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The Last of the Belles
and Other Stories

Jacob's Ladder

1

IT WAS A PARTICULARLY SORDID and degraded murder trial, and Jacob Booth, writhing quietly on a spectators' bench, felt that he had childishly gobbled something without being hungry, simply because it was there. The newspapers had humanized the case, made a cheap, neat problem play out of an affair of the jungle, so passes that actually admitted one to the courtroom were hard to get. Such a pass had been tendered him the evening before.

Jacob looked around at the doors, where a hundred people, inhaling and exhaling with difficulty, generated excitement by their eagerness, their breathless escape from their own private lives. The day was hot and there was sweat upon the crowd – obvious sweat in large dewy beads that would shake off on Jacob if he fought his way through to the doors. Someone behind him guessed that the jury wouldn't be out half an hour.

With the inevitability of a compass needle, his head swung towards the prisoner's table and he stared once more at the murderess's huge blank face garnished with red button eyes. She was Mrs Choynski, née Delehanty, and fate had ordained that she should one day seize a meat axe and divide her sailor lover. The puffy hands that had swung the weapon turned an ink bottle about endlessly; several times she glanced at the crowd with a nervous smile.

Jacob frowned and looked around quickly; he had found a pretty face and lost it again. The face had edged sideways into his consciousness when he was absorbed in a mental picture of Mrs Choynski in

action; now it was faded back into the anonymity of the crowd. It was the face of a dark saint with tender, luminous eyes and a skin pale and fair. Twice he searched the room, then he forgot and sat stiffly and uncomfortably, waiting.

The jury brought in a verdict of murder in the first degree; Mrs Choynski squeaked, "Oh, my God!" The sentence was postponed until next day. With a slow rhythmic roll, the crowd pushed out into the August afternoon.

Jacob saw the face again, realizing why he hadn't seen it before. It belonged to a young girl beside the prisoner's table and it had been hidden by the full moon of Mrs Choynski's head. Now the clear, luminous eyes were bright with tears, and an impatient young man with a squashed nose was trying to attract the attention of the shoulder.

"Oh, get out!" said the girl, shaking the hand off impatiently. "Le' me alone, will you? Le' me alone. Geeze!"

The man sighed profoundly and stepped back. The girl embraced the dazed Mrs Choynski, and another lingerer remarked to Jacob that they were sisters. Then Mrs Choynski was taken off the scene – her expression absurdly implied an important appointment – and the girl sat down at the desk and began to powder her face. Jacob waited; so did the young man with the squashed nose. The sergeant came up brusquely and Jacob gave him five dollars.

"Geeze!" cried the girl to the young man. "Can't you le' me alone?" She stood up. Her presence, the obscure vibrations of her impatience, filled the courtroom. "Every day itsa same!"

Jacob moved nearer. The other man spoke to her rapidly:

"Miss Delehanty, we've been more than liberal with you and your sister and I'm only asking you to carry out your share of the contract. Our paper goes to press at—"

Miss Delehanty turned despairingly to Jacob. "Can you beat it?" she demanded. "Now he wants a pitcher of my sister when she was a baby, and it's got my mother in it too."

"We'll take your mother out."

"I want my mother though. It's the only one I got of her."

"I'll promise to give you the picture back tomorrow."

"Oh, I'm sicka the whole thing." Again she was speaking to Jacob, but without seeing him except as some element of the vague, omnipresent public. "It gives me a pain in the eye." She made a clicking sound in her teeth that comprised the essence of all human scorn.

"I have a car outside, Miss Delehanty," said Jacob suddenly. "Don't you want me to run you home?"

"All right," she answered indifferently.

The newspaperman assumed a previous acquaintance between them; he began to argue in a low voice as the three moved towards the door.

"Every day it's like this," said Miss Delehanty bitterly. "These newspaper guys!" Outside, Jacob signalled for his car and, as it drove up, large, open and bright, and the chauffeur jumped out and opened the door, the reporter, on the verge of tears, saw the picture slipping away and launched into a peroration of pleading.

