

## THE LEMON SEED

ROBERT RUDD WHITING

“GOOD morning, Mr. Bleeker,” said the present head of the firm briskly. “And how are we getting on this morning?”

The drab little man on the high stool lifted his pen from the ledger long enough to say very gravely, “Things are going very well, sir.”

Save for vacations and holidays this had been the daily formula for almost forty years. The present head of the firm had learned his part of it from his father. Mr. Bleeker’s part of it through all that time had been executed by Mr. Bleeker.

“How are *we* getting on?”—“*Things* are going very well”—that had been the keynote of Mr. Bleeker’s whole existence. From his boyhood, way back in the days when New York was filled with New Yorkers, he had never felt himself a part of anything; he had never thrown his lot in with any other human being sufficiently to justify the use of the pronoun “we.” With Mr. Bleeker it had always been “it”—something outside of himself, something of which he was no part—that was doing well or ill.

He was like the old New York houses down in the quiet part of town in which he lived. There were whole rows of them, all of the same pattern, with their crumbling brownstone façades, their high stoops and obtrusively unobtrusive respectability. Each had an unexplainable air of detachment, aloofness from the neighboring houses that shared the same side walls with it; one felt that if they were suddenly to come to life no one of them would dream of referring to the whole row as *we*. They suggested meek little old gentlemen with thin, colorless hair, whose rusty black coats needed brushing above the narrow shoulders. They suggested Mr. Bleeker. One of the several which had fallen upon boarding-house days housed him in a tiny hall bedroom on the fourth floor back.

The same attitude of detachment and aloofness had characterized Mr. Bleeker all his life. In his younger days he had

occasionally gone to the theatre. He had seen *Evangeline* at Niblo's Garden, and *Pocahontas* with Burroughs; and he remembered Edwin Booth and Lawrence Barrett as if it were only yesterday. But never had he once said to his companion when it was over: "My, didn't we have a good time!"—or, "a bad time," as the case might have been. It was always "Wasn't it splendid?" or, "Weren't they dull?"—never *we*; always *it* or *they*.

Once, years and years ago, there had been a girl; a slender, pure-eyed maid with all the sweet calm and simplicity of a great lady. She had seemed really to care, and Mr. Bleeker would have spoken, but—well, he told himself that it was because she was richer than he. But was it not more probably only another instance of his inherent shyness of becoming *part* of anything? Of being compelled to look out upon life from the standpoint of *we*?

From time to time, more frequently in later years, Mr. Bleeker had felt a vague dissatisfaction with his life. Hitherto he had made no attempt to formulate these feelings; merely tucked them away in the pigeon-holes of his sub-conscious mind, and had gone on making fine, spidery entries in his ledgers. But at last there came a morning when, after the head of the business had made his customary inquiry as to "how are we getting on," Mr. Bleeker hesitated expectantly for a moment before giving the usual assurance that "things are going on very well, sir."

It was the fortieth anniversary of his employment by the firm and he had rather hoped, half expected, that the head of the business might—But, oh well, he told himself, what difference did it make? Why should one take particular notice of any one day merely because it happened to be the anniversary of something or other?—Same work, same number of hours and minutes, same everything.

But Mr. Bleeker was trying to deceive himself. Anniversaries *are* different from other days. Anniversaries are the times at which we take stock of all that has happened to us in the past. We drag out from the dusty corners of our memories all the half formulated hopes and disappointments which

we were too busy to take note of at the time, and we arrange these and compare them and balance up our totals. It is on anniversaries that we figure out the profit and loss of life, and determine the solvency or insolvency of our happiness.

And the stock-taking of himself on this fortieth anniversary, in spite of his efforts to keep his mind entirely on the firm's figures, plainly showed Mr. Bleeker that after all the years he had been in the business of life he was unsuccessful. As far as the things that really count go—friendships, joys, sorrows—he was insolvent. It wasn't the material things that made him a failure; it did not trouble him because in all these years he had not advanced in position; it was not because he had been walking on a treadmill and now, after the better part of a lifetime, a little tired, a little feeble, found himself at the point at which he had started. It was something else that made him the failure he was.

Through some whim, perhaps because the day was an anniversary, his mind went back to the big family gatherings at his grandfather's. No anniversary was overlooked. He remembered the long, high-ceilinged old room, the table with its legs curved as if bowing under the weight of the great bowl of fragrant punch—Ah, that was it! The memory of that punch showed him why he had been a failure.

Once as a little boy he had been permitted to watch his grandfather brew that wonderful punch. He remembered how the sugar had dissolved in the fruit juices, and the juices had blended with the spirits, and the spirits with the wines—everything but the lemon seeds. Even when the ice had finally melted down, the lemon seeds were still whirling around and around, intact, with every stirring. He remembered his grandfather's amusement when he asked if they, too, would not finally dissolve. That was it: he was like those lemon seeds in the punch: he was *in* life, but he could never become part of it; no matter how deeply stirred he might sometimes have been, he had never been able to dissolve and blend with the rest of it. He——

Mr. Bleeker stopped short and bit his lip as he found his pen making a 9 instead of a 6; things were certainly upside down with him this fortieth anniversary.

