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A GENTLEMAN'S GENTLEMAN

By F. Hopkinson Smith

1909

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I

I had left Sandy MacWhirter crooning over his smouldering wood fire the day Boggs blew in with news of the sale of Mac's two pictures at the Academy, and his reply to my inquiry regarding his future plans (vaguely connected with a certain girl in a steamer chair), "By the next steamer, my boy," still rang in my ears, but my surprise was none the less genuine when I looked up from my easel, two months later, at Sonning-on-the-Thames and caught sight of the dear fellow, with Lonnegan by his side, striding down the tow-path in search of me.

"By the Great Horn Spoon!" came the cry. And the next minute his big arms were about my shoulders, his cheery laugh filling the summer air.

Lonnegan's greeting was equally hearty and spontaneous, but it came with less noise.

"He's been roaring that way ever since we left London," said the architect. "Ever since we landed, really," and he nodded at Mac. "Awfully glad to see you, old man!"

The next moment the three of us were flat on the grass telling our experiences, the silver sheen of the river flashing between the low-branched trees lining the banks.

Lonnegan's story ran thus:

Mac had disappeared the morning after their arrival; had remained away two weeks, reappearing again with a grin on his face that had frozen stiff and had never relaxed its grip. "You can still see it; turn your head, Mac, and let the gentleman see your smile." Since that time he had spent his nights writing letters, and his days poring over the morning's mail. "Got his pocket full of them now, and is so happy he's no sort of use to anybody." Mac now got his innings:

Lonnegan's airs had been insufferable and his ignorance colossal. What time he could spare from his English tailor—"and you just ought to see his clothes, and especially his checkerboard waistcoats"—had been spent in abusing everything in English art that wasn't three hundred years old, and going into raptures over Lincoln Cathedral. The more he saw of Lonnegan the more he was convinced that he had missed his calling. He might succeed as a floorwalker in a department store, where his airs and his tailor-made upholstery would impress the hayseeds from the country, but, as for trying to be—The rest was lost in a gurgle of smothered laughter, Lonnegan's thin, white fingers having by this time closed over the painter's windpipe.

My turn came now:

I had been at work a month; had my present quarters at the White Hart Inn, within a stone's throw of where we lay sprawled with our faces to the sun—the loveliest inn, by the way, on the Thames, and that was saying a lot—with hand-polished tables, sleeve and trouser-polished arm-chairs, Chippendale furniture, barmaids, pewter mugs, old and new ale, tough bread, tender mutton, tarts—gooseberry and otherwise; strawberries—two would fill a teacup—and *roses!* Millions of roses! "Well, you fellows just step up and look at 'em."

"And not a place to put your head," said Mac.

"How do you know?"

"Been there," replied Lonnegan. "The only decent rooms are reserved for a bloated American millionaire who arrives to-day—everything else chock-a-block except two bunks under the roof, full of spiders."

Mac drew up one of his fat legs, stretched his arms, pushed his slouch hat from his forehead—he was still on his back drinking in the sunshine—and with a yawn cried:

"They ought to be exterminated."

"The spiders?" grumbled Lonnegan.

"No, millionaires. They throw their money away like water; they crowd the hotels. Nothing good enough for them. Prices all doubled, everything slimed up by the trail of their dirty dollars. And the saddest thing in it all to me is that you generally find one or two able-bodied American citizens kowtowing to them like wooden Chinese mandarins when the great men take the air."

"Who, for instance?" I asked. No millionaires with any such outfit had thus far come my way.

"Lonnegan, for one," answered Mac.

The architect raised his head and shot a long, horizontal glance at the prostrate form of the painter.

"Yes, Lonnegan, I am sorry to say," continued Mac, his eyes fixed on the yellow greens in the swaying tree-tops.

"I was only polite," protested the architect. "Lambert is a client of mine; building a stable for him. Very level-headed man is Mr. Samuel Lambert; no frills and no swelled head. It was Tommy Wing who was doing the mandarin act 32 the other day at the Carlton—not me. Got dead intimate with him on the voyage over and has stuck to him like a plaster ever since. Calls him 'Sam' already—did to me."

"Behind his back or to his face?" spluttered Mac, tugging at his pipe.

"Give it up," said Lonnegan, pulling his hat over his face to shield his eyes from the sun.

