

JEAN: A VICTIM OF THE LIFE OF A BAD BOY

BY ERNESTINE GERSTEL SCHWARTZ



JEAN was the bad boy of the village, and what seemed the essence of incongruity, he had the face of an angel. His large, innocent blue eyes, his fine nose and perfect mouth, supplemented by a clear complexion, a dimpled chin and a mass of curling yellow hair, caused the new minister, who was young and fresh from the seminary, to exclaim, "What an inspiration for an artist to do cherubs!" Luckily for the new minister one of his auditors was deaf and the other knew nothing about inspirations or cherubs. Trentville would have considered the observation frivolous.

Jean was 14, tall, strong and well grown, in marked contrast to his twin brother Frank, who, though quite as tall as Jean, was slight and stooped a little. He had the same regular features as his brother, but lacked the vivid coloring, the animated expression and the dimpled chin. Strangers would pass Frank by unnoticed, but were quick to remark on Jean's beauty, and it may be added, as quick to be told of his Satanic disposition by the person to whom the remark was addressed. There was hardly a person in Trentville who had not been made personally acquainted with Jean's exuberance of animal spirits.

That Jean was bad, every one was forced to admit, even his poor mother; but that he was hopelessly bad, only Mrs. Whitcombe, his aunt, was ready to assert. Mrs. Whitcombe was a tall, spare woman, with faded yellow hair and pale blue eyes. Her sharp chin and sharper nose and the straight thin lips held no reminiscence of past beauty, but were a faithful index of her harsh and nagging disposition.

Jean was her especial antipathy, and whenever his future was mentioned she would shudder and say she hoped the dear Lord would spare his mother the ghastly sight when he met his just deserts. It is true Jean's pranks sometimes went beyond mere boyish fun, but the demon of mischief seemed to possess the lad. He was a very genius for thinking up new schemes for the undoing of the good citizens of Trentville.

A bitter arraignment of Jean by his aunt in the presence of the young minister, however, called from the latter an expression of opinion that was new to that locality. "The boy has a keen sense of humor," he asserted. "There is always a point to his pranks. You will notice they invariably bring out the weakness or vanity or folly of the person on whom they are perpetrated. And, after all," he added warmly, somewhat to his own surprise, "while it is true they sometimes show disrespect to his elders, you yourself must admit, Mrs. Whitcombe, they are really harmless."

"You call it harmless," retorted Mrs. Whitcombe, wrathfully. "To wail my Jacob when he was a-startin' out to carry the milk, and a-holdin' him fast while his brother Frank emptied out the cans? Call that harmless?" she demanded shrilly.

"Yes, that's right, Mrs. Whitcombe," put in Mr. Wells, the village Postmas-

ter, with his slow drawl, "but you know your Jacob tripped Frank up on the way home from school a-causin' him to cut his cheek on a piece of glass. Jean called it gettin' even. Jacob spilt Frank's blood and Frank spilt Jacob's milk. There you are." Mr. Wells prided himself on his fine sense of justice. Mrs. Whitcombe retreated behind an adroit change of subject. At this she was an adept.

That Mrs. Whitcombe passionately disliked Jean, she made no effort to conceal, but the true reason therefor, which she would hardly admit even to herself, was because the youth possessed such a superabundance of good looks, while her own son, who was about the same age as the twins, was so ugly that people talked about it openly as a matter so obvious there need be no reticence about it. And Jean's beauty only served to bring out Jacob's ugly features the more sharply by contrast. Mrs. Whitcombe loved her ugly duckling with all the passion of which her warped nature was capable, and hated Jean with a passion almost as great.

In the bitterness of her soul she took every occasion to taunt her sister-in-law with her son's waywardness, always ending with, "You mark my words, Cynthia, the boy'll come to a bad end. He'll bring your gray hairs in sorrow to the dust." And Jean's poor, harassed little mother would answer hopefully: "He ain't all bad, Susan; a boy that never tells no lies and don't do no hurt to animals, can't be all bad. He's jest got double his share of mischief. You know I allus says he got Frank's share too. Frank's that quiet like he jest sets around a dreamin' and a dreamin'."

To this Mrs. Whitcombe would only shake her head in the most aggravating way, and as she rose to go, would fire her parting shot, "You'll wish yer hair never been born." When she had gone Jean's mother would compress her lips firmly and throw up her head defiantly, but would have a heart-to-heart talk with Jean nevertheless.

