

Marx Hardy Machiavelli Joyce Austen
Defoe Abbot Melville Montaigne Cooper Emerson Hugo
Stoker Wilde Christie Maupassant Haggard Chesterton Molière Eliot Grimm
Garnett Engels Schiller Byron Maupassant Schiller
Goethe Hawthorne Smith Kafka
Cotton Dostoyevsky Kipling Doyle Willis
Baum Henry Nietzsche Hall
Leslie Dumas Flaubert Turgenev Balzac Willis
Stockton Vatsyayana Crane
Burroughs Verne
Curtis Tocqueville Gogol Busch
Homer Tolstoy Whitman Twain
Darwin Zola Lawrence Plato
Potter Freud Jowett Stevenson Dickens Harte
Kant Andersen London Descartes Cervantes Burton Hesse
Poe Aristotle Wells Voltaire Cooke
Hale James Hastings Shakespeare Irving
Bunner Richter Chekhov Chambers Alcott
Doré Dante Swift Shaw Wodehouse
Pushkin Newton



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[3]

THE LIMIT

BY

ADA LEVERSON

LONDON CHAPMAN & HALL

[4]

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[5]

TO ROBERT ROSS

CHAPTER I

VALENTIA

"Romer, are you listening?"

"Valentia, do I ever do anything else?"

"I've almost decided and absolutely made up my mind that it will look ever so much better if you don't go with me to Harry's dinner after all."

"Really?"

"Yes. We two—you *and* I—always seem to make such an enormous family party! Of course, I know we have to go about in these huge batches sometimes—to your mother, and that sort of thing, but in this case it will look better not."

Valentia made this rather ungracious suggestion, looking so pretty, so serious, and yet with such a conciliating smile that it would have been almost impossible for even the most touchy person to have been offended.

The tall, significant-looking husband stopped in his stroll across the room.

It was a charming room, with pale grey walls [12] and a pale green carpet, and very little in it except, let in as a panel, a delicate low-toned portrait of the mistress of the house, vaguely appearing through vaporous curtains, holding pale flowers, and painted with a rather mysterious effect by that talented young amateur, her cousin, Harry de Freyne. It had been his sole success in art, and had been exhibited at the Grafton Galleries under the name of *The Gilded Lily*. No one had ever known or was ever likely to know whether the title referred to the decorative, if botanically impossible, blossom in her hand, or to the golden hair of the seductive sitter.

Romer Wyburn paused a moment—he always paused before speaking—and then said very slowly—

"Oh! Really? You think it will look better if I don't go with you?"

He invariably spoke with the greatest deliberation, and with no expression whatever.

"Oh yes, dear, I'm sure it would," she repeated coaxingly.

"Do you mean if you go without me?"

"What else can I mean?"

"It'll look better, you think; eh? Is that the idea?"

[13] He sat down opposite the portrait, lighted a cigarette, and thought. Then he said with ruminating interest—

"I don't see why. Why will it look so much better for me not to go with you?"

"Oh, Romer dear, really! It's one of those things that are almost impossible to explain. Oh, if you'd only do just what I advise—if you'd only *go* by me, and not want these long tedious explanations, how much better it would be! You see, Harry is giving this dinner *on purpose* so that Daphne shall meet Van Buren by accident. You know all about Van Buren, *the* Van Buren—the millionaire, who turns out to be a dear creature and quite charming! and has taken the *greatest* fancy to Harry, and clings on to him, and keeps on and on asking him to ask him to meet people. You must own it would be rather jolly for Daphne, because, of course, you can't *think* how he's run after—I mean Van Buren—and he isn't an ordinary American snob, and it really and truly isn't only his millionairishness, but he's a real person, and good-looking and nice as well; and though, Heaven knows, I'm as romantic as anybody—for myself—I wouldn't be so selfish as to be romantic for her too, and I can't help feeling it's our duty, being in the place of parents to her, to give the angel a sporting chance! Of course, [14] the point is, Van Buren has told Harry he only likes nice English girls very well brought up, and he wants to settle down in England, and he thinks that any relation of Harry's must be perfect; and, naturally, I'm pleased. I feel exactly like a mother to Daphne, although she's only six years younger."

