

Fire of Youth -- by Henry James Forman

Synopsis of Preceding Chapters.

ANTHONY WEST and his friend, Joe Shelburn, both Harvard seniors, come to New York to spend the holidays. Eluding Joe and his sporty companions, Anthony takes Grace Thomas, a pretty telephone girl, whom he has met at the hotel, out to dinner. Later he escorts her to her home, where he passes a delirious hour with her arms about his neck and her kisses on his lips. The next morning Anthony is awakened by a telegram calling him home because of his mother's serious illness.

Anthony's father had been the founder and editor of a little newspaper which became famous throughout the country, but neither the call of wealth or fame could persuade him to leave the obscure Nebraska village where he lived happily with his wife and son. Years before Mr. West had befriended Jim Howard, who then, after Mr. West's death, ably conducted the paper for the family.

On her deathbed Mrs. West gives Anthony a magnificent ruby which has been in her family a long time and is known as the "Fire of Youth." She wants him to give it to the girl he decides to marry. After his mother's death Anthony returns to Harvard to finish his course. Then, acting upon Jim Howard's advice, he becomes a newspaper reporter in New York. His father's reputation proves of great assistance to him, and he soon finds himself gaining a wide knowledge of New York life. But he is fearfully lonely, and one night he seeks out Grace Thomas, the telephone girl, who promises to marry him as soon as her evening's work is finished.

CHAPTER IX.

Brilliant Prospects.

FOUR young men were sitting in Jack's restaurant on a sultry evening in September, consuming Welsh rabbits before dispersing to their homes and to their beds. To be exact, it was nearer morning than evening. It was 2 o'clock. They were all young reporters on meager salaries, and all not only hoped but expected to do great things and to be hugely successful. Not one of them expected to remain a reporter always. Owing to the tension and the excitement of their calling they felt it to be a necessity to fore- rather, even at that hour, in the jayest place they could find, regardless of the expense, seeming as it were to draw on their future for the bills.

"The bully thing about this newspaper game," said Douglas Nash, sipping at his amber-colored beer, "is that it is a training for anything. No matter what you're going to do, newspaper work is the A B C of it."

"Yes, if I had a kid," remarked Sam Hughes, a heavy-set young man with an early-indulged moustache, "I'd certainly see to it, whether he went to college or not, that he got a year or two of newspaper work before he started in on his business or profession."

"Aren't any of you going to be newspaper men for keeps?" demanded Anthony West, his cigarette poised in mid-air before his lips.

"I know I'm not," said Frank Mason, a youth whom Anthony had known but slightly in college, but whom he knew better now. "I am going into magazine work first chance I get and try writing plays."

"And I'm fussing with law a little bit right now," Douglas Nash put in mildly.

"I see you are," murmured Hughes under his moustache, intercepting a glance of Nash's toward a pretty young thing in pink who was drinking creme de menthe in the company of an elderly man.

"He's doing a little sociology now," put in Frank Mason. "Very good thing for a lawyer."

"The law and the prophetesses," remarked Anthony.

"Ease off on that," retorted Nash, aiming a finger at Anthony. "You're not the one to throw stones. Your glass house may be in Central Park on dark nights. But there are electric lights there. And these orbs of mine have lamped you there so recently as last night—and not alone."

Anthony still had his habit of flushing.

"What were you doing there?" he parried.

"Never mind what I was doing. You can't deny it."

"I can," said Anthony, "but I won't. Not being a budding lawyer I stick to the truth."

"Who is she, West?" blandly inquired Mason.

"She's a dream--of Nash's," was all he replied.

"That's the trouble with this life," Hughes took up the thread serenely. "This night-hawk life when every respectable person's in bed, living in an atmosphere of policemen and," with a wave of the hand, "this: it gets you sooner or later--it gets you."

"Well, what are you going to do, Sam?" demanded Nash.

"Oh, I'm going into Wall Street," the young men roared with laughter.

"Might as well join a monastery," declared Frank Mason.

"Or a nunnery," added Nash.

"But you haven't told us what you're going to do, West," he went on. "You going to stick to this game?"



"Yes," smiled Anthony. "I'm going to be a country editor."

Without knowing exactly why the young men laughed as loudly as before. Somehow the thought of Anthony West as a country editor seemed grossly incongruous to them. Through every pore he exhaled the vivacity and the tone of the great city.