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At lunch hour when he was leaving the little restaurant around the corner, the pretty girl at the cashier's desk pointedly ignored the flirtatious young man who paid his check just ahead of him. Mr. Bleeker vaguely envied the young man because he had been ignored pointedly. The ignoring of Mr. Bleeker was always perfectly unconscious. All afternoon he became more and more dissatisfied with himself.

On his way home that night he heard a little street urchin shout over to his pal: "How did de Giants come out?"

"We won in de tent'," was the cheerful reply.

"We?" mused Mr. Bleeker. "We?" But the Giants were professional ball players—grown men. He had often, much to his annoyance, heard the younger clerks speaking of them.

It was a balmy spring evening, and here and there a man and a young woman lingered by a hallway, speaking in low voices. At such times Mr. Bleeker quickened his pace a trifle. He felt very lonesome, very—detached.

That night, in his dingy old walnut bed, Mr. Bleeker lay awake brooding over his grievances. All his life it had been *they* against *him*. If only . . . He turned over and tried to go to sleep. He began to count sheep going over a fence—thirty-nine, forty, forty-one . . . If only . . . He flopped over on his other side and tried to concentrate his mind on snow falling, falling, softly, softly. . . . It was winter time. The snow was piled high on the brownstone steps and his grandfather was stirring, stirring at a gigantic punch that was getting bigger and bigger. And with every stirring Mr. Bleeker, very small and very helpless, was sent whirling around on the surface. At last the stirring stopped and Mr. Bleeker, dripping and dizzy from the fragrant fumes, was lifted out for inspection. Then he heard his grandfather's voice, measured and mournful, say: "I'm afraid I never can make it dissolve," and he was dropped into the bowl again. As he struck the surface he awoke with a start, cold and sweating.

How many hours he tossed and twisted he could not know. It seemed eternity. His brain was going around like a squirrel cage. God, if it would only stop long enough for him to get a

fresh start and think. Would morning never come? He *couldn't* stand it. He couldn't *stand* it.

He got up and feverishly put on his clothes. Stealing out of his room, he felt his way softly down the dark stairs. After a moment's fumbling at the chain he cautiously opened the front door and slipped outside. In the fresh night air he paused a moment, his hand still on the knob. Suddenly, as if seized by a panic, he slammed the door after him with a bang that must have reverberated through the old house, rushed down the steps and walked and walked and walked. Across town, down town, he knew not where he went. He only knew that he must walk, walk until the things in his head were tired—so tired that they *must* stop.

After midnight and before dawn, when the night is worn and bedraggled and the day has not yet started to arise, there comes a time when it seems as if some great vampire were hovering over the earth, sucking the vitality out of every living creature. It is the hour when sick men most often yield to death; when strong men become cowards, and weak men seek to escape their burdens by suicide.

It was at this hour that Mr. Bleeker found himself walking down a wide, deserted avenue. The sound of distant thunder, nearer, nearer, and then a roaring, hammering demon swept by on the elevated structure above his head. A gaunt grey cat, startled from its feast at an overturned garbage can, darted across his path and shot into the inky darkness of a cellarway. Mr. Bleeker shuddered.

At the next corner the street sign on a lamp-post caught his eye. The Bowery! The name suggested visions of climbing roses and the dark, cool shadows cast in bright sunlight. He smiled bitterly at the irony of it and quickened his weakening pace. The piercing shriek of a fire engine's whistle in the distance—or was it the death shriek of the banshee?—chilled him to the marrow. Ugh! . . . .

And there—at the end of the street—what *was* that awful thing—like some gigantic insect with horrid luminous eyes—all angles—spanning the whole street with its monstrous, sharp-jointed legs?

Ah, yes: the bridge entrance—the Brooklyn Bridge! He paused and drew his hand across his forehead. He had once shown the bridge to a man from out of town and knew it perfectly. Yes, it was only the Brooklyn Bridge. And yet how eerie, how uncanny it seemed in the weird, dim light of the dawn, for now the sky was streaked with greys. The terrible vampire of the hour before was slowly rising, drawing up her skirts, her claws dripping with—Mr. Bleeker clenched his fists as if hanging on to something—dripping with the vitality and will power of her victims. Men had jumped from the Brooklyn Bridge and found death in the river below. He remembered wondering at the time—

“I will,” he muttered, striding forward with fresh determination. “If the lemon seed can never become part of the punch, take it out of the punch and throw it away. I will!”

Absurd and ridiculous? Assuredly; especially in broad daylight. But to poor little Mr. Bleeker, distraught and unbalanced in the depressing grey of dawn, the idea was noble and heroic.