"Well, that's all right. I see all that."

Romer seemed rather bored, as men naturally are at a long catalogue of another man's advantages. "Now, look here. Why would it look better for me not to go?"

There was some excuse for his insistence on this point, for in a superficial way Romer was very effective, fair and good-looking, well-made and distinguished; but the entire absence of all expression from his empty, regular face, and of all animation from his dry, colourless voice and manner, soon counteracted the effectiveness. Valentia often said that Romer should never do more than walk through a room or look in for a few minutes where there were other people—even at a club—and then go away immediately, when he would leave a striking impression. If he stayed longer he became alarming. His personality was so extraordinarily *nil* that it was quite oppressive. Obviously kind and not in the least pompous, yet his silence made him formidable, especially [15] to most of his wife's friends who, though they could hardly be reproached with want of pluck as a general rule, had one great fear in life—the fear of being bored. It was on this ground that they were all terrified of Romer.

"Don't you think, Romer, if we both go it will look too marked? Almost as if we were vulgarly trying to get Daphne married? A horrid idea! Besides, if you don't turn up Harry can ask some one amusing in your place. You see, he's promised to show Van Buren *interesting* people.... No, darling, I don't mean it in that way. I'm sure you're interesting enough, but I mean queer people, and celebrities and things. That's what Van Buren wants, and that's what he must have. And that's one reason why he's so delighted with Harry, because Harry can get them all, through being a sort of artist, you see. What a good thing, after all, that he didn't drift into diplomacy! As he's an American you can't expect Van Buren to be really modern, and he has all the old-fashioned ideas about what *he* calls culture. He wants to go in for being intellectual and artistic and knowing what he calls people with brains who really count. I mean he wants to meet people like Seymour Hicks and Waller, and Thomas Hardy, and so on, and not only celebrities and people who have made their name, but even people with a [16] future, and, in fact, any peculiar, well-educated creatures—anything out of the way."

Romer looked rather dazed.

"Really? Then will Hicks or Hardy be asked in my place?"

Valentia laughed. "Don't be so absurdly literal and hopelessly idiotic, darling! No, of course not. But I dare say Harry will get—well—perhaps Rathbone, the tattooed man, his Oxford friend."

"Really! And will this chap's being tattooed make the party go off better?"

"Oh yes, Romer dear; in a sort of way, because it makes him interesting, although you can't see it. When he was quite young he was always having lifelong passions for people, and being tattooed in their honour. He has blue chain bracelets with initials on his left wrist, and a heart and an anchor with other initials on his right arm, and a flight of swallows—oh, and goodness knows what! In fact, when you come to think of it Mr. Rathbone is really a kind of serial story—with illustrations. I wonder Lord Northcliffe doesn't bring him out in monthly parts!" She laughed again. "Harry might even get Hereford Vaughan, the man who has written all the plays that are going on now. Harry knows him quite well, and Van Buren would be so pleased."

[17] "Does Daphne want to marry this American chap?"

"Good gracious, no! The idea! Why, she doesn't even know him!... Yes, of course she does, naturally."

"Oh!"

Romer, though he never by any chance smiled at his wife's careless irresponsible chatter, nor laughed at her trivial jests, took the deepest interest in them, and would listen, as if under a charm, by the hour, to subtleties and frivolities that one would never have imagined he would enjoy. Sometimes the faint shadow of a smile would illuminate his face like a cold ray of wintry moonlight, but that was when she had ceased speaking. The smile was the effect of having watched the sparkle of her grey eyes, the expression of her pretty mouth, and her brilliant, sunshiny grace.

"It's very sweet of Harry," she said thoughtfully, "to do all this for me. It's all for me, or rather it's all for Daphne; he's so fond of Daphne."

"Really? Why doesn't he marry her himself?"

She looked surprised and blushed slightly.

