

Jacob's Ladder, F. Scott Fitzgerald

I

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 court room 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 toward the prisoner's table and he stared once more at the murderess' huge blank face garnished with red button eyes. She was Mrs. Choynski, nee Delehanty, and fate had ordained that she should one day seize a meat ax 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 court room. "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 newspaper man assumed a previous acquaintance between them; he began to argue in a low voice as the three moved toward the door.

"Every day it's like this," said Miss Delehanty bitterly. "These newspaper guys!" Outside, Jacob signaled 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 fragilely 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 forever.

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 hang no woman in New York State."

"No; that's sure."

"She'll get life." Surely it was not she who had spoken. The tranquillity 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 road-house 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 good night?"

"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 learned 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.

II

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 humor, 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 leaned 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 splendor 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 good night.

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 toward a future of his own which he could not foretell.

III

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."

"I see what you mean. I'll let her alone."

Jacob was forced to be content with that. He had no faith in Billy Farrelly, but he guessed that Farrelly liked him and wouldn't offend him unless stronger feelings were involved. But the holding hands under the table tonight had annoyed him. Jenny lied about it when he reproached her; she offered to let him take her home immediately, offered not to speak to Farrelly again all evening. Then he had seemed silly and pointless to himself. It would have been easier, when Farrelly said "So you're in love with this baby," to have been able to answer simply, "I am."

But he wasn't. He valued her now more than he had ever thought possible. He watched in her the awakening of a sharply individual temperament. She liked quiet and simple things. She was developing the capacity to discriminate and shut the trivial and the unessential out of her life. He tried giving her books; then wisely he gave up that and brought her into contact with a variety of men. He made situations and then explained them to her, and he was pleased, as appreciation and politeness began to blossom before his eyes. He valued, too, her utter trust in him and the fact that she used him as a standard for judgments on other men.

Before the Farrelly picture was released, she was offered a two-year contract on the strength of her work in it—four hundred a week for six months and an increase on a sliding scale. But she would have to go to the Coast.

"Wouldn't you rather have me wait?" she said, as they drove in from the country one afternoon. "Wouldn't you rather have me stay here in New York—near you?"

"You've got to go where your work takes you. You ought to be able to look out for yourself. You're seventeen."

Seventeen—she was as old as he; she was ageless. Her dark eyes under a yellow straw hat were as full of destiny as though she had not just offered to toss destiny away.

"I wonder if you hadn't come along, someone else would of," she said—"to make me do things, I mean."

"You'd have done them yourself. Get it out of your head that you're dependent on me."

"I am. Everything is, thanks to you."

"It isn't, though," he said emphatically, but he brought no reasons; he liked her to think that.

"I don't know what I'll do without you. You're my only friend"—and she added—"that I care about. You see? You understand what I mean?"

He laughed at her, enjoying the birth of her egotism implied in her right to be understood. She was lovelier that afternoon than he had ever seen her, delicate, resonant and, for him, undesirable. But sometimes he wondered if that sexlessness wasn't for him alone, wasn't a side that, perhaps purposely, she turned toward him. She was happiest of all with younger men, though she pretended to despise them. Billy Farrelly, obligingly and somewhat to her mild chagrin, had left her alone.

"When will you come out to Hollywood?"

"Soon," he promised. "And you'll be coming back to New York."

She began to cry. "Oh, I'll miss you so much! I'll miss you so much!" Large tears of distress ran down her warm ivory cheeks.

"Oh, geeze!" she cried softly. "You been good to me! Where's your hand? Where's your hand? You been the best friend anybody ever had. Where am I ever going to find a friend like you?"

She was acting now, but a lump arose in his throat and for a moment a wild idea ran back and forth in his mind, like a blind man, knocking over its solid furniture—to marry her. He had only to make the suggestion, he knew, and she would become close to him and know no one else, because he would understand her forever.

Next day, in the station, she was pleased with her flowers, her compartment, with the prospect of a longer trip than she had ever taken before. When she kissed him good-bye her deep eyes came close to his again and she pressed against him as if in protest against the separation. Again she cried, but he knew that behind her tears lay the happiness of adventure in new fields. As he walked out of the station, New York was curiously empty. Through her eyes he had seen old colors once more; now they had faded back into the gray tapestry of the past. The next day he went to an office high in a building on Park Avenue and talked to a famous specialist he had not visited for a decade.

"I want you to examine the larynx again," he said. "There's not much hope, but something might have changed the situation."

He swallowed a complicated system of mirrors. He breathed in and out, made high and low sounds, coughed at a word of command. The specialist fussed and touched. Then he sat back and took out his eyeglass. "There's no change," he said. "The cords are not diseased—they're simply worn out. It isn't anything that can be treated."