"Go jump in the river!" said Miss Delehanty, sitting in Jacob's car. "Go – jump – in – the – river!"

The extraordinary force of her advice was such that Jacob regretted the limitations of her vocabulary. Not only did it evoke an image of the unhappy journalist hurling himself into the Hudson, but it convinced Jacob that it was the only fitting and adequate way of disposing of the man. Leaving him to face his watery destiny, the car moved off down the street.

"You dealt with him pretty well," Jacob said.

"Sure," she admitted. "I get sore after a while and then I can deal with anybody no matter who. How old would you think I was?"

"How old are you?"

"Sixteen."

She looked at him gravely, inviting him to wonder. Her face, the face of a saint, an intense little Madonna, was lifted fragiley out of the

mortal dust of the afternoon. On the pure parting of her lips no breath hovered; he had never seen a texture pale and immaculate as her skin, lustrous and garish as her eyes. His own well-ordered person seemed for the first time in his life gross and well worn to him as he knelt suddenly at the heart of freshness.

“Where do you live?” he asked. The Bronx, perhaps Yonkers, Albany – Baffin’s Bay. They could curve over the top of the world, drive on for ever.

Then she spoke, and as the toad words vibrated with life in her voice, the moment passed: “Eas’ Hun’erd Thuyty-thuyd. Stayin’ with a girl friend there.”

They were waiting for a traffic light to change and she exchanged a haughty glance with a flushed man peering from a flanking taxi. The man took off his hat hilariously. “Somebody’s stenog,” he cried. “And oh, what a stenog!”

An arm and hand appeared in the taxi window and pulled him back into the darkness of the cab.

Miss Delehanty turned to Jacob, a frown, the shadow of a hair in breadth, appearing between her eyes. “A lot of ’em know me,” she said. “We got a lot of publicity and pictures in the paper.”

“I’m sorry it turned out badly.”

She remembered the event of the afternoon, apparently for the first time in half an hour. “She had it comin’ to her, mister. She never had a chance. But they’ll never send no woman to the chair in New York State.”

“No, that’s sure.”

“She’ll get life.” Surely it was not she who had spoken. The tranquility of her face made her words separate themselves from her as soon as they were uttered and take on a corporate existence of their own.

“Did you use to live with her?”

“Me? Say, read the papers! I didn’t even know she was my sister till they come and told me. I hadn’t seen her since I was a baby.” She pointed suddenly at one of the world’s largest department stores. “There’s where I work. Back to the old pick and shovel day after tomorrow.”

“It’s going to be a hot night,” said Jacob. “Why don’t we ride out into the country and have dinner?”

She looked at him. His eyes were polite and kind. “All right,” she said.

Jacob was thirty-three. Once he had possessed a tenor voice with destiny in it, but laryngitis had despoiled him of it in one feverish week ten years before. In despair that concealed not a little relief, he bought a plantation in Florida and spent five years turning it into a golf course. When the land boom came in 1924, he sold his real estate for eight hundred thousand dollars.

Like so many Americans, he valued things rather than cared about them. His apathy was neither fear of life nor was it an affectation; it was the racial violence grown tired. It was a humorous apathy. With no need for money, he had tried – tried hard – for a year and a half to marry one of the richest women in America. If he had loved her, or pretended to, he could have had her; but he had never been able to work himself up to more than the formal lie.

In person, he was short, trim and handsome. Except when he was overcome by a desperate attack of apathy, he was unusually charming; he went with a crowd of men who were sure that they were the best of New York and had by far the best time. During a desperate attack of apathy he was like a gruff white bird, ruffled and annoyed, and disliking mankind with all his heart.

He liked mankind that night under the summer moonshine of the Borghese Gardens. The moon was a radiant egg, smooth and bright as Jenny Delehanty’s face across the table; a salt wind blew in over the big estates collecting flower scents from their gardens and bearing them to the roadhouse lawn. The waiters hopped here and there like pixies through the hot night, their black backs disappearing into the gloom, their white shirt fronts gleaming startlingly out of an unfamiliar patch of darkness.