"The pickle crop has not turned out as expected this year," Douglas Nash began, quoting items of an imaginary country paper.

"Joe Brown is building a new silo in place of the one burned down last month. He was insured. Long may he wave," caught up Mason.

"Miss Mary Ann Brown had a shower given her by a number of surprising friends. A good time was had by all," concluded Hughes.

"Say, West," continued Douglas Nash, "you'd better come up to our flat and let my mother talk to you. She don't believe in this country business. There are hicks enough in this world. It's New York for mine every time."

"Mine, too," chimed Mason and Hughes in chorus, like actors on the stage.

They paid their checks and the party broke up toward three in the morning. Hughes and Mason went uptown, while Anthony and Douglas Nash decided to walk down toward Twenty-third street.

"Night in New York," murmured Nash, squaring his shoulders and sniffing the fresh air as an elevated train hurtled by overhead and some newspaper vans came rumbling toward them from Herald square. "The place is alive even in its sleep."

"Yes," said Anthony soberly, "it's meat and drink to me. But it can be terribly lonely, all the same."

"It sure can," assented Nash. "Don't I know it? That's why my mother came on from Cincinnati to live here, so I won't go to the bow-wows."

"You're lucky. I'm pretty much alone here."

"That's the devil--that is."

"That's what drives a fellow to fool with girls in the park, you know," and Anthony gave a short laugh.

"Who was she?"

"Nobody in particular-- nice enough girl in her way, but--"

"I see. You come and talk to mother. Tell you what. When's your day off? Saturday? Well, you come and have dinner with us Saturday. Mother's lots of fun-- good sport. So long, then; Saturday, seven o'clock."

They parted at Twenty-third street, Douglas Nash turning westward toward the Episcopal Theological Seminary, near which he had an infinitesimal flat with his mother, and Anthony walking toward Fourth avenue.

The night was cooling toward

dawn, but the stars still burned. He approached Madison Square, with its blinking lights and the deeply massed shadows about the building of the Garden. The open space of the square, its wisps of mystery in the shape of trees were deliciously intimate and refreshing after the endless cold brick and mortar of the streets. He delighted in every aspect of the city, but the loneliness that he so often suffered was an intolerable fact. He had no roots here. Everything, all his relationships, were touch and go. He knew as yet not one nice woman or girl. No one passed him on, the way young men are passed on by their women folk to friends in strange cities. His affair with the telephone girl, Grace Thomas-- where was it all leading to? He remembered a moment of ardor when he had been sitting with her in the park, clinging to her from

"From a door marked 'Private' Liggett himself was issuing with a lady--a lady so beautiful and alluring that when her glance rested frankly and carelessly on Anthony he was dazzled."

the sheer spontaneous craving for affection, thinking that one might do worse than marry a girl like her. Men of experience and standing sometimes married their stenographers on telephone girls. At this moment, however, with the cold light of the stars before dawn he recoiled from the thought. Nevertheless, he had an appointment with her a few days hence.

A twittering, twinkling little woman was Mrs. Nash, and she held her big son Douglas in thrall as some gay Renaissance lady in Italy might have held her young cavalier servant.

She smiled upon him as upon a lover, and, in fact, when Nash was performing the ceremony of introducing Anthony, he said:

"Meet my best girl--the only mother I ever had."

"You're in luck," answered Anthony. "Delighted to meet you, Mrs. Nash."

"So you're Anthony West," she said, gazing into his eyes like a girl of the "souful" variety who has just acquired the art of soulfulness. "Why haven't you come to see me before?"

"Because I haven't been asked, Mrs. Nash."

"Doug!" she called sharply to her son. "What do you mean by keeping away the nicest of my boys from me? Is that the way I brought you up?" And she shook the gray curls on her brow at the culprit in affectionate ire. "Come here, Anthony," she went on. "Sit down beside me and tell me all about yourself. And mind--you can tell me anything."

This acquaintance by assault was a little startling to Anthony, but he warmed quickly under the old lady's geniality.

"An interesting and important

life like mine," he laughed, "it would take too long. Mrs. Nash. But I can tell you I'm mighty glad to be here. This is the first home I've been asked to in New York."

"Isn't it a heartless place?" she twittered. "Isn't it? Isn't it? No wonder the boys run after chorus girls and things like that--anything with arms and legs."

