



House of All Nations



"... FULL OF RICH COMEDY
... A WORK OF
EXTRAORDINARY TALENT."

THE NEW YORKER

CHRISTINA STEAD

HOUSE OF ALL NATIONS

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*All characters in this book are
entirely fictitious, and no reference
is intended to any living person.*

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ON est dédommagé de la perte de son innocence par celle de ses préjugés. Dans la société des méchants, où le vice se montre à masque levé, on apprend à les connaître.

—DENIS DIDEROT, *Le Neveu de Rameau*

Credo

No one ever had enough money.

—JULES BERTILLON

There's no money in working for a living.

—IDEM

Of course, there's a different law for the rich and the poor: otherwise, who would go into business?

—E. RALPH STEWART

If all the rich men in the world divided up their money amongst themselves, there wouldn't be enough to go round.

—JULES BERTILLON

Woolworth's taught the people to live on nothing and now we've got to teach them to work for nothing.

—IDEM

The only permanent investment now is in disaster.

—MICHEL ALPHENDÉRY

A self-made man is one who believes in luck and sends his son to Oxford.

—IDEM

There are poor men in this country who cannot be bought: the day I found that out, I sent my gold abroad.

—COMTESSE DE VOIGRAND

It's easy to make money. You put up the sign BANK and someone walks in and hands you his money. The façade is everything.

—JULES BERTILLON

Everyone says he is in banking, grain, or peanuts, but he's really in a dairy.

—HENRI LÉON

If there's a God, he's more like Rockefeller than Ramsay MacDonald.

—WILLIAM BERTILLON

Patriotism pays if you take interest in other countries.

—DR. JACQUES CARRIÈRE

With the revolution coming, there's one consolation—our children won't be able to spend our money.

—FRANK DURBAN

Here we are sitting in a shower of gold, with nothing to hold up but a pitchfork.

—JULES BERTILLON

Every successful gambler has a *rentier* sitting at the bottom of his pants.

—IDEM

A speculator is a man who, if he dies at the right time, leaves a rich widow.

--WILLIAM BERTILLON

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House of All Nations

Scene One: He Travels Fast But Not Alone

THEY were in the Hotel Lotti in the Rue de Castiglione, but not in Léon's usual suite. Léon's medicine case in yellow pigskin lay open, showing its crystal flasks, on a Louis XV chair. The Racamonds, man and wife, bent over this case and poked at it.

"He always travels with it: cowardice of the lion before a common cold, eh?" Aristide reflected.

Marianne sniffed. "He's afraid to lose his money, that's all."

The white door opened a few inches and an immense head, with long black hair carefully brushed over a God's acre of baldness, appeared in the crack. Clear brown eyes sunk in large sockets searched them, forgave them. "Hello, Aristide! Just having a bath," said the head. "Wait a few minutes, will you? Sit down, Marianne. Ring if you want anything. Excuse me." The door shut. In a moment, it reopened. "Excuse me. How are you, Marianne? Do you want some tea, some—a cockta', sherry? Ring, on the telephone. I'll be with you in a minute."

The door shut. Water was running behind several doors. Marianne fingered the curtains. "Why did they give him a suite at the back this time?"

"Perhaps they're full up?"

"So early in spring? No. He must be economizing." They waited. The water stopped running and they heard distant splashing. Persuasively came the edged voice of a woman. Marianne pricked her ears and looked at Aristide. "Then Mme. Léon is here?"

"No: one of his women, it must be."

Léon's traveling library was on the table: three dictionaries; Cook's

handbook; *Winter Sunshine*; the *Revue de Transylvanie*, and *Polish Up Your French*.

"She must be taking a bath, too."

Aristide shook his head vigorously. "Léon never lets his women use his bed or his bath: modesty."

Beside his bed was a faded breast-pocket photograph of a solid woman in ostrich plumes and kid gloves—his mother.

Marianne laughed. "Fear."

In a moment more the door opened and Léon appeared, fully dressed and very fresh. Behind him was a dazzling young woman, a Ukraine blonde, with a long plump face, a complexion of radishes in cream, hair in page curls. Her eyes, large as imperial amethysts, roved in an indolent stare of proud imbecility. For a full minute after the sudden splendor of her entrance, Aristide Raccamond found himself bathed in her glare. In the exalted fashion of Paris whores, she singled out and courted the husband in the presence of the wife. Henri Léon waited for her a moment and then hurriedly introduced her: "My friends, Mr. and Mme. Raccamond, old friends, good friends: Mme. Vera Ashnikidzé, an old friend of mine."