"Harry? Why, he never marries!"

"He doesn't as a rule, I know," Romer admitted.

[18] "Then, why should he make an exception for Daphne? He's fond of her—of us—in fact, devoted—just like a brother. Not that I ever saw a devoted brother. Besides, Harry's made to be a bachelor, and he isn't well off enough to marry."

"Really? Hard up? Poor chap! Never saw any sign of it."

"Hard up? No; how like you! Of course, he has plenty of money, for *him*, but he spends it all, poor boy. Anyhow, of course, he's not really rich like Van Buren. It's on a totally different scale—a different sort of thing altogether. But, of course, Van Buren may not care for Daphne; people have such funny tastes; and not only that, but if he adores and worships the ground she treads on I shan't let her dream of marrying him unless she absolutely returns it—at least, unless she likes him fairly well."

All this seemed to absorb Romer, and after a pause he said—

"I suppose you'll get Daphne a new dress for Harry's beano?"

Valentia smiled pityingly.

"Yes, of course, you would think that. No! Why, that would be *l'enfance de l'art!* First of all, Daphne looks ever so much better when she's dressed really simply, not the latest fashion; on the very verge of dowdiness! It [19] suits her—shows her off. It would be silly to dress her up like a doll or make her look *endimanchée* on Thursday, or arranged and got up expensively, on purpose for Van Buren. I wouldn't, for instance, for anything, let her wear her new tulle dress from Armand! He'd see through it. Besides, I want her to contrast with me as if I'd taken any amount of trouble about my own appearance and none about hers. It'll make him pity her a little, and think how well she'd look in the sort of clothes he could give her. Besides, I myself am not going to be very smart—just tidy."

"Paquin?"

"How clever of you to guess! Well, now I must go and see Harry and hear all about the dinner, and tell him how sorry you are you can't come. And you're going to lunch at the Club, aren't you? And won't you go and dine with your mother on that evening?"

"I may as well."

"*Do, Romer dear! I can't bear you to neglect her, although I never think it's safe to let you dine with her without me. She always takes advantage of my absence to be horrid about me, and then you will defend me, although I've implored you not to heaps of times, and then you quarrel. If, this time, she says I'm frivolous and worldly and an utter fool and very deep, you [20] must agree with every word. I'm so fond of her, she's such a dear thing, it's too bad to worry her by contradicting her, and she has such a vile temper! Telephone and invite yourself—a pressing invitation, and give her my very best love.*"

Romer promised all she asked and then went out to the Club.

Valentia watched him through the window as he went. She thought he looked very well through a window, and ought by rights always to be seen in that way—as it were, under glass. She felt quite proud of him, of his smart appearance. In his way, he was an elaborate dandy, and spent years at his tailor's, slowly choosing the right thing. She remembered she had married him chiefly because of his fine presence and mysterious silence. She had thought at the time there must be so much at the back of it all, so much in him. He was in love with her and seemed difficult to understand. What could be more attractive? And now—well, he was ideally kind and good-natured. And she certainly felt sometimes that she couldn't even yet quite make him out. Then she gave a slight sigh, went to the door and called Daphne.

Daphne came in, trimming a hat. She had lived with the Wyburns ever since their marriage five years ago, and Valentia, having [21] no children and a most passionately tender disposition—far too much natural affection to expend on Romer alone—lavished devotion on her sister. And Daphne was so nice and so pretty, almost as pretty as herself, in a satisfactorily different way. Valentia with her short straight features, grey eyes under dark brows, low forehead almost hidden by wavy fair hair, and a mouth curved and curled into subtle and complicated lines, was the type loved by Rossetti and Burne-Jones. She had a wonderful fair complexion, against which her long eyelashes showed, when she looked down, dark and effective, and though she was rather tall, slim and very modishly

dressed, she never looked like a fashion-plate and had no air of being a mere mannequin for clothes, but seemed essentially real, with a suggestion in her personality of a beauty at once pagan and spiritual—the pagan predominating. Her pictorial appearance had no doubt made easier the artist's task, and the pale exquisite portrait had truly been described as a whispering likeness.