"You take my breath away," murmured Anthony, and her son in his deep bass put in:

"Remember, mother, there are gentlemen present."

"Here! You know your job!" She threw a terrible look at her son. "You get the cocktails ready!"

It was a delightful party. They were in the combination living and dining room and could move about in single file only. The furniture was in excellent taste and a dainty touch pervaded the apartment. Everything was in its place, and even the disorder among the books on the shelf seemed premeditated--an antidote against too great regularity. There was a divan with pillows, a couple of easy chairs, a gate-legged table--it was a pocket edition of a home.

"Do you know what this lad wants to do in life, mother?" said Douglas, arriving with a tray of cocktails. "A country editor!"

Mrs. Nash leveled a soulful and reproachful glance at the offender.

"Why, Anthony West! Don't you go and do anything foolish! Didn't Doug say you were a Harvard man? Is that what you got your Harvard education for?"

"What I say, mother," prompted Douglas, "is this: No country editor alive can ever make more than five thousand dollars a year. Anybody at all successful in New York can make at least twenty-five thou-

sand." It was notable that Douglas was the one who used concrete figures. Mrs. Nash stooped to nothing so crude. "I was lunching at the Ransomes yesterday," she rattled cheerily as they sat down at the little gate-legged table. "You know who they are--he's a director of Oxidized Steel--and they were talking of a yachting trip to the Mediterranean just as one might talk of a visit to Staten Island." And she laughed chirpingly at the savvy and brightness of life.

"Mother enjoys vicariously the wealth of others," commented her son.

"A positive inspiration," murmured Anthony, hardly knowing what to say.

"They're people worth knowing--that's what I mean," insisted the spirited little woman. "Young men should know the right kind of people." And in the cramped and serried conditions of the diminutive flat she spoke in general terms of wealth and luxury, of motor cars, country and town houses, of a place in "society." A veritable Major Pemmison was the little lady. With a knowing man-of-the-world look she remarked:

"If there's anything I hate it's dinginess. I hate a cheap man, a cheap marriage, a cheap life." Luxury, wealth and success were the gods she worshipped, and Anthony, under the genial spell, was rapidly becoming convinced that, when all was said and done, she was right--that wealth and success and luxury were those inalienable rights guaranteed to the proper people by the Constitution. "I certainly need you, Mrs. Nash," Anthony said at parting from her that evening. "I hope you will let me come again?"

"Come again! My dear, you're adopted!" she cried, taking both his hands. "You may kiss me right here," she turned a puffy little cheek toward him.

He kissed her with a laugh, and as he walked home that night he felt himself more disturbed about his future than ever before. Two things he told himself he dreaded more than all the others--poverty and dinginess. In Little Rapids both were waiting for him like a pair of familiars. If he remained a reporter at least one of the twain was a certainty. The world lay illimitable before him. Yet where was he going? Douglas Nash, with his brave little mother to guide and inspire him, was heading toward twenty-five thousand a year at the law. Whereas he, Anthony, was gliding infallibly toward the dinginess of which Mrs. Nash had spoken with so much abhorrence. He had no one to inspire him. Adela used to be pretty good at that, he reflected. He wished she were in New York. In his room, before going to bed, he was moved to write to Adela.

"Dear Adela:

"I have been thinking and wondering about you. In spite of my business I have a good deal of time on my hands in which to think. For though this is the greatest, it is certainly also the loneliest city in America. You walk along blocks and blocks, miles in fact, of houses, places, apartment houses--an immense world of homes, with women, mothers, sisters, sweethearts in them, and they are all somebody else's. They all exclude you like so many fortresses."

"I remember how I used to talk things over with mother, how I used to brag to you, and you, with eyes sparkling, encouraging me as though you were deeply interested--and the beauty of it was that you were interested, though I hardly know why. For I certainly don't treat my friends very white. I haven't treated you particularly well, when I recall that this is the first letter I am writing you from New York."

"The truth of the matter is I was pretty badly hit by all that happened at home last Winter, and since my beginning here in New York I have been working like a machine, long and impossible queer hours, getting what sleep I can during the noisy New York day."

"I certainly wish you were here, Adela, with your sweetness and your genius for friendship. It would make a big difference to me. It's a great training I think I'm getting here, but believe me, Addie, I'm paying a big price for it. The first and only lady I have

Continued on Next Page

(C) 1921 International Feature Service, Inc. Great Britain Rights Reserved