Mac raised himself to a sitting posture, as if to reply, fumbled in his watch-pocket for a match, instead, shook the ashes from his brier-wood, filled the bowl with some tobacco from his rubber pouch, drew the lucifer across his shoe, waited until the blue smoke mounted skyward and resumed his former position. He was too happy mentally—the girl in the steamer chair was responsible—and too lazy physically to argue with anybody. Lonnegan rolled over on his elbows, and feasted his eyes on the sweep of the sleepy river, dotted with punts and wherries, its background of foliage in silhouette against the morning sky. The Thames was very lovely that June, and the trained eye of the distinguished architect missed none of its beauty and charm. I picked up my brushes and continued work. The spirit of perfect camaraderie makes such silences not only possible but enjoyable. It is the restless chatterer that tires.

Lonnegan's outbreak had set me to thinking. Lambert I knew only by reputation—as half the world knew him—a man of the people: lumber boss, mill owner, proprietor of countless acres of virgin forest; many times a millionaire. Then came New York and the ice-cream palace with the rock-candy columns on the Avenue, and "The Samuel Lamberts" in the society journals. This was all the wife's doings. Poor Maria! She had forgotten the day when she washed his red flannel shirts and hung them on a line stretched from the door of their log cabin to a giant white pine—one of the founders of their fortune. If Tommy Wing called him "Sam" it was because old "Saw Logs," as he was often called, was lonely, and Tommy amused him.

Tommy Wing—Thomas Bowditch Wing, his card ran—I had known for years. He was basking on the topmost branches now, stretched out in the sunshine of social success, swaying to every movement made by his padrones. He was a little country squirrel when I first came across him, frisking about the root of the tree and glad enough to scamper close to the ground. He had climbed a long way since then. All the blossoms and tender little buds were at the top, and Tommy was fond of buds, especially when they bloomed out into yachts and four-in-hands, country houses, winters in Egypt (Tommy an invited guest), house parties on Long Island

or at Tuxedo, or gala nights at the opera with seats in a first tier.

In the ascent he had forgotten his beginnings—not an unnatural thing with Tommies: Son of a wine merchant—a most respectable man, too; then “Importer” (Tommy altered the sign); elected member of an athletic club; always well dressed, always polite;—invited to a member’s house to dine; was unobtrusive and careful not to make a break. Asked again to fill a place at the table at the last moment—accepted gracefully, not offended—never offended at anything. Was willing to see that the young son caught the train, or would meet the daughter at the ferry and escort her safely to school. “So obliging, so trustworthy,” the mother said. Soon got to be “among those present” at the Sherry and Delmonico balls. Then came little squibs in the society columns regarding the movements of Thomas Bowditch Wing, Esquire. He knew the squibber, and often gave her half a column. Was invited to a seat in the coaching parade, saw his photograph the next morning in the papers, he sitting next to the beautiful Miss Carnevelt. He was pretty near to the top now; only a little farther to where the choicest buds were bursting into flower; too far up, though, ever to recognize the little fellows he had left frisking below. There was no time now to escort school-girls or fill unexpectedly empty seats unless they were exclusive ones. His excuse was that he had accepted an invitation to the branch above him. The mother of the school-girl now, strange to say, instead of being miffed, liked him the better, and, for the first time, began to wonder whether she hadn’t made too free with so important a personage. As a silent apology she begged an invitation for a friend to the Bachelor Ball, Tommy being a subscriber and entitled to the distribution of a certain number of tickets. Being single and available, few outings were given without him—not only week-ends (Weak Odds-and-Ends, Mac always called them), but trips to Washington, even to Montreal in the winter. Then came the excursions abroad—Capri, Tangier, Cairo.

It was on one of these jaunts that he met “Saw Logs,” who, after sizing him up for a day, promptly called him “Tommy,” an abbreviation instantly adopted by Maria—so fine, you know, to call a fellow “Tommy” who knew everybody and went everywhere. Sometimes she shrieked his name the length of the deck. On reaching London it was either the Carlton or the Ritz for Lambert. Tommy, however, made a faint demur. “Oh, hang the expense, Tommy, you are my guest for the summer,” broke out Lambert. What a prime minister you would have made, Tommy, in some kitchen cabinet!

There were no blossoms now out of his reach. Our little squirrel had gained the top! To dazzle the wife and daughter with the priceless value of his social position and then compel plain, honest, good-natured Samuel Lambert to pay his bills, and to pay those bills, too, in such a way, “by Heavens, sir, as not to wound a gentleman’s pride”: that, indeed, was an accomplishment. Had any other bushy tail of his acquaintance ever climbed so high or accomplished so much?

A movement on my right cut short my reverie.

MacWhirter had lifted his big arms above his head, and was now twisting his broad back as if for a better fulcrum.

“Lonny—” he cried, bringing his body once more to a sitting posture.