Daphne, who was not quite eighteen, was a good deal taller, and more slender. She had dark brown eyes, smooth dark hair, parted in the middle, a rather bright colour and features of the classic type. Her chin was rather long, and she had a brilliant, sudden smile, and all [22] the attractive freshness and slight abruptness of her age, with an occasionally subdued air, caused by the shadow that had fallen on their youth by the death of their beautiful mother. Her gentle grace and touch of premeditated *naïveté* made her charming. Beyond question she would be a great success.

"Romer can't go on Thursday," Valentia said, taking the needle and hat out of her sister's hand and beginning to sew. "I must go and see Harry and tell him to get some one else. Really, Daphne, you go too far! It's all very well to be clever with your needle, but you needn't tear a Lewis hat to pieces and turn it inside out without asking my advice."

"Oh, I wasn't! I was only squashing in the brim and trying to make the hat smaller. It seems to have got larger since I put it away."

"Don't be perfectly absurd, darling. It's because you've been seeing smaller hats lately."

"Oh yes, I see. Who's going instead of Romer?"

"How should I know? We'll see."

"It's just as you like, darling," said Daphne in her level voice; "but in case the American hates me, and I hate him, and Harry's talking to you all the time, and I'm frightened of the celebrities, isn't anything going to be done for me?"

[23] "Of course not. What do you want? That Foster boy again? Don't look down and blush, it makes me sick. All right, perhaps, if

there's room. He's a nice, decorative boy, but remember they don't dance at dinner, and that's the only thing he can do."

"Indeed it isn't!" cried Daphne.

"I'm very sorry to hear it. Suppose Foster's engaged, or at Alder-shot?"

"He won't be. It's too sweet of Romer not going. Did you marry him because you knew he would do whatever you told him?"

"I don't think it was that so much," said Valentia, thoughtfully, trying on the hat in front of the glass. "I thought he was a strong silent man, a man with an orange up his sleeve, as it were. But I've never seen the orange."

"How funny of you! I should hate a mysterious person. You don't want your husband to be a kind of conjurer."

"Yes, I do, as long as he doesn't wear a conjurer's evening dress. I like being surprised. Now let's go and surprise Harry at his studio; we must be quick, he's expecting us."

[24]

CHAPTER II

HARRY

Harry de Freyne stood in his usual position, smoking a cigarette, and leaning a little forward, with his back to the mirror as if to resist the temptation of looking into it. The family good looks were acutely accentuated in this young man. He had the smooth, glossy dark hair, white teeth, and speaking dark grey eyes that women like; clearly-cut features, and the rather prominent chin, generally and mistakenly supposed to show strength of character. His pleasant, clean-shaven, slightly sunburnt face bore an expression of animation with a certain humorous anxiety natural in a man who was generally a good deal in debt and always a little in love. Further he had the advantage of a tall, strong yet supple figure, with a natural grace of movement and much personal charm. Harry knew he was

good-looking and did not undervalue the fact, but regarded it solely as an asset, not as a private satisfaction. He regarded everything as an asset. [25] He was no fop, although he wore a single eye-glass rather as a concession to some ideal of dandyism than as a help to clear vision. He could see remarkably well, with or without it.

The long Empire mirror was placed above a delightful early English large open fireplace, in which burnt a Parisian-looking wood fire. Harry was the possessor of a fine—indeed, a magnificent studio, full of good old things, chiefly other people's, and bad new things, principally his own. The theory that all bad art is the result of sincere feeling was certainly not exemplified in his case. The portrait of his cousin that had been regarded as so full of promise was, as he always, said, the only decent piece of work he had ever done. He had been educated for diplomacy, and learnt eight languages, some of which he spoke fluently, and in all of which he could look with expression.

The room was no mere exhibition of bric-à-brac, but was a cosy, shadowy, miscellaneous place, not without an ecclesiastical touch here and there. One felt every subject could be gone into there, from stockbroking to love, and that everything could be done there, whether it was praying, eating, singing, or flirting—everything except perhaps painting.