They drank a bottle of champagne and he told Jenny Delehanty a story. “You are the most beautiful thing I have ever seen,” he said,

“but as it happens you are not my type and I have no designs on you at all. Nevertheless, you can’t go back to that store. Tomorrow I’m going to arrange a meeting between you and Billy Farrelly, who’s directing a picture on Long Island. Whether he’ll see how beautiful you are I don’t know, because I’ve never introduced anybody to him before.”

There was no shadow, no ripple of a change in her expression, but there was irony in her eyes. Things like that had been said to her before, but the movie director was never available next day. Or else she had been tactful enough not to remind men of what they had promised last night.

“Not only are you beautiful,” continued Jacob, “but you are somehow on the grand scale. Everything you do – yes, like reaching for that glass, or pretending to be self-conscious, or pretending to despair of me – gets across. If somebody’s smart enough to see it, you might be something of an actress.”

“I like Norma Shearer* the best. Do you?”

Driving homeward through the soft night, she put up her face quietly to be kissed. Holding her in the hollow of his arm, Jacob rubbed his cheek against her cheek’s softness and then looked down at her for a long moment.

“Such a lovely child,” he said gravely.

She smiled back at him; her hands played conventionally with the lapels of his coat. “I had a wonderful time,” she whispered. “Geeze! I hope I never have to go to court again.”

“I hope you don’t.”

“Aren’t you going to kiss me goodnight?”

“This is Great Neck,” he said, “that we’re passing through. A lot of moving-picture stars live here.”

“You’re a card, handsome.”

“Why?”

She shook her head from side to side and smiled. “You’re a card.”

She saw then that he was a type with which she was not acquainted. He was surprised, not flattered, that she thought him droll. She saw that, whatever his eventual purpose, he wanted nothing of her now. Jenny Delehanty learnt quickly; she let herself become grave and sweet and quiet as the night, and as they rolled over Queensboro Bridge into the city she was half asleep against his shoulder.

2

HE CALLED UP BILLY FARRELLY next day. "I want to see you," he said. "I found a girl I wish you'd take a look at."

"My gosh!" said Farrelly. "You're the third today."

"Not the third of this kind."

"All right. If she's white, she can have the lead in a picture I'm starting Friday."

"Joking aside, will you give her a test?"

"I'm not joking. She can have the lead, I tell you. I'm sick of these lousy actresses. I'm going out to the Coast next month. I'd rather be Constance Talmadge's* water boy than own most of these young..." His voice was bitter with Irish disgust. "Sure, bring her over, Jake. I'll take a look at her."

Four days later, when Mrs Choynski, accompanied by two deputy sheriffs, had gone to Auburn to pass the remainder of her life, Jacob drove Jenny over the bridge to Astoria, Long Island.

"You've got to have a new name," he said – "and remember, you never had a sister."

"I thought of that," she answered. "I thought of a name too – Tootsie Defoe."

"That's rotten," he laughed, "just rotten."

"Well, you think of one if you're so smart."

"How about Jenny... Jenny... oh, anything... Jenny Prince?"

“All right, handsome.”

Jenny Prince walked up the steps of the motion-picture studio, and Billy Farrelly, in a bitter Irish humour, in contempt for himself and his profession, engaged her for one of the three leads in his picture.

“They’re all the same,” he said to Jacob. “Shucks! Pick ’em up out of the gutter today and they want gold plates tomorrow. I’d rather be Constance Talmadge’s water boy than own a harem full of them.”

“Do you like this girl?”

“She’s all right. She’s got a good side face. But they’re all the same.” Jacob bought Jenny Prince an evening dress for a hundred and eighty dollars and took her to the Lido that night. He was pleased with himself, and excited. They both laughed a lot and were happy.

“Can you believe you’re in the movies?” he demanded.

“They’ll probably kick me out tomorrow. It was too easy.”

“No, it wasn’t. It was very good – psychologically. Billy Farrelly was in just the one mood—”

“I liked him.”

“He’s fine,” agreed Jacob. But he was reminded that already another man was helping to open doors for her success. “He’s a wild Irishman, look out for him.”