“Yes, Mac.”

“In that humiliating and servile interview which you had a short time ago with your other genuflector, the landlord of the White Hart Inn, did you in any way gain the impression that every ounce of grub in his shebang was reserved for the special use of his highness, Count Kerosene, or the Earl of Asphalt, or the Duke of Sausage, or whatever the brute calls himself?—or do you think he can be induced to—”

“Yes, I think so.”

“Think what, you obtuse duffer?”

“That he can be induced.”

“Well, then, grab that easel and let us go to luncheon.”

II

I had not exaggerated the charm of the White Hart Inn—nobody can. I know most of the hostelries up and down this part of the river—the “Ferry” at Cookham, the “French Horn” across the Backwater, one or two at Henley, and a lovely old bungalow of a tavern at Maidenhead; but this garden of roses at Sonning has never lost its fascination for me.

For the White Hart is like none of these. It fronts the river, of course, as they all do—you can almost fish out of the coffee-room window of the “Ferry” at Cookham—and all the life of the boat-houses, the punts and wherries, with their sprawling cushions and bunches of jack-straw oars, and tows, back and forth, of empty boats, goes on just as it does at the other boat-landings, up and down the river; but, at the White Hart, it is the rose garden that counts! Planted in rows, like corn, their stalks straight as walking-sticks and as big; then a flare of smaller stalks like umbrella ribs, the circle covered with Prince Alberts, Cloth-of-Golds, Teas, Saffrons, Red Ramblers (the old gardener knows their names; I don’t). And the perfume that sweeps toward you and the way it sinks into your soul! Bury your face in a bunch of them, if you don’t believe it.

Then the bridge! That mouldy old mass of red brick that makes three clumsy jumps before it clears the river, the green rushes growing about its feet. And the glory of the bend below, with the fluff of elm, birch and maple melting into the morning haze!

Inside it is none the less delightful. Awnings, fronting the garden, stretch over the flowerbeds; vines twist their necks, the blossoms peeping curiously as you take your coffee.

There is a coffee-room, of course, with stags’ heads and hunting prints, and small tables with old-fashioned flowers in tiny vases, as well as a long serving board the width of the room, where everything that can be boiled, baked or stewed and then served cold awaits the hungry.

It was at this long board that we three brought up, and it was not long before Lonnegan and Mac were filling their plates, and with their own hands, too, with thin cuts of cold roast beef, chicken and slivers of ham, picking out the particular bread or toast or muffin they liked best, bringing the whole out under the low awning with its screen of roses, the swinging blossoms brushing their cheeks—some of them almost in their plates.

From where we sat over our boiled and baked—principally boiled—we could see not only the suite of rooms reserved for the great man and his party—one end of the inn, really, with a separate entrance—but we could see, too, part of the tap-room, with its rows of bottles, and could hear the laughter and raillery of the barmaid as she served the droppers-in and loungers-about. We caught, as well, the small square hall, flanked by the black-oak counter, behind which were banked bottles of various shapes and sizes, rows of pewter tankards and the like, the whole made comfortable with chairs cushioned in Turkey red, and never empty—the chairs, I mean; the tankards always were, or about to be.

This tap-room, I must tell you, is not a bar in the American sense, nor is the girl a barkeeper in any sense. It is the open club of the village, where everybody is welcome who is decent and agreeable. Even the curate drops in—not for his toddy, perhaps (although “You can’t generally sometimes almost always tell,” as Mac said), but for a word with anybody who happens to be about. And so does the big man of the village who owns the mill, and the gardener from Lord So-and-So’s estate, and the lord himself, for that matter, the groom taking his “bitter” from the side window, with one eye on his high stepper polished to a piano finish. All have a word or a good-morning or a joke with the barmaid. She isn’t at all the kind of a girl you think she is. Try it some day and you’ll discover your mistake. It’s Miss Nance, or Miss Ellen, or whatever else her parents fancied; or Miss Figgins, or Connors, or Pugby—but it is never Nance or Nell.

Our luncheon over, we joined the circle, the curate making room for Lonnegan, Mac stretching his big frame half over a settle.

“From the States, gentlemen, I should judge,” said the curate in a cheery tone—an athletic and Oxford-looking curate, his high white collar and high black waistcoat gripping a throat and chest that showed oars and cricket bats in every muscle. Young, too—not over forty.

I returned the courtesy by pleading guilty, and in extenuation, presented my comrades to the entire room, Lonnegan’s graceful body straightening to a present-arms posture as he grasped the outstretched hand of a brother athlete, and Mac’s heartiness capturing every one present, including the barmaid.