[26] When the servant announced Mrs. Wyburn and Miss de Freyne one might have fancied Harry looked slightly disappointed, but he greeted the pretty creatures with suitable effusion and high spirits.

They both sat down rather carefully in the corner seats by the fire.

"Romer can't come, he's dining with his mother," announced Valentia. "He ought to, you know, now and then."

"I don't like her," said Daphne, "she abuses every one."

"I know she does, but she's really not so bad, dear, all the same; there are many worse. She's rather spiteful, but warmhearted—awfully kind if you break your leg," said Valentia.

"But you don't break your leg," said Harry.

"Oh, sometimes you do. At any rate you might. Don't encourage Daphne to argue, Harry. Who did you say you'd ask instead if we couldn't get Romer?"

"Rathbone's just written to accept in his place," said Harry, taking out a letter. "But—don't you think we could persuade Romer if we tried hard? However, you know best."

He took out a list. "Hereford Vaughan, Van Buren, Rathbone and me—that's four; you two, Lady Walmer, and Miss Luscombe, the actress. I think that'll do."

[27] "Lady Walmer?" repeated Valentia. "Why?"

"And a real actress!" murmured Daphne.

"Not a real actress. She's walked on at all the principal theatres in London, and somebody's always going to take a theatre for her, but there's no danger. I told Van Buren that on the stage they think she's in society, and in society they believe she's on the stage. And he thinks it's real cute, and an extraordinary English type."

"How are you getting on with him?"

"Beautifully,—if he weren't so beastly intelligent and inquisitive. He always wants to know all the news and all the latest gossip. What do you think he asked me last night? Why Big Ben was called Big Ben! How on earth should I know!"

"Big who?"

"Not big anybody;—the place, the thing;—the clock. He said no doubt I must think him dreadfully ignorant for not knowing, but he felt he must ask."

Smiling at the recollection, Harry lighted another cigarette.

"What did you say?" Daphne asked.

"If it had been the afternoon I think I'd have taken the risk and told him I didn't know, but as it was the evening—he always gets rather excited in the evening after dinner and so much [28] Perrier water,—walking back to the Ritz in the moonlight, and talking about London, I invented a long story.—No, he won't repeat it, don't be frightened; it was really rather awful; and when Van Buren gives you his word of honour not to tell a thing ..."

"You're all right! That must be a great help," said Valentia sympathetically.

"It shows he has a nice loyal nature," Daphne remarked. "I admire that sort of thing very much."

"A nice loyal nature! I should think he has! He hates spreading scandal, and he wouldn't say a single word now to take away the character of Big Ben – if it was –"

"What?"

"Oh, if it was ever so! You ought to make Daphne wear one of those thin tulle veils to match her hat. They're jolly – you can get them at that shop close to me."

"Oh, she needn't, she's going to be manicured, and she's coming back here for me in a quarter of an hour."

"Good-bye, darling," said Daphne, standing up, and she made a kind of face, which Valentia understood to mean the word Foster.

"What is the child playing at?" said Harry. "If you two have a code it would be as well to learn it."

[29] "All right," said Valentia to Daphne.

Harry walked with her to the door and she ran out, saying, "I won't be long."

"She wants Foster, the baby Guardsman," explained Valentia.

"Oh, why didn't you say so at first? Of course I suppose they've arranged it. At any rate it's as good as done. Then there must be one more woman. But never mind now."

Harry sat down beside her and said, in a different voice – he had a very good voice, especially when he spoke caressingly –

"How interesting you are! One of your eyebrows is a little thicker than the other."

"Oh, Harry!..."

"How are we all going to get home that evening?"

"What do you think?" she asked.

"Well, it's like this, as you may say. We'll all meet at the Ritz and dine there. Good. Then we drive in separate vehicles to here, and have some music. Then I see you both home, and—well, I think that's all. It's not much."

"I don't quite like the way Lady Walmer looks at you, Harry."