She advanced with studied insulting vanity. "Charmed, I am sure." Her manners were perfect, that is, she flouted the Raccamonds outrageously, stirred the eels in their souls, while she went through the polite ritual minutely and coaxingly. Léon allowed them another gasp at his swan and then spoke to her in Russian. With a little frown and a lascivious smile, a short cooing broke out of her throat and she passed to the outer door, wallowing in the swelling air, not giving a second glance to the Raccamonds.

Léon came back from shooing her off, with a bashful family smile. "What do you think of her, eh? Eh, Marianne?" He flushed. "I value your opinion, Marianne."

"Russian, eh?" asked Aristide, somewhat embarrassed.

"Very beautiful: I admire your taste," croaked Marianne.

Léon made a wry face, recovered himself, expostulated, "She's a lady. I met her with Paul, Paul Méline, with a little friend, a Mme. Something, on the Champs-Élysées, Café du Berry. There were two of them

right there at the little table. Méline was with me and I had a bet with him that they wouldn't speak to us. He got them into conversation and he won. I didn't pay him yet. He got the other girl. A lady, too." He begged, "She's a decent woman, Marianne, married. Have you ever seen a girl like that, Aristide?" He exulted, checked himself immediately out of respect for Marianne. He grinned at Marianne. "Marianne doesn't mind if you speak up. She knows you're faithful. Don't you, eh, Marianne?" He became earnest. "I can tell you one thing about that boy, Marianne. I've known him ten, fifteen years, I've tempted him." He bubbled over with the confession. "I've tempted him." He sobered again. "No disrespect to you, Marianne. That was before I met you. Since I met you, never! Never, I swear to you! You're a fine type of woman. I respect you. But I've got to say it: he never fell! He's faithful to you, Marianne, I've got to say that for him." He ended with a shade of regret.

Then he laughed, "Listen, Aristide, there's too much talk about how good the pound sterling is. I want to see that banker you were telling me about. Berty? Berty—Bertillon? I've got an idea. Never mind—" He lowered his voice. "The other girl says she's a widow. She's quite a lady. Méline had breakfast with her. She's just gone, I think. Poor girl—" (He was evidently thinking of his own girl again.) He confided to Marianne: "A beauty like that. That's surprising, isn't it, Marianne? What do you make of it? And she lives in the Rue de Valence, near the Gobelins. Quite poor! Miserable! That shows she's honest." He looked dubious. "I saw her room last night: two rooms. Her husband's a naval lieutenant—comes home every three months. It's not much. She hasn't heard from him for three months. She's had typhoid fever. Some little trouble between them, I guess." He said lustily, "I should worry! My profit, eh! He, he, my profit." He clouded again. "I didn't like her telling me about the typhoid, but she says she comes from Transylvania too. Says she's a country girl. Shows she's honest. Eh? Eh?" He meditated between them, convinced they were absorbed by his affair. "She seems unhappy—I don't want no sympathy tales though. Imagine a girl like that living all alone. Can you?" He became gigantically sunny. "If she does. Well, who knows? Well,

where are we lunching, Aristide? How's the son at Oxford, Marianne? My boy—not satisfied at all. Wants to be an archeologist; what's that, eh? Old ruins, eh? No good. Well, wait, wait, we'll see."

They went towards the door, Léon affectionately grabbing Marianne's arm and murmuring, "What do you advise me to do, eh? You're a mother. You've got brains. What can I do? Well, where shall we—here, here, downstairs, I've got some telephoning to do. Here, here, this way."

They had resigned themselves to Léon ten minutes before. Now, they let him waft them to the lounge, where they were supposed to wait for him respectably while he skirmished with his own business. They drifted to the bar of the hotel, waited, standing, awkwardly. "Let's have a drink," said Marianne.

"What for?" Aristide asked. "We don't know if Léon is going to drink."

A handsome, slender, middle-aged South Russian, with that mottled dusky-and-olive complexion often seen in underfed Negroes, leaned across the bar to a young woman whose silver curves resembled those of the chromium. He said in a conversational tone, "What beautiful nipples you have, Mademoiselle! I'm mad with enthusiasm. I should love to bite your splendid breasts."

Aristide started. "There's Paul Méline! Let's go and speak to him before Henri comes back."

The barman laughed. "I'll introduce you to Mademoiselle, Mr. Méline, so that you needn't be so formal: but you must behave."

The young woman had flushed, but looked at Méline without resentment. No woman had ever looked at Paul Méline with resentment.