Then some compounded extracts were passed over the counter and the talk drifted as usual (I have never known it otherwise) into comparisons between the two “Hands Across the Sea” people. That an Englishman will ever really warm to a Frenchman or a German nobody who knows his race will believe, but he can be entirely comfortable (and the well-bred Englishman is the shyest man living) with the well-bred American.

Lonnegan as chief spokesman, in answer to an inquiry, and with an assurance born of mastery of his subject instantly recognized by the listeners, enlarged on the last architectural horror, the skyscraper, its cost, and on the occupations of the myriads of human bees who were hived between its floors, all so different from the more modest office structures around the Bank of England: adding that he had the plans of two on his drawing table at home, a statement which confirmed the good opinions they had formed of his familiarity with the subject.

I floated in with some comparisons touching upon the technic of the two schools of water-color painting, and, finding that the curate had a brother who was an R.A., backed out again and rested on my oars.

Mac, more or less concerned over the expected arrival, and anxious that his listeners should not consider the magnate as a fair example of his countrymen, launched out upon the absence of all class distinctions at home—one man as good as another—making Presidents out of farmers, Senators out of cellar diggers, every man a king—that sort of thing.

When Mac had finished—and these Englishmen *let you finish*—the mill-owner, a heavy, red-faced man (out-of-doors exercise, not Burgundy), with a gray whisker dabbed high up on each cheek, and a pair of keen, merry eyes, threw back the lapels of his velveteen coat (riding-trousers to match), and answered slowly:

“You’ll excuse me, sir, but I stopped a while in the States, and I can’t agree with you. We take off our caps here to a lord because he is part of our national system, but we never bow down to the shillings he keeps in his strong box. You do.”

The lists were “open” now. Mac fought valiantly, the curate helping him once in a while; Lonnegan putting in a word for the several professions as being always exempt—brains, not money, counting in their case—Mac winning the first round with:

“Not all of us, my dear sir; not by a long shot. When any of our people turn sycophants, it is you English who have coached them. A lord with you is a man who doesn’t have to work. So, when any of us come over here to play—and that’s what we generally come for—everybody, to our surprise, kotows to us, and we acknowledge the attention by giving a shilling to whoever holds out his hand. Now, nobody ever kotows to us at home. We’d get suspicious right away if they did and shift our wallets to the other pocket; not that we are not generous, but we don’t like that sort of thing. We do here—that is, some of us do, because it marks the difference in rank, and we all, being kings, are tickled to death that your flunkies recognize that fact the moment they clap eyes on us.”

Lonnegan looked at Mac curiously. The dear fellow must be talking through his hat.

“Now, I got a sudden shock on the steamer on my way home last fall, and from an *American gentleman*, too—one of the best, if he was in tarpaulins—and I didn’t get over it for a week. No kotow about him, I tell you. I wanted a newspaper the worst way, and was the first man to strike the Sandy Hook pilot as he threw his sea-drenched leg over the rail. ‘Got a morning paper?’ I asked. ‘Yes, in my bag.’ And he dumped the contents on the deck and handed me a paper. I had been away from home a year, mostly in England, and hadn’t seen anybody, from a curator in a museum to the manager of an estate, who wouldn’t take a shilling when it was offered him, and so from sheer force of habit I dropped a trade dollar into his hand. You ought to have seen his face. ‘What’s this for?’ he asked. ‘No use to me.’ And he handed it back. I wanted to go out and kick

myself full of holes, I was so ashamed. And, after all, it wasn't my fault. I learned that from you Englishmen."

The toot-toot of an automobile cut short the discussion.

The American millionaire had arrived!

Everybody now started on the run: landlord, two maids in blue dresses with white cap strings flying, three hostlers, two garage men, four dogs, all bowing and scraping—all except the dogs.

"What did I tell you?" laughed Mac, tapping the curate's broad chest with the end of his plump finger. "That's the way you all do. With us a porter would help him out, a hotel clerk assign him a room, and that would end it. The next morning the only man to do him reverence would be the waiter behind his chair figuring for the extra tip. Look at them. Same old kotow. No wonder he thinks himself a duke."

The party had disembarked now and were nearing the door of the private entrance, the two women in Mother Hubbard veils, the two men in steamer-caps and goggles—the valet and maid carrying the coats and parasols. The larger of the two men shed his goggles, changed his steamer-cap for a slouch hat which his valet handed him, and disappeared inside, followed by the landlord. The smaller man, his hands and arms laden with shawls and wraps, gesticulated for an instant as if giving orders to the two chauffeurs, waited until both machines had backed away, and entered the open door.