"Oh, Valentia! If it comes to that, how do you fondly imagine I shall like the way Rathbone is sure to look at you?"

"Oh, Harry! Why, he's tattooed!"

[30] "You see," went on Harry seriously, "I really am making a dash for it about Daphne. She'll really be happy with Van Buren, and I shall be ever so much happier,—with Van Buren and everyone else,—because, through Daphne being always with you, I never see you alone for one single second."

"Oh, you exaggerate, Harry!"

"I know I do. I don't see you for half a second."

"Romer has been so nice lately," she answered gently.

"Very amusing, I suppose?"

"But—I often think how very nice he really is."

"Oh, don't say that, even in fun. I'm coming to stay with you in the summer—at the Green Gate—unless you'd rather ask Rathbone instead."

"Or unless you'd rather go yachting with the Walmers," she remarked. "They have a daughter, haven't they?"

"Oh, Valentia, be anything but blasphemous!..."

"Really?... Oh, Harry!"

"Do you mean to say you need my saying it?"

"No."

"Then, I will. Valentia, I—"

[31] She got up and opened the door so that Daphne should not have to ring when she returned.

When the two sisters left a few minutes later, Harry sat down again as if in deep thought and lighted a cigarette. His servant came in.

"Please, sir, Mr. Van Buren is at the telephone."

"Oh well, tell him ... Oh no —, all right — I'll go."

[32]

CHAPTER III

VAN BUREN

"It's extremely kind of you, Harry, to let me come around like this in the morning. I dare say you want to be working sometimes. I'm really afraid of being in the way, but I was rather at a loose end this morning and I wanted to have a talk with you," said Van Buren apologetically.

"Rot. Awfully glad to see you, old chap. Have a cigarette?"

"Thanks, Harry, no. I find I'm very much better if I don't smoke till after tea.... We're intimate friends now, and yet you never call me anything but my surname, or 'old chap'. That reminds me, there's a little request I'd like to make of you, Harry."

"What's that?"

"Call me Matthew — no, call me plain Mat. It would give me real pleasure."

Harry smiled rather loudly —

"My dear fellow, I couldn't call you plain [33] Mat. It wouldn't be suitable! You're too good-looking!"

Van Buren smiled and shook his head. In its way it was a handsome head in the fair, clean-shaven American style, with shining blond hair. He had very broad shoulders, and a very thin waist, and that naïve worldliness of air so captivating in many of his countrymen.

Except that he wore a buttonhole of Parma violets, he was dressed in every particular exactly like Harry. But no one would have believed it—he looked so much better dressed.

"That's your chaff, Harry. I'm not a Gibson man, and I don't pretend to be."

He looked at his hands, which were small and white, the fingertips brilliantly polished, and said meditatively—

"I'm very much looking forward to meeting your cousin, Harry. I expect she's the ideal of a young English lady. Dark, did you say?"

"Rather dark, and very pretty."

"It's a curious thing, Harry, that to me a broonette has always more fascination than a blonde. It seems—I may be wrong—as though there's more piquancy, more character."

"I quite agree with you," said Harry. "Now the sister—the married one—is very fair."

"And she's quite what you call a professional beauty, isn't she?" asked Van Buren with great relish.

[34] "My dear fellow, I don't call anyone a professional beauty, and you mustn't either. There's no such thing. I can't think how in America you get hold of these prehistoric phrases! The expression must have been dead long before either of us was born!... Still, she is a beauty all the same."

"Is that so? Mind you, Harry, there's something very attractive about a blonde, too. To me golden hair and blue eyes suggest gentleness and womanliness.... What is Mrs. Wyburn like?"

"Well, she's rather like an angel on a Christmas card, with her hair down—I mean she was, as a little girl," said Harry quickly. "Now she's considered like 'Love among the Roses' by Burne-Jones."

"Do you really mean that, Harry? Why, she must be more beautiful than Miss de Freyne!"

"I wouldn't worry about her, if I were you," Harry said.

"Why not, Harry?"