands as high as a table in the corner furthest from the door. The cane chair

shows the exact shape of Marriot's back. What is left (after lighting the fire) of a frame picture lies on the hearth-rug. Gilray walks in uninvited. He has left word that his visitors are to be sent on to me. The room fills. My hand feels along the mantelpiece for a brown jar. The jar is between my knees; I fill my pipe....

After a time the music ceases, and my wife puts her hand on my shoulder. Perhaps I start a little, and then she says I have been asleep. This is the book of my dreams.