

THE LION'S MOUTH

"PETITES CHOSES"

BY L. S. P.

TO begin the tale well—it all occurred some years ago. If the happenings were not so personal to myself, I might think them good material for an opera bouffe.

We—my sisters and I—who had, up to a certain time, led a more or less charmed life, with "money and position," as we say, had suddenly to meet just such reverses and hardships as are dealt out consistently in the fairy tales. Cinderella, and the Princess suddenly turned Goose Girl, had, if I may be pardoned the vulgarism, "nothing on us!" The wheel of fortune turned. We were spun rapidly from a languid life of delightful pleasure and pardonable pride, to a panic of necessity for earning precarious livings in a great city. Joining our forces, and adding to our panic her own, was a cousin of ours whom I shall call Anne. She, too, had been brought up in wealth and ease, and was now in the same amazing goose-girl condition as ourselves.

We were young. The days were difficult; the more so, no doubt, because once in so often we insisted upon adjusting on our young locks that questionable crown of sorrow that is fashioned out of the memory of happier things.

Personally, I think a great deal of maudlin pity is lavished on the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the garden of Eden. Their loss was at least, one may say, their own fault. For our expulsion from our garden of happier days we were in no sense even remotely responsible. We were simply, over night, as it were, ejected. There was no picturesqueness,

no romantic angel with a flaming sword. He who drove us forth from the bowers of beauty and boskets of ease was no more than a man in a check suit, who had once been my father's partner—a one-eyed man who, it was learned too late, had despite, or because of his great business ability, a former prison record, and an ineradicable tendency to acquisition and abscondence.

Then, too, when our first parents took a sentimental stroll at evening back to Eden, to look through the bars of the gate upon what was now lost to them, they did not see crowds of other people enjoying a state of life that had once been theirs. We did. And what made the sight more sharp was that the "others" were too often our own kith and kin. We had cousins, aunts, relatives by the dozen, who still enjoyed undisturbed ease, wealth, social distinction!

Inevitably, we gave them a great deal of appraising thought. We developed a talent for measuring their fortunes and their hearts. It would never have occurred to me, in earlier days, to reckon what Aunt B's income might be. Now I asserted with acrid certainty that it must be not a dollar less than sixty thousand per annum. I never should have cared formerly whether Greatuncle Timothy had much or little; now I spent an entire twenty minutes arguing with my sister that she underreckoned his wealth, and I even added up probable figures on paper to prove it hypothetically. "He must have, he *must* have, my dear, well over eighty thousand of income!"

As if it mattered! But it did matter, you see! Because it gave us a scale of measurement for their picayune hearts!

How could they go on living undisturbed in such lavish ease, while we toiled and moiled outside the gates? Did not the thought of us, who had once been beside them, trouble their night dreams, render them restless, haunt their green bowers and their ivy pillows? Apparently not! Did those older wealthy aunts, uncles, cousins, forget that ever, ever they were young? To a certainty of circumstantial evidence, they did!

From time to time of an afternoon, middle-aged cousins or aunts would come to pay us a visit, or drink a cup of tea with us. But I could never convince myself that there was anything really social in the performance. I could have sworn that through Cousin Thesbia's amazed lorgnon we were not seen to be gracious and tactful hostesses at all, gracious and tactful though we took pains to be, but rather, extraordinary unlikely exhibits—the P— girls earning their livings! What a spectacle!

It was later, among our three selves, over our meager but delightful supper of rice or potatoes, that we tasted the fine flavor of the experience and became downright gay. Too proud to let any of our former associates know what straits we were in, or the simplicity of our diet, or the gravity and acuteness of the approaching question of spring clothes and a new hat! Oh, yes; we were that! But we laughed over the situation. Downright sports we were, I think. Nevertheless, underneath all this gay pride and flair ran a dark river of desire that some one, some one should know the difficulty and poverty we endured—that some one among these people would divine our needs and give evidence of having a heart; not, you understand for our sakes, so much as for theirs.

