

**THE  
RELENTLESS CITY**

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The relentless city by E. F. Benson

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**E. F. BENSON**

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# The Relentless City

By

E. F. Benson

Author of 'Mammon & Co.,' etc.



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## CHAPTER I

THE big pink and white dining-room at the Carlton was full to suffocation of people, mixed odours of dinner, the blare of the band just outside, and a babel of voices. In the hall theatre-goers were having their coffee and cigarettes after dinner, while others were still waiting, their patience fortified by bitters, for their parties to assemble. The day had been very hot, and, as is the manner of days in London when June is coming to an end, the hours for most people here assembled had been pretty fully occupied, but with a courage worthy of the cause they seemed to behave as if nothing of a fatiguing nature had occurred since breakfast. The band played loud because it would otherwise have been inaudible above the din of conversation, and people talked loud because otherwise nobody could have heard what anybody else said. To-night everybody had a good deal to say, for a case of the kind that always attracts a good deal of attention had just been given that lengthy and head-lined publicity which is always considered in England to be inseparable from the true and indifferent administration of justice, and the vultures of London life found the banquet extremely to their taste. So they ate their dinner with a sense of special gaiety, pecked ravenously at the aforesaid affair, and all talked loudly together. But nobody talked so loud as Mrs. Lewis S. Palmer.

It was said of her, indeed, that, staying for a week-end

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not long ago with some friend in the country, rain had been expected because one day after lunch a peacock was heard screaming so loud, but investigation showed that it was only Mrs. Palmer, at a considerable distance away on the terrace, laughing. Like the peacock, it is true, she had been making *la pluie et le beau temps* in London this year, so the mistake was accountable. At present, she was entertaining two young men at an ante-opera dinner. A casual observer might have had the impression that she was clothed lightly but exclusively in diamonds. She talked, not fast, but without pause. She was in fact what may be called a long-distance talker: in an hour she would get through much more than most people.

'Yes, London is just too lovely,' she was saying; 'and how I shall tear myself away on Monday is more than I can imagine. I shall cry my eyes out all the way to Liverpool. Mr. Brancepeth, you naughty man, you were thinking to yourself that you would pick them up and carry them home with you to remind you of me. I should advise you not to say so, or I shall get Lord Keynes to call you out. I always tell everyone that he takes as much care of me as if he were my father. Yes, Lord Keynes, you are what I call faithful. I say to everyone, Lord Keynes is *the* most faithful friend I ever had. Don't you think you are faithful, now? Well, as I was saying when Mr. Brancepeth interrupted me with his wicked inquiries, I shall cry my eyes out. Indeed, if it wasn't that Lord Keynes had faithfully promised to come over in the fall, I think I should get a divorce from Lewis S. and remain here right along.'

'On what grounds?' asked Bertie Keynes.

'Why, on the grounds of his incompatibility of residence. Just now I feel as if the sight of Fifth Avenue would make me feel so homesick for London that I guess I should rupture something. When I am homesick I feel

just like that, and Lewis S. he notices it at once, and sends to Tiffany's for the most expensive diamond they've got. That helps some, because a new diamond is one of the solemnest things I know. It just sits there and winks at me, and I just sit there and wink at it. We know a thing or two, a big diamond and I. But I conjecture it will have to be a big one to make me feel better this time, for just now London seems to me the only compatible residence. I guess I'll make Lewis buy it.'

Mrs. Palmer's tact had been one of the standing dishes of the season, and it appeared that there was plenty of it still in stock. It was distributed by her with strict impartiality to anyone present, and had a firm flavour.

Bertie Keynes laughed, and drew from his pocket a small printed card.

'I don't know if you have seen this,' he said. "'Admit bearer to see the world. Signed, Lewis S. Palmer.'" And he handed it to her.

Mrs. Palmer opened her mouth very wide, and screamed so loud that for a radius of three tables round all conversation ceased for a moment. The scream began on about the note selected by express trains when they dash at full speed through a station, rose an octave or two with an upward swoop like a steam siren, came slowly down in a chromatic scale, broken off for a moment as she made a hissing intake of her breath, and repeated itself. This year it had been one of the recognised 'cries of London.'

'Why, if that isn't the cutest thing in the world,' she screamed. 'I never saw anything so cunning. Why, I never! Admit bearer to see the world! How can I get one for Lewis? It would just tickle him to death.'

'Pray take this,' said Bertie. 'I brought it on purpose for you.'

'Well, if that isn't too nice of you! I shall just hand that to Lewis without a word the moment I set eyes on