One afternoon while Mrs. Whitcombe was sitting at her window, she saw Jean and his mother in her faded blue calico wrapper and huge sunbonnet come out of their front gate and start down the road, both gesturing excitedly. When they had walked a short distance and were almost in front of Mrs. Whitcombe's window they stopped, evidently in the heat

of argument. Suddenly, to Mrs. Whitcombe's amazement, she saw her sister-in-law raise her hand in the act of striking Jean, when the latter, as suddenly, clenched his fist and, warding off the blow with one hand, struck at his mother with the other. She sank to the ground and lay perfectly still.

Mrs. Whitcombe ran out of the house at the top of her speed. When she reached the gate the prostrate form was still lying in the middle of the road, and Jean was kneeling beside it, every line of his quivering frame eloquent of grief. His evident remorse called forth no pitying thought from his aunt. Her triumph was paramount.

"I allus told her you'd bring her gray hairs in sorrow to the grave," Mrs. Whitcombe's shoulders shook convulsively, but Mrs. Whitcombe continued harshly, "Didn't I allus say you'd come to a bad end, and now see what you done. You maybe killed your own mother," and kneeling beside the form which lay so still in the dust she hastily untied the bonnet-strings and pushed back the blue gingham monstrous.

Frank's smiling eyes looked up into her own. The look of startled incredulity on their aunt's face struck Jean like a bolt of lightning from the two boys. Frank scrambled to his feet and still laughing, ran away from the close vicinity of his aunt. Jean, however, stood his ground to see the full effect of his latest achievement.

Mrs. Whitcombe was white with rage, words failed her at this supreme indignity. "You see, Aunt Susan," taunted Jean, when he could speak for mirth. "You seemed so set on having mother's gray hairs a-trailin' in the dust, I hated jest to see you disappointed."

Then Mrs. Whitcombe found her tongue. "You good-for-nothing creature," she screamed, "why does the Lord send you to me? You're not fit to breathe the same air with him, you little devil, you!"

"Humph," grunted Jean sarcastically, "where's your good, little Jacob now, d'you suppose?"

"He's in the barn tendin' to his chores," returned Mrs. Whitcombe triumphantly.

WHEN JEAN STRUCK HIS MOTHER TO THE EARTH



JEAN'S AUNT

"I saw him a-gota' there half an hour ago. You didn't see what he had in his hand, did you?" asked Jean. "He had Jim Field's old pipe and he went up in the hayloft to learn to smoke. Doin' chores!" and Jean laughed derisively.

Just then a cry from Frank attracted them, and following the direction of his gaze, they saw flames bursting from the upper part of the barn back of Mrs. Whitcombe's house, and smoke pouring out of the window in the loft.

"My God! Jacob's in there," shrieked the horror-stricken mother, rushing wildly to the barn. "Jacob! Jacob!" she screamed. "He'll be burned to death before my very eyes."

Like a flash Jean darted past his aunt and seizing a ladder which stood at the side of the house, ran with it to the barn. The angry tongue of flame darted greedily toward it, but Jean said no heed to them. In an instant he was on the top rung and through thick, stifling smoke, climbed over the window sill and disappeared within the loft. He was gone but

a moment, which to the agonized mother seemed an eternity, when he reappeared at the window bearing Jacob, white and dazed, in his arms. With desperate effort he pulled himself and his burden over the ledge and began his perilous descent.

Half-way down, overcome by smoke and exertion, Jean slipped, and together he and his burden crashed to the ground below.

Jacob was unhurt, suffering only from the temporary effects of the tobacco. Jean sustained a broken leg.

Mrs. Whitcombe had him carried into her house and nursed him as tenderly as though he had been her own son, and during the long watches the rare beauty of the face lying on the pillow, so scrupulous and appealing, touched her heart and she uttered a prayer of thankfulness that his face had not been harmed.

After Jean was well again, whenever Mrs. Whitcombe discoursed on his waywardness, she always ended with—and her voice was a shade less harsh, "but he has his redeemin' points."

A VICTIM OF THE MERIT SYSTEM

TRAGEDY OF A MODEST SCHOOLTEACHER NOT WITHOUT APPLICATION TO THE PORTLAND PUBLIC SCHOOLS

"He succeeds who deserves to succeed." Do you believe that, Marjorie? Marjorie, Tsay, Marjorie, do you believe it?

"What?" drawled Marjorie, with an abstracted half yawn. "Believe what? What did you say, child?"

"Do you believe it?" persisted the first speaker. "Action and reaction are equal and in opposite directions. What we give out in teaching comes back in salary, and those intangibles that are the reward of good or evil doing. Now, if the action is fairly correct, the physical law demands the return stroke—the reward, that is—the—"

"Merit rise," finished Marjorie, smiling. "Five dollars, maybe ten, as the stamp of professionalism. Henceforth to be accounted as registered stock, apart from the common herd. But don't let's count on it too much, dear. Action and reaction may be equal, but there's a lot lost in friction. They count the loss on the reaction side, and you don't get it. Somebody else does," she added, parenthetically.