“I know. You can tell when a guy wants to make you.”

“What?”

“I don’t mean he wanted to make me, handsome. But he’s got that look about him, if you know what I mean.” She distorted her lovely face with a wise smile. “He likes ’em; you could tell that this afternoon.”

They drank a bottle of charged and very alcoholic grape juice.

Presently the head waiter came over to their table.

“This is Miss Jenny Prince,” said Jacob. “You’ll see a lot of her, Lorenzo, because she’s just signed a big contract with the pictures. Always treat her with the greatest possible respect.”

When Lorenzo had withdrawn, Jenny said, “You got the nicest eyes I ever seen.” It was her effort, the best she could do. Her face was serious

and sad. "Honest," she repeated herself, "the nicest eyes I ever seen. Any girl would be glad to have eyes like yours."

He laughed, but he was touched. His hand covered her arm lightly. "Be good," he said. "Work hard and I'll be so proud of you – and we'll have some good times together."

"I always have a good time with you." Her eyes were full on his, in his, held there like hands. Her voice was clear and dry. "Honest, I'm not kidding about your eyes. You always think I'm kidding. I want to thank you for all you've done for me."

"I haven't done anything, you lunatic. I saw your face and I was... I was beholden to it – everybody ought to be beholden to it."

Entertainers appeared and her eyes wandered hungrily away from him.

She was so young – Jacob had never been so conscious of youth before. He had always considered himself on the young side until tonight.

Afterward, in the dark cave of the taxicab, fragrant with the perfume he had bought for her that day, Jenny came close to him, clung to him. He kissed her, without enjoying it. There was no shadow of passion in her eyes or on her mouth; there was a faint spray of champagne on her breath. She clung nearer, desperately. He took her hands and put them in her lap.

She leant away from him resentfully.

"What's the matter? Don't you like me?"

"I shouldn't have let you have so much champagne."

"Why not? I've had a drink before. I was tight once."

"Well, you ought to be ashamed of yourself. And if I hear of your taking any more drinks, you'll hear from me. "

"You sure have got your nerve, haven't you?"

"What do you do? Let all the corner soda jerkers maul you around whenever they want?"

"Oh, shut up!"

For a moment they rode in silence. Then her hand crept across to his. "I like you better than any guy I ever met, and I can't help that, can I?"

"Dear little Jenny." He put his arm around her again.

Hesitating tentatively, he kissed her and again he was chilled by the innocence of her kiss, the eyes that at the moment of contact looked beyond him out into the darkness of the night, the darkness of the world. She did not know yet that splendour was something in the heart; at the moment when she should realize that and melt into the passion of the universe he could take her without question or regret.

“I like you enormously,” he said, “better than almost anyone I know. I mean that about drinking though. You mustn’t drink.”

“I’ll do anything you want,” she said, and she repeated, looking at him directly, “Anything.”

The car drew up in front of her flat and he kissed her goodnight.

He rode away in a mood of exultation, living more deeply in her youth and future than he had lived in himself for years. Thus, leaning forward a little on his cane, rich, young and happy, he was borne along dark streets and light towards a future of his own which he could not foretell.

3

A MONTH LATER, CLIMBING into a taxicab with Farrelly one night, he gave the latter’s address to the driver. “So you’re in love with this baby,” said Farrelly pleasantly. “Very well, I’ll get out of your way.”

Jacob experienced a vast displeasure. “I’m not in love with her,” he said slowly. “Billy, I want you to leave her alone.”

“Sure! I’ll leave her alone,” agreed Farrelly readily. “I didn’t know you were interested – she told me she couldn’t make you.”

“The point is you’re not interested either,” said Jacob. “If I thought that you two really cared about each other, do you think I’d be fool enough to try to stand in the way? But you don’t give a darn about her, and she’s impressed and a little fascinated.”

“Sure,” agreed Farrelly, bored. “I wouldn’t touch her for anything.” Jacob laughed. “Yes, you would. Just for something to do. That’s what I object to... anything... anything casual happening to her.”

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