How could Cousin Kate enjoy rolling about in unmitigated luxury untroubled by thought of our case? And Anne's Aunt Caroline, who had a "hotel" in Paris and a villa at Nice, and another at Mentone, and who was famed for being the best-dressed American in France! How could she sleep easy on her pillow,

while her own niece— Oh, well! We began to think that we knew life.

Then one day arrived a letter from Aunt Caroline. Aunt Caroline had not, it seems, slept easy on her pillow. Not that she admitted the fact; but at the end of an utterly uninteresting letter stood this: "I have asked Thérèse (Thérèse was her maid!) to pack and send you *quelques petites choses, ma chère*, that I thought you just might find useful."

"*Quelques petites choses!*" Here was speculation! Here was excitement!

They came at last! I never met with two more thrilling trunks in any fairy tale.

I am not going to give an inventory. I shall tell you only about a few of the *petites choses* that met our eyes.

On top! a gorgeous coral-satin ball gown, heavily embossed in gold; ball-room slippers, stockings and fan to match! An opera cloak of emerald-green satin lined with orchid brocade; a deep squirrel collar and border; heavy rhinestone clasps. More slippers! more stockings! more fans! A dinner gown of royal-purple velvet; pearl trimmings and girdle. Let all the rest be left to a vivid imagination. But no, I must tell you this at least, that the second trunk contained twelve parasols—of every conceivable beauty and brilliancy of color, and fifteen hats of a glory like the Apocalypse.

In front of the trunks on our knees, we sat back on our heels and gazed at one another and then went into hysterical peals of laughter; and I saw Anne after moments of this, wiping her eyes of merriment on the tail of a coral-satin ballgown. *Petites choses! Quelques petites choses!*

Well, I write of *quelques petites choses* and the philosophy of dress! Carlyle made a whole book of the latter. I mean to tell you as much in a few paragraphs.

You may think Aunt Caroline a perfect fool to have supposed we could use such *choses*. She was! *That was her virtue!*

The *choses* flattered us with delight, as nothing else could have done! They placed us in our own eyes in our old station! They remade us, refreshed us, established us as upon a rock. The very fact that these *petites choses* had nothing to do with our present dilemma gave them for us their entire endearment.

Of course, we filched a buckle here (one of the tamer ones); a pair of stockings there; and transferred in our mind's eye the squirrel collar to a more sober companionship. But in the main, none of Aunt Caroline's bestowals could we use.

In time, when we had sufficiently enjoyed the mere glory of possessing them, we began giving them away.

The hats! To have worn anyone of them, in our condition would have scandalized us! We had sense enough to know that. We began giving them to the laundress, the janitress, the scrubwoman, and the scrubwoman's daughter, the unconverted wife of the socialistic elevator boy, the giggling colored sweetheart of the chocolate fireman.

Parasols were dispensed in lieu of fees; and brought us incomparable service. Out of sheer charity and gayety of heart, we bestowed the purple velvet, pearls and all, on the giggling sweetheart of the fireman, just in time for her chocolate-color wedding. The heartburnings and amazement affecting all her guests and her future life must be imagined.

Ah, the power of clothes and their philosophy! Ah, me! how *petites choses* changed the face of the earth—not for us only.

We gave the scrubwoman's daughter the violet hat with orchids. I now believe it to have been her ruin. Her disconsolate mother, wearing one of the peacock's feathers tragically but still proudly over one eye, told us, some weeks later that "Melissa" had been arrested in a cabaret round-up, and she and her young man taken up for disorderly conduct. The laundress I used to see go by with the orange and apple-green silk parasol, with the blue-enamel

handle. Then finally we saw her no more. She came to a bad end, and was landed in jail, not surprisingly at all, but, I still believe, undeservedly for shoplifting. The socialistic elevator boy and his wife have separated, because, it seems likely, her ideas of caste have changed since her possession of the apple-green satin cloak, and she is unwilling to divorce herself from it. The giggling bride of the chocolate wedding soon eloped with a café au-lait vaudeville player, who fell in love with her at the marriage ceremony, when she wore the purple velvet. I understand that soon after she was dancing cancons in it, pearls and all, on the vaudeville stage herself, and bringing the house down! But it is a hard life!