He climbed the bridge steps and strode through the covered approach with the bold, determined step of a drunken man bent upon proving his sobriety. Out on the bridge the fresh morning air struck him sharply. Ahead of him the sky was daubed with broad smears of light, as if Nature, remembering that Brooklyn is farther away from its daily work than Manhattan, found it necessary to awaken it a trifle earlier.

Below the promenade, practically deserted at this hour, was the driveway. Two or three heavy trucks rumbled along. A trolley car scurried by. Far down beneath the driveway rolled the wide river, patient and silent, ready to bear its daily burden of the city's commerce and traffic. Mr. Bleeker was about to seek death in its life. Would he in turn find life in death? He wondered.

The height made him dizzy, and, as if afraid of falling, he veered away from the railing. How did they do it, he wondered. He would have to drop to the driveway to reach the outer edge; and the drop was too great; he would surely—He

shook the unpleasant thought from him. Perhaps farther on there would be a place.

He passed under the stately gothic arches of the great stone pier. The indefinite daubs of light in the sky ahead of him had now taken form in great streaks of pale gold radiating upward from the silhouetted Brooklyn skyline. Pausing to follow their course, he turned, and looked back toward the city he had left.

He gasped.

Tower upon tower, green and ivory and gold, piling up higher and higher until it seemed they must pierce the heavens themselves! 'Twas like some magic dream city of the Arabian Nights, but with a strength of purpose and a virility never known to Oriental imagination.

Joseph Pennell, with his artist's gift of seeing beauty where beauty is, rather than where beauty ought to be, has seen this unbelievable city, and felt the thrill of it.

And Mr. Bleeker, too, forlorn and soul-hungry on the bridge before dawn, felt the thrill of it.

Even as he stood there, spellbound, a ray of the still invisible sun caught the topmost pinnacle and kindled it into a blaze of golden glory. Slowly, slowly, it descended. Now the next highest tower had caught. Then another. And another. Now the peaks of the whole unbelievable city were bathed in gold. It was as if the hand of God were gently awakening the work of man. And then, suddenly,—in some way Mr. Bleeker knew it without turning,—the sun rose back of Brooklyn.

Mr. Bleeker, with unconscious reverence, took off his hat.

"Wonderful!" he murmured.

What a monument to its builder!—to the builders of every brick and stone of it; to the builders of even the dingy little shadow-buried houses in the foreground that gave the noble towers their majestic height, and accentuated their golden glory. It was a monument to the men and women who, by their faithful industry, had made it all possible; to the Wall Street king and the great merchant; yes, and even to the newsboy in the streets and the humble pushcart pedler—for even the meanest of them had done his part; even—

Mr. Bleeker suddenly straightened up and drew a deep breath. There was a new light in his eye, and, as he walked slowly toward the wonderful vision before him, a new firmness in his step.

Mr. Bleeker, his eyes bright and strangely youthful in spite of the dark circles under them, was at his customary ledger at the usual hour.

"Good morning, Mr. Bleeker," said the present head of the business. "And how are we getting on this morning?"

"Things"—Mr. Bleeker, slightly confused, stopped short. Then, with almost eagerness: "We're doing splendidly, sir."

The head of the business, noting the slight variation of the time-honored formula, smiled approvingly. "Good for *us!*" he said, with a cheery nod of his head.



## THE WILL

HEWES LANCASTER

"ME," Madame François said wistfully, "when I die I should wish to leave will."

"Will," Madame Moise took up brightly, "but, yes! It would be fine for you to leave will."

Madame Moise was nothing if not eager, and always she was sympathetic. She did not know much about the François, they were new people who had moved to the Bayou only a few years ago, but she knew all about the note that tells of a troubled longing. Having responded warmly to this note in the old Madame's tone, she added honestly:

"Well, me! I wish to know what *will* is, maybe?"

Madame François grew gracious.—Poor little shrivelled Madame that she was, a woman who had had no children, whose opinion was therefore held in such slight regard along the Bayou. How she warmed in the glow of giving knowledge. How she bent her worn old body about, and wove meaning into the air with her thin old fingers that she might give the information nicely!

"Will is paper woman leave when she die. She hide it. Hide it in drawer——"

"In drawer," uttered Madame Moise. And because she was keen of wit and could not help seeing things as they were, she had a swift vision of Madame François' house and its furnishings—shelves on the wall, bed in the corner,—not a drawer in either living room or kitchen. How could Madame François leave a paper hidden in a drawer? She hesitated politely:

"In drawer, yes. If——?"

Madame François' glance grew more gracious, her fingers more vibrant. Ah, it was indeed true that she had had no children! But, had she not read books? Three of them? Not such reading books as children read at school, but books with paper backs and fine print that made her screw up her eyes to read it. Books that Madame Moise with all her wit and