"I thought so," said Jacob, humbly, as if he had been guilty of an impertinence. "That's practically what you told me before. I wasn't sure how permanent it was."

He had lost something when he came out of the building on Park Avenue—a half hope, the love child of a wish, that some day—

"New York desolate," he wired her. "The night clubs all closed. Black wreaths on the Statue of Civic Virtue. Please work hard and be remarkably happy."

"Dear Jacob," she wired back, "miss you so. You are the nicest man that ever lived and I mean it, dear. Please don't forget me. Love from Jenny."

Winter came. The picture Jenny had made in the East was released, together with preliminary interviews and articles in the fan magazines. Jacob sat in his apartment, playing the Kreutzer Sonata over and over on his new phonograph, and read her meager and stilted but affectionate letters and the articles which said she was a discovery of Billy Farrelly's. In February he became engaged to an old friend, now a widow.

They went to Florida and were suddenly snarling at each other in hotel corridors and over bridge games, so they decided not to go through with it after all. In the spring he took a stateroom on the Paris, but three days before sailing he disposed of it and went to California.

IV

Jenny met him at the station, kissed him and clung to his arm in the car all the way to the Ambassador Hotel. "Well, the man came," she cried. "I never thought I'd get him to come. I never did."

Her accent betrayed an effort at control. The emphatic "Geeze!" with all the wonder, horror, disgust or admiration she could put in it was gone, but there was no mild substitute, no "swell" or "grand." If her mood required expletives outside her repertoire, she kept silent.

But at seventeen, months are years and Jacob perceived a change in her; in no sense was she a child any longer. There were fixed things in her mind—not distractions, for she was instinctively too polite for that, but simply things there. No longer was the studio a lark and a wonder and a divine accident; no longer "for a nickel I wouldn't turn up tomorrow." It was part of her life. Circumstances were stiffening into a career which went on independently of her casual hours.

"If this picture is as good as the other—I mean if I make a personal hit again, Hecksher'll break the contract. Everybody that's seen the rushes says it's the first one I've had sex appeal in."

"What are the rushes?"

"When they run off what they took the day before. They say it's the first time I've had sex appeal."

"I don't notice it," he teased her.

"You wouldn't. But I have."

"I know you have," he said, and, moved by an ill-considered impulse, he took her hand.

She glanced quickly at him. He smiled—half a second too late. Then she smiled and her glowing warmth veiled his mistake.

"Jake," she cried, "I could bawl, I'm so glad you're here! I got you a room at the Ambassador. They were full, but they kicked out somebody because I said I had to have a room. I'll send my car back for you in half an hour. It's good you came on Sunday, because I got all day free."

They had luncheon in the furnished apartment she had leased for the winter. It was 1920 Moorish, taken over complete from a favorite of

yesterday. Someone had told her it was horrible, for she joked about it; but when he pursued the matter he found that she didn't know why.

"I wish they had more nice men out here," she said once during luncheon. "Of course there's a lot of nice ones, but I mean—Oh, you know, like in New York—men that know even more than a girl does, like you."

After luncheon he learned that they were going to tea. "Not today," he objected. "I want to see you alone."

"All right," she agreed doubtfully. "I suppose I could telephone. I thought—it's a lady that writes for a lot of newspapers and I've never been asked there before. Still, if you don't want to—"

Her face had fallen a little and Jacob assured her that he couldn't be more willing. Gradually he found that they were going not to one party but to three.

"In my position, it's sort of the thing to do," she explained. "Otherwise you don't see anybody except the people on your own lot, and that's narrow." He smiled. "Well, anyhow," she finished—"anyhow, you smart Aleck, that's what everybody does on Sunday afternoon."

At the first tea, Jacob noticed that there was an enormous preponderance of women over men, and of supernumeraries—lady journalists, cameramen's daughters, cutters' wives—over people of importance. A young Latin named Raffino appeared for a brief moment, spoke to Jenny and departed; several stars passed through, asking about children's health with a domesticity that was somewhat overpowering. Another group of celebrities posed immobile, statue-like, in a corner. There was a somewhat inebriated and very much excited author apparently trying to make engagements with one girl after another. As the afternoon waned, more people were suddenly a little tight; the communal voice was higher in pitch and greater in volume as Jacob and Jenny went out the door.

At the second tea, young Raffino—he was an actor, one of innumerable hopeful Valentinos—appeared again for a minute, talked to Jenny a little longer, a little more attentively this time, and went out. Jacob gathered that this party was not considered to have quite the swagger of the other. There was a bigger crowd around the cocktail table. There was more sitting down.