Nor were *petites choses*, despite all their delight, without their cost to us. Lines of action sprang from them. The laundress and all the others, while giving us exuberant thanks for our bounty, raised all their charges consistently. In an unguarded moment, I once hardily carried a beautiful lilac silk parasol to our unpretending grocer's on Third Avenue, and was charged twenty-five cents for a pound of onions. I left it at home the next time, but the prices were not reduced. The astute eye of that grocer saw it still at a distance, in the closet. I am sure of it.

As for our wealthy relatives, *petites choses* settled our relation to them completely. Not that they knew about *petites choses*. That was just it. They simply decided on circumstantial evidence that three girls avowedly poor and struggling as we were, who would spend money on silk stockings of the finest make, rhinestone buckles (mind you!) however beautiful—and who wore delicate embroidered gauntlet gloves out of Paris, were certainly deserving of no better fate than had been meted out to them. They washed their hands of us!

I carried the lilac parasol to a proud editorial office one day, and the haughty editor took me to be by that token, not only a charming, but an eminently successful author. I may say it was the be-

ginning of my success. The parasol still stands in the closet! I could buy one now like it if I chose.

Ah *petites choses*, how little *petites* you are, *enfin*. As to the philosophy of dress, is it not I ask you (Sartor Resartus à part!), is it not, *bon Dieu*, of a profundity?

THE PRESIDENTIAL STYLE

BY FREDERICK L. ALLEN

THERE is one thing that I wish the excavators would find out for us about our friend King Tut-Ankh-Amen (aside from the little question of how the boys who played round with him pronounced his name). I should like to know what sort of letter he used to write to the Federated Nile Dredgers of Thebes or the National Pyramid Study Institute, declining their very kind invitation to attend their annual banquet and get-together and to say a few words on Egyptian foreign policy. It would be instructive to learn whether the sort of literary style which is employed on similar occasions by our American presidents, cabinet officers, governors, mayors, and other lords temporal is an inherited perquisite of authority, or whether it is a new native growth.

You know the sort of style I mean. Occupants of the White House seem in general to be more completely addicted to it than anyone else. The public correspondence of the President of the United States is always of a peculiarly sonorous and pontifical quality, suitable for large-chested declamation to an accompaniment of brass instruments and kettledrums. His letters and messages are the modern equivalent of the epic; very few Americans would appreciate an allusion to the surge and thunder of the Odyssey, but everybody would understand a reference to the surge and thunder of a presidential letter endorsing the annual membership campaign of the Tallahassee Boy Scouts.

It must be an awful strain to have to

write presidentially. If the President is invited to the fiftieth anniversary picnic of the Bridgeport Dancing Masters' Club, he can't just sit down and dash off:

DEAR SIR:

It was perfectly corking of you to invite me to your party, and I know I'd have a swell time if I went, but honestly I can't make it. I'm all tied up, and the Secretary of State says to stay round while we try to think what to do next. Isn't that just rotten?

Regards to the boys.

No, he can't write that way. What he has to turn out is more like this:

DEAR SIR:

It is with profound regret that I find, on consulting my list of engagements, that pressure of important business renders it impossible for me to be absent from the Capital at the time of your fiftieth anniversary picnic. No exercise, no pastime, no sport suited to the polished surface of a ball-room floor is more essential than is dancing to the recreative development and orderly progress of the two sexes upon which, more than upon any other factor, depends in the last analysis the ultimate welfare of the American people. No form of celebration so befits an association of instructors in this historic art as a picnic, combining as it does the dignity of co-operative nourishment with a suitable regard for the need of healthful play. May I take the liberty of expressing to the members of the Club my very sincere wishes for their continued prosperity?

That sort of style, like a silk hat on the Fourth of July, is a mark of high political rank. A President never says "makes it impossible" when he can say "renders it impossible." He likes to announce the results of "the last analysis," whatever that may be. (Presumably, it is related to the "acid test.") To read a presidential document aloud one should stand erect with the weight of the body evenly balanced on the balls of the feet, inhale deeply several times and let the words come booming out one by one from the dia-