"Yes," pursued the first speaker, gently, "but allowing for leakage, still there's enough left. Why, out of thirty thousand dollars, Marjorie—thirty thousand dollars, just think of it!—there's enough for all hands and the cook. They've awarded us only a small five cents so far, and there's thousands upon thousands left. Think of the possibilities."

"I have thought of them," said Marjorie. "Thought and thought till my brain whirled, and I concluded non-resistance was better for my complexion. The possibilities are appalling. I presume they must have simply overwhelmed the two distinguished heads of the merit commission and the favored special teachers."

"Shall you apply?"

"Oh, sure. And so shall you. I may get turned down, but somehow, do you know, dear, people always rate me high and think my little much. I don't mean to be deceptive or play the spread eagle, but it's my way, and if it wins I'm not to blame. Come to an examination, or anything beyond a surface test, and I'd hide behind you in shame. But I know how to work the ropes."

commission have never even heard of me; and as to the others, the two heads, as I call them, of the great double-headed snake, one barely knows me by sight, and the other has never seen me in the schoolroom ninety minutes altogether. Marjorie, I just can't—I can't—it would kill me to be refused—and yet—here her face whitened, and her voice dropped to a whisper. "I've got to. I'm getting so nervous lately. I need a Summer trip away—a real rest—and a merit rise is my only hope. It's so little for them to give—only twenty-five cents a day for the twenty working days—and it means so much to us. Besides, I've worked so hard it isn't begging to ask for it. Haven't I earned it?"

"It isn't worth it," results that count as much as professionalism and atmosphere, as I understand it," said Marjorie, with a lift of her brows. "And, Lizzie, dear, if I were you I would work less, worry less, and bluff it a little more."

"I wish I knew how," said Lizzie, wearily. "But somehow I have a wretchedly uncomfortable conscience to deal with. It goes me if I fall short."

"An unpleasant bedfellow," said Marjorie. "And, like the algebraic X, it ought to be eliminated. If I knew of a virtue that would put you immune, I'd inoculate you even by force. By your own account to sleep, dear, or forty-five parts of bright eyes will see those dark circles around your poor, tired eyes, and wonder the cause. Tomorrow we will put in our applications—tomorrow, Lizzie. Nothing ventured, nothing have."

"Little boats, should keep near shore," retorted Lizzie with a bitterness of personal application. "And yet—and yet—let's see it John Burroughs says in that beautiful little poem of his: 'I know my own will come to me. My own; it is my own. I've earned it. I deserve it. The taxpayers have meant it for me, and the laborer is worthy of his hire. Yes, tomorrow, I'll apply. Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow—Macbeth, you were not in greater torment over your gory deeds than I over the financial gymnastics of our School Directors. Directors? Oh, no, and she buried her face in her hands. "Not directors. They're misdirectors. They're dealing in human flesh, and doing out our life blood—and, at a fling of their loaded dice, deciding whether or not there are still twenty-five cents' worth of red corpuscles unexpended in our veins. Our life against their money. And a niggard's sum at that!"

"The rise? Oh, yes, of course. I—well, really, I can't confess to being surprised. I rather expected it. You see I had that vulgar appendix to my accomplishments, a pull. But Lizzie, have you seen her? Do you know, if she were rejected, I never could look her in the face again! I'd feel as if she hated me, or ought to. Talk of merit, she's the one that deserves it! Why, she is full of literature to the bone, while I—oh, well, I'm on the list, anyway. Born lucky! There she comes now. I must wait for her."

Impatiently, with the seat and dance of life, and the primitive love of living a-tangle in her blood and at her finger tips, the girl waited. Superb, you would

have called her, with her fine eyes, resounding voice, and the gleam in her head. Add to this a body firm and tense, well-groomed and well-carried, feet correctly shod, and with the spring and elastic touch born of a living consciousness of health, and you recognized the presence of a perfectly wrought physical being—magnetic, warm, stirring, still the life stirred in you responsively, and you knew her as a controlling force and potentially, a splendid animal, but not indeed a soulful animal. Warm, now, with a sense of recent conquest, she pulsed over with sheer momentum of feeling, dramatic, and arrested only by the negation expressed in line and feature of the one approaching.

