

## THE POET AND THE EMPORIUM

"I am beginning life," he said, with a sigh. "Great Heavens! I have spent a day--a day!--in a shop. Three bedroom suites and a sideboard are among the unanticipated pledges of our affection. Have you lithia? For a man of twelve limited editions this has been a terrible day."

I saw to his creature comforts. His tie was hanging outside his waistcoat, and his complexion was like white pasteboard that has got wet. "Courage," said I. "It will not occur again----"

"It will," said he. "We have to get there again tomorrow. We have--what is it?--carpets, curtains----"

He produced his tablets. I was amazed. Those receptacles of choice thoughts!

"The amber sunlight splashing through the leaky--leafy interlacing green," he read. "No!--that's not it. Ah, here! Curtains! Drawing-room--not to cost more than thirty shillings! And there's all the Kitchen Hardware! (Thanks.) Dining-room chairs--query--rush bottoms? What's this? G.L.I.S.--ah! "Glistering thro' deeps of glaucophane"--that's nothing. Mem. to see can we afford Indian needlework chairs--57s. 6d.? It's dreadful, Bellows!"

He helped himself to a cigarette.

"Find the salesman pleasant?" said I.

"Delightful. Assumed I was a spendthrift millionaire at first. Produced in an off-hand way an eighty-guinea bedroom suite--we're trying to do the entire business, you know, on about two hundred pounds. Well--that's ten editions, you know. Came down, with evidently dwindling respect, to things that were still ruinously expensive. I told him we wanted an idyll--love in a cottage, and all that kind of thing. He brushed that on one side, said idols were upstairs in the Japanese Department, and that perhaps we might do with a servant's set of bedroom furniture. Do with a set! He was a gloomy man with (I should judge) some internal pain. I tried to tell him that there was quite a lot of middle-class people like myself in the country, people of limited or precarious means, whose existence he seemed to ignore; assured him some of them led quite beautiful lives. But he had no ideas beyond wardrobes. I quite forgot the business of shopping in an attempt to kindle a little human enthusiasm in his heart. We were in a great vast place full of wardrobes, with a remote glittering vista of brass bedsteads--skeleton beds, you know--and I tried to inspire him with some of the poetry of his emporium; tried to make him imagine these beds and things going east and west, north and south, to take sorrow, servitude, joy, worry, failing strength, restless ambition in their impartial embraces. He only turned round to Annie, and asked her if she thought she could do with 'enamelled.' But I was quite taken with my idea----Where is it? I left

Annie to settle with this misanthrope, amidst his raw frameworks of the Homes of the Future."

He fumbled with his tablets. "Mats for hall--not to exceed 3s. 9d....  
Kerbs ... inquire tiled hearth ... Ah! Here we are: 'Ballade of the Bedroom Suite':--

"Noble the oak you are now displaying,  
Subtly the hazel's grainings go,  
Walnut's charm there is no gainsaying,  
Red as red wine is your rosewood's glow;  
Brave and brilliant the ash you show,  
Rich your mahogany's hepatite shine,  
Cool and sweet your enamel: But oh!  
Where are the wardrobes of Painted Pine?"

"They have 'em in the catalogue at five guineas, with a picture--quite as good they are as the more expensive ones. To judge by the picture."

"But that's scarcely the idea you started with," I began.

"Not; it went wrong--ballades often do. The preoccupation of the 'Painted Pine' was too much for me. What's this? 'N.B.--Sludge sells music stools at--' No. Here we are (first half unwritten):--

"White enamelled, like driven snow,

Picked with just one delicate line.

Price you were saying is? Fourteen!--No!

Where are the wardrobes of Painted Pine?'

"Comes round again, you see! Then L'Envoy:--

"Salesman, sad is the truth I trow:

Winsome walnut can never be mine.

Poets are cheap. And their poetry. So

Where are the wardrobes of Painted Pine?'

"Prosaic! As all true poetry is, nowadays. But, how I tired as the afternoon moved on! At first I was interested in the shopman's amazing lack of imagination, and the glory of that fond dream of mine--love in a cottage, you know--still hung about me. I had ideas come--like that Ballade--and every now and then Annie told me to write notes. I think my last gleam of pleasure was in choosing the drawing-room chairs. There is scope for fantasy in chairs. Then----"

He took some more whisky.

"A kind of grey horror came upon me. I don't know if I can describe it. We went through vast vistas of chairs, of hall-tables, of machine-made pictures, of curtains, huge wildernesses of carpets, and ever this cold, unsympathetic shopman led us on, and ever and again made us buy this or that. He had a perfectly grey eye--the colour of an overcast sky in

January--and he seemed neither to hate us nor to detest us, but simply to despise us, to feel such an overwhelming contempt for our petty means and our petty lives, as an archangel might feel for an apple-maggot. It made me think...."

He lit a fresh cigarette.

"I had a kind of vision. I do not know if you will understand. The Warehouse of Life, with our Individual Fate hurrying each of us through. Showing us with a covert sneer all the good things that we cannot afford. A magnificent Rosewood love affair, for instance, deep and rich, fitted complete, some hours of perfect life, some acts of perfect self-sacrifice, perfect self-devotion.... You ask the price."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"Where are the wardrobes of Painted Pine?" I quoted.

"That's it. All the things one might do, if the purse of one's courage were not so shallow. If it wasn't for the lack of that coinage, Bellows, every man might be magnificent. There's heroism, there's such nobility as no one has ever attained to, ready to hand. Anyone, if it were not for this lack of means, might be a human god in twenty-four hours.... You see the article. You cannot buy it. No one buys it. It stands in the emporium, I suppose, for show--on the chance of a millionaire. And the shopman waves his hand to it on your way to the Painted Pine.

"Then you meet other couples and solitary people going about, each with a gloomy salesman leading. The run of them look uncomfortable; some are hot about the ears and in the spiteful phase of ill-temper; all look sick of the business except the raw new-comers. It's the only time they will ever select any furniture, their first chance and their last. Most of their selections are hurried a little. The salesman must not be kept all day.... Yet it goes hard with you if you buy your Object in Life and find it just a 'special line' made to sell.... We're all amateurs at living, just as we are all amateurs at furnishing--or dying. Some of the poor devils one meets carry tattered little scraps of paper, and fumble conscientiously with stumpy pencils. It's a comfort to see how you go, even if you do have to buy rubbish. 'If we have this so good, dear, I don't know how we shall manage in the kitchen,' says the careful housewife.... So it is we do our shopping in the Great Emporium."

"You will have to rewrite your Ballade," said I, "and put all that in."

"I wish I could," said the poet.

"And while you were having these very fine moods?"

"Annie and the shopman settled most of the furniture between them.

Perhaps it's just as well. I was never very good at the practical details of life.... Cigarette's out! Have you any more matches?"

"Horribly depressed you are!" I said.

"There's to-morrow. Well, well...."

And then he went off at a tangent to tell me what he expected to make by his next volume of poems, and so came to the congenial business of running down his contemporaries, and became again the cheerful little Poet that I know.