"Who do you think the big man is, Mac?" Lonnegan asked.

"Don't know, and don't want to know."

"Lambert."

"What! Saw Logs?"

"The same, and—yes—by Jove! That little fellow with the wraps is Tommy."

A moment later Tommy reappeared and made straight for the barmaid.

"Get me some crushed ice and vermouth," he said. "We carry our Hollands with us. Why, Mr. MacWhirter! and Mr. Lonnegan! and—" (I was the "and"—but he seemed to have forgotten my name.) "Well, this *is* a surprise!" Neither the mill-owner nor the curate came within range of his eyes.

"Where have I been? Well, I'll have to think. We did London for a week—Savoy for supper—Prince's for luncheon—theatre every night—that sort of thing. Picked up a couple of Gainsboroughs at Agnew's and some tapestries belonging to Lord—forget his name—had a letter." (Here Tommy fumbled in his pocket.) "No, I remember now, I gave it to Sam. Then we motored to Ravenstock—looked over the Duke's stables—spent the night with a very decent chap Sam met in the Rockies last year—son of Lord Wingfall, and—"

The ice was ready now (it was hived in a keg and hidden in the cellar, and took time to get at), and so was the vermouth and the glasses, all on a tray.

"No, I'll carry it." This to the barmaid, who wanted to call a waiter. "I never let anybody attend to this for Sam but myself"—this to us. "I'll be back in a minute."

In a few moments he returned, picking up the thread of his discourse with: "Where was I? Oh, yes, at Lord Wingfall's son's. Well, that's about all. We are on our way now to spend a few days with—" Here he glanced at the curate and the mill-owner, who were absorbing every word that fell from his lips. "Some of the gentry in the next county—can't think of their names—friends of Sam." It became evident now that neither Mac nor Lonnegan intended introducing him to either of the Englishmen.

The barmaid pushed a second tray over the counter, and Tommy drew up a chair and waved us into three others. "Sam is so helpless, you know," he chatted on. "I can't leave him, really, for an hour. Depends on me for everything. Funny, isn't it, that a man worth—well, anywhere from forty to fifty millions of dollars, and made it all himself—should be that way? But it's a fact. Very simple man, too, in his tastes, when you know him. Mrs. Lambert and Rosie" (Mac stole a look at Lonnegan at the familiar use of the last name, but Tommy flowed on) "got tired of the *Cynthia*—she's a hundred and ninety feet over all, sixteen knots, and cost a quarter of a million—and wanted Sam to get something bigger. But the old man held out; wanted to know what I thought of it, and, of course, I had to say she was all right, and that settled it. Just the same way with that new house on the Avenue—you know it, Mr. Lonnegan—after he'd spent one hundred and fifty thousand dollars decorating the music-room—that's the one facing the Avenue—she thought she'd change it to Louis-Seize. Of course Sam didn't care for the money, but it was the dirt and plaster and discomfort of it all. By the way, after dinner, suppose you and Mr. Lonnegan, and you, too"—this to me—"come in and have a cigar with Sam. We've got some good Reina Victorias especially made for him—glad to have you know him."

Mac gazed out of the open door and shut his teeth tight. Lonnegan looked down into the custard-pie face of the speaker, but made no reply. Tommy laid a coin on the counter, shot out his cuffs, said: "See you later," and sauntered out.

No! There were no buds or blossoms—nothing of any kind, for that matter—out of Tommy's reach!

The mill-owner rose to his feet, straightened his square shoulders, made a movement as if to speak, altered his mind, shook Mac's hand warmly, and with a bow to the tap-room, and a special nod to the barmaid, mounted his horse and rode off. The curate looked up and smiled, his gaze riveted on Mac.

"One of your American gentlemen, sir?" he asked. The tone was most respectful—not a trace of sarcasm, not a line visible about the corners of his mouth; only the gray eyes twinkled.

"No," answered Mac grimly; "*a gentleman's gentleman.*"

The next morning at sunrise Mac burst into our room roaring with laughter, slapping his pajama-incased knee with his fat hand, the tears streaming from his eyes.

"They've gone!" he cried. "Scooted! Saw Logs, Mrs. Saw, the piece of kindling and her maid in the first car, and—"

He was doubled up like a jack-knife.

"And left Tommy behind!" we both cried.

"Behind!" Mac was verging on apoplexy now. "Behind! Not much. He was tucked away in the other car with the valet!"

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A GENTLEMAN'S GENTLEMAN ***

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