She was, indeed, in utter contrast. There was a droop and dejection extending even to the clinging garments. The feet left the earth at each step as if gravely had well-nigh overcome all resisting life-forces. She came humbly, wistfully, pale as a troll blossom, kissed too warmly by the sun, or burdened too heavily by the loving, officious rain. As if drawn by the irresistible sense of protection vouchsafed to the weak by the strong—not often, indeed, by members of the self-same sex—she walked straight into the arms of the waiting one, and buried her tired head on a bosom, throbbing, not now with the exultation of conquest, but with its alien, pity.

"Tired, dear one?" she said; and the other only echoed: "Yes, just tired; that's all."

Thus they stood a moment, Marjorie softly stroking the hair and face of her friend; nor was a question asked nor an explanation offered, for between them all was understood.

Then they walked slowly homeward together, Lizzie trying to talk with a show of carelessness, but with a tongue which lamely reviewed and reweighed every word that had passed between them, wondering if she had overspoken her heart or had said too little, or had spoken amiss. A restraint seemed gradually to unnerve them—a cloud no bigger than a man's hand, yet it grew till it filled the horizon. Elizabeth was not so happy; so much was clear. Conversation on the apologetic had become an impossibility for the rejected girl, not in words but by an aversion of manner, warded off all approaches to the question.

And Marjorie, realizing more and more that the entire system was wrong, and that she herself was a partaker of wrong, began to fear that her presence there only served as a reminder of her friend's humiliation and failure. Hereafter keenly sensitive, she read the condemnation she felt for herself into her friend's heart, and read erroneously, just as we are prone to hate unjustly those we have wronged, or who know of our wrongdoing, because we imagine they must despise us. It is easy to believe what we elect to believe; and Marjorie withdrew farther and farther, and no longer sought friendly counsel or made show of sympathy or regret. "She hates me," she thought; "why should I give her a chance to rebut me? Am I to blame for my success or unsuccess for another's failure?" And common consent and usage spoke in a loud voice and said: "No, it is the survival of the fittest. It is the law of physical law. Adaptation, only, means survival." But her heart hourly registered its protest and said: "Without not from her own grain of human pity. How can you know her need or measure her grief?"

Day after day Elizabeth would plot home from school more and more despondently. The little uplift at the first, the sense of rising above discord and humiliation, had somehow been overborne. Stress of toil was it? Or rather, burdens unknown and unshared? None

seemed to know and few to care. And Marjorie dared not ask.

A day came at last when the vital forces in the girl's life had burned low, and came finally a night when she had lost sense of time and space and galling conditions, and moaned and babbled of things to which her lips in saner moments had forbidden speech.

Then, her fears confirmed, she sought the principal. Yes, she had been falling for some time, he said; not doing work up to her usual standard; a victim to the merit system, he should say. She had seemed somewhat crushed at the first—perfectly natural, of course—must have been so humiliating to one so sensitive—but she had rallied and seemed to rise above it. Then the children had heard of it, and children get but a half-truth at best. They learn these things get them in the air—and, of course, they did not understand—thought it meant she was not a good teacher—and it weakened her discipline. They seemed to lose respect for her, and she, proportionately, to lose mastery of them. Yes, he had tried to control these things, but the spirit was at home and abroad. Even the parents felt she had been marked for discredit. A dreadful thing, such a failure becoming public property; and such will become public, again and always, and it will mean the ruin of hard-working, conscientious teachers, and the ultimate ruin of our school system.

Why, that last day, an old German woman, unable to read or write a word of English, scarcely able to speak in intelligible gutturals, came in with her tumbled son. No, she would not put her son into an unmerited teacher. She was paid him not a good teacher, or she was paid him not at all. This she had said to Elizabeth in the presence of the children, and that night Elizabeth had gone home and come back no more. And the children, once so kind and tractable, filled now with the spirit of unrest reflected upon them from teacher and home and community, had turned spiteful and implacable, gone rampant with loosened restraint, and had been turned over to a pupil-teacher, under whom they chafed and broke away repeatedly.

And the principal said, with tears in his eyes: "It is a cursed system, and will yet curse this city through its broken, spiritless teachers and its demoralized boys and girls."

Marjorie went home with an enlightened understanding but a sore and heavy heart. Elizabeth knew no one. All that day and the next Marjorie refused to leave her. The third morning, when near school time, the cloud seemed to lift, and her time sense, educated through long-continued habits, reasserted itself. She opened her eyes, and turned them upon the little alarm clock on the table, and Marjorie, she exclaimed, "It's after 8 o'clock. I can't possibly dress and get to school by twenty minutes of nine, and I'll be fined. I must get up at once," and she tried to raise herself, but fell back weak and faint. "What is the matter? What has happened?" she asked, piteously. "I'll be fined—and I spent—my—last—dollar—yesterday."