"See how beautiful my wife is," said Méline, getting out a leather billfold and extracting a bundle of photographs. "Here she is—that's my little boy." Whereas Léon had an old, dull story and began by telling girls that he was unhappy and misunderstood at home, Méline always showed a picture of his wife and raved about his domestic happiness. It put everyone on the right footing and kept him out of scrapes.

"Good morning, Paul," said Marianne. She took the photograph and looked again at the heavy Russian beauty whose dress was dashing but

comfortably draped over her, like a shawl over a grand piano. Méline got up, bowed, ignored Marianne's plainness, seemed to enter it in large figures in her credit sheet that she was cherished by someone (Aristide) if not by him. Then he took the photograph back rather hastily. It was not intended for Marianne. "Let's have our drinks in the foyer," he said. A waiter saw Méline a long way off and floated rapidly nearer.

From their seats in the lounge, waiting for their drinks, they could see Léon at the desk. A black-coated manager with a set face appeared to remonstrate with Léon. Two clerks looked distantly preoccupied till they moved round the corner when they began to smirk in an unpleasant gentlemanly way. The revolving door turned and blew Léon's voice to them, brisk: "No, no, no, no, no. You quoted me one price. I've been here for months. You made me one price. I don't pay another. Next time you tell me beforehand, see." His voice faded again. They heard Léon commanding, "Send someone to fix up the room. Did Mr. Méline come downstairs? Where, where? Is there a lady waiting for me? Where is she?"

He came springing towards them with his sturdy step, a short giant, five feet three in height, a great skull, bull neck, prizefighter's shoulders, gorilla's chest, thick waist and fleshy limbs, in a suit with too swagger a cut. His arms were short and thick above the elbow but of normal size in the forearm, so that they swung as he walked with an exaggerated sweep. Everything he did, even his sitting still, betrayed a violent will. He turned and rushed back to the desk with a swirl of coattails, to give the groom a message. He called peremptorily, "*Hé, boy!*" Another groom approached with the self-respecting scuttle of a great hotel. When he dispatched the second, both grooms sneered and grinned behind his back. They were taller, and were slender, dark young fellows, wearing white collars and the hotel livery. They thought Léon a bounder and themselves the tailor's dream. Besides, Léon had an all-in rate at the hotel and did not give any tips.

A pale blonde with large hat, pointed chin, thin toes, thin neck but a good figure, sat and scrutinized them steadily. She also observed Léon with prepossession. Léon's bossy back, bright shoes, and malacca cane at an angle of forty-five degrees performed at the telephone

switchboard. The telephone girl smiled her sweetest. Now he came towards them again. "That's right, Aristide, having a drink? No, none for me. Well, where shall we eat?"

"Griffon's is a good place: I've been there a lot since you were here last," Aristide informed the air.

Léon recovered himself. "Yes, yes, is it good? I've got a lot to talk over with you, Aristide." He turned to them, "Excuse us, Marianne. I want to go over a lot of business with your husband. We'll both make a profit. You don't mind, do you? I must look around. I'm expecting someone. A lady. I want her to come to lunch—er, I want you to run your eye over her, Marianne. I think a lot of your opinion. A very fine business head. I don't usually go in for business ladies—" (the sudden sunrise which was his smile) "—one of the smartest I ever met." He frowned slightly, shook his head vigorously into his collar, and pulled back his chin with a rebellious pout and a somber roll of the eye. He thrust at Aristide, "How's Bertillon? Jules?"

"As usual. I'd like you two to meet."

"He does, eh?" he said vaguely. "I want to meet him, too. Saw him only a second. Heard about him. Smart feller. Must see for myself. Can't believe it: a *goyisher Kopf*. Old Amsterdam family, isn't it—Antwerp? Family in diamonds, something?"

"The grandfather. The only non-Jew," said Aristide priggishly, "in the business."

Léon's laughter rumbled in the seven mountains of his mind, "And *he* got out. He, he, he, ho, ho. When can I meet him?"

"This afternoon. Whenever you like. What hour? I'll be there."

"No, no. Not this afternoon. No. I've got some business. Yes. Business. Be occupied until late tonight. This woman's introducing me to a cotton planter and a man with an oil-royalties business in Mexico. Very smart girl. A cotton-picker, she says: revolutionize the southern states of the U.S.A. I hope it's one hundred per cent. I don't trust women's introductions. I'll see. At any rate. When can I see Bertillon? Tomorrow morning early? First thing? Eh, early? What time's he get in, eight?"

"Nine-thirty," said Aristide.