"Never mind, dear; I'll pay your fines," whispered Marjorie, tenderly, and the sick girl closed her eyes and babbled again of the orgies of the schoolroom and of herself, an outcast.

Later in the day she regained consciousness again, but there was a strange, new, fevered light in her eyes which boded no good. "They torment me," she cried. "They torment me. Whenever I close my eyes I see them. My little lambs are turned to wolves. Oh, I can't stand it! I can never teach again. I will die first. I want to die," she whispered. "Do you think I will?"

"No, dear; no, no, precious child. You are too good, too true, too bright to give up this way. Your talents will be recognized. You—why child, you are a genius. You're simply unusual, while I'm nothing but a flash in the pan. Die? I should say not. You're going to live. Do you hear me—you're going to live."

A cloud passed over Elizabeth's face. "Lately I've planned to drown myself," she said slowly, and with coolness born of calculation. "Once I should have planned just where and how to drop beneath the water, and where I should be found, and how I should lie—with the current—but now I don't care. I don't care how I live. Only I want to live. Perhaps God means me to die this way, instead."

Then, after a moment, "I don't suppose they meant it that way. They didn't mean murder. But it comes to that. Nine out of ten of us they disgrace and humiliate—we can't teach after that. All we can do is die. Still," she went on, slowly and weakly, "God blesses the door against the multitude. Straight is the gate and narrow the way—the directors are only copying the Bible plan. I guess—it's—all—right. They know best."

She closed her eyes, and Marjorie, thinking her asleep, stole away for a few minutes' rest.

When she returned she gave a loud outcry. The bed was empty. Fragments of the girl's clothing were also gone. Frantically they searched the house and the premises. There was no sign of the missing one. Neighbors joined in the search. School children learned the news one to another and ran, half-frightened, to join in the search. The Chief of Police was "phoned up" and his brigade set to work. Word came at last, and gathered in volume as it came, of a strange-appearing girl, wandering, half-clad and alone, down to the banks of the river. She had waded all questions, had gained the foothold of the newly-remodeled Morrison-street bridge, and in full view of a half-dozen spectators, had leaped to her death in the chill waters of the placid Willamette, and they had closed over her, kindly, lovingly, sealing in death the lips which long had uttered no complaint, closing the eyes whose vista had embraced the life of joy and much of woe; stilling a heart whose every beat had become a pain.

And so she died, tortured, tormented, hunted, haunted, the victim of a system, she had not died in vain and the system perished with her; but it lives on, fed by the blood of its victims, gloating over broken hearts and broken hopes and broken lives, eating its sordid way into the integrity of a

manipulation of the school life, disaffecting its old, corrupting its young.

Still it lives, this destroyer, and stalks its grim way through God's fairest city, red-eyed, open-mouthed, seeking yet other victims among the ranks of the faithful, the pure and the true.

Song of the Cavalry.
Boston Transcript.
Up and to horse, as the hiss of the morn
Reckless the cheek of the sky,
And her sweet breath blows through the state
Of the corn,
And the pulse of youth beats bright
Up and away in the cool moist air,
Life worth living, and all things fair—
Clickety-click-clickety click—
And it's O for the cavalry!

The ring of hoofs on a shady road;
The charge down a village street;
The halt to parley-to fire and load—
The rub of retreating feet!
On and on in the wney art,
Welcoming danger anywhere—
Clickety-click-clickety click—
And it's O for the cavalry!

A stirrup cup at some wayside till:
A bed on the warm, bare ground;
The plant of a lowly whip-poor-will
From the cypress trees around,
Off to sleep without fear or care,
The sleep of youth in the open air—
Clickety-click-clickety click—
And it's O for the cavalry!

The years have come and the years have gone,
And many a dream proved true;
But I sometimes long for youth's cool of the
morn,
And the faces that it knew—
The ideals under the clustering hair,
When for all life's plans was time and to
spare—
Clickety-click-clickety click—
And it's O for the cavalry!

For time has denuded the cries of pain
That tortured our years of youth;
The heat, the dust, and the blinding rain,
Forgotten forevermore!
Hallowed the hardships we had to bear,
The toll the suffering, the meager fare—
Clickety-click-clickety click—
And it's O for the cavalry!

ONE OF JEAN'S REDEEMING POINTS

Mrs. Conny-mor—What a fine collection you have of old Roman war knives! Mrs. Upstart—Yes, aren't they great? I inherited them from my grandfather, he used to be a butcher.—Detroit Free Press.