Jenny, he saw, drank only lemonade. He was surprised and pleased at her distinction and good manners. She talked to one person, never to everyone within hearing; then she listened, without finding it necessary to shift her eyes about. Deliberate or not on her part, he noticed that at both teas she was sooner or later talking to the guest of most consequence. Her seriousness, her air of saying "This is my opportunity of learning something," beckoned their egotism imperatively near.

When they left to drive to the last party, a buffet supper, it was dark and the electric legends of hopeful real-estate brokers were gleaming to some vague purpose on Beverly Hills. Outside Grauman's Theater a crowd was already gathered in the thin, warm rain.

"Look! Look!" she cried. It was the picture she had finished a month before.

They slid out of the thin Rialto of Hollywood Boulevard and into the deep gloom of a side street; he put his arm about her and kissed her.

"Dear Jake." She smiled up at him.

"Jenny, you're so lovely; I didn't know you were so lovely."

She looked straight ahead, her face mild and quiet. A wave of annoyance passed over him and he pulled her toward him urgently, just as the car stopped at a lighted door.

They went into a bungalow crowded with people and smoke. The impetus of the formality which had begun the afternoon was long exhausted; everything had become at once vague and strident.

"This is Hollywood," explained an alert talkative lady who had been in his vicinity all day. "No airs on Sunday afternoon." She indicated the hostess. "Just a plain, simple, sweet girl." She raised her voice: "Isn't that so, darling—just a plain, simple, sweet girl?"

The hostess said, "Yeah. Who is?" And Jacob's informant lowered her voice again: "But that little girl of yours is the wisest one of the lot."

The totality of the cocktails Jacob had swallowed was affecting him pleasantly, but try as he might, the plot of the party—the key on which he could find ease and tranquillity—eluded him. There was something tense in the air—something competitive and insecure. Conversations with the men had a way of becoming empty and overjovial or else melting off into a sort of suspicion. The women were nicer. At eleven o'clock, in the pantry, he suddenly realized that he hadn't seen Jenny for an hour. Returning to the living room, he saw her come in, evidently from outside, for she tossed a raincoat from her shoulders. She was with Raffino. When she came up, Jacob saw that she was out of breath and her eyes were very bright. Raffino smiled at Jacob pleasantly and negligently; a few moments later, as he turned to go, he bent and whispered in Jenny's ear and she looked at him without smiling as she said good night.

"I got to be on the lot at eight o'clock," she told Jacob presently. "I'll look like an old umbrella unless I go home. Do you mind, dear?"

"Heavens, no!"

Their car drove over one of the interminable distances of the thin, stretched city.

"Jenny," he said, "you've never looked like you were tonight. Put your head on my shoulder."

"I'd like to. I'm tired."

"I can't tell you how radiant you've got to be."

"I'm just the same."

"No, you're not." His voice suddenly became a whisper, trembling with emotion. "Jenny, I'm in love with you."

"Jacob, don't be silly."

"I'm in love with you. Isn't it strange, Jenny? It happened just like that."

"You're not in love with me."

"You mean the fact doesn't interest you." He was conscious of a faint twinge of fear.

She sat up out of the circle of his arm. "Of course it interests me; you know I care more about you than anything in the world."

"More than about Mr. Raffino?"

"Oh-my-gosh!" she protested scornfully. "Raffino's nothing but a baby."

"I love you, Jenny."

"No, you don't."

He tightened his arm. Was it his imagination or was there a small instinctive resistance in her body? But she came close to him and he kissed her.

"You know that's crazy about Raffino."

"I suppose I'm jealous." Feeling insistent and unattractive, he released her. But the twinge of fear had become an ache. Though he knew that she was tired and that she felt strange at this new mood in him, he was unable to let the matter alone. "I didn't realize how much a part of my life you were. I didn't know what it was I missed—but I know now. I wanted you near."

"Well, here I am."

He took her words as an invitation, but this time she relaxed wearily in his arms. He held her thus for the rest of the way, her eyes closed, her short hair falling straight back, like a girl drowned.

"The car'll take you to the hotel," she said when they reached the apartment. "Remember, you're having lunch with me at the studio tomorrow."

Suddenly they were in a discussion that was almost an argument, as to whether it was too late for him to come in. Neither could yet appreciate the change that his declaration had made in the other. Abruptly they had become like different people, as Jacob tried desperately to turn back the clock to that night in New York six months before, and Jenny watched this mood, which was more than jealousy and less than love, snow under, one by one, the qualities of consideration and understanding which she knew in him and with which she felt at home.

"But I don't love you like that," she cried. "How can you come to me all at once and ask me to love you like that?"

"You love Raffino like that!"

"I swear I don't! I never even kissed him—not really!"

"H'm!" He was a gruff white bird now. He could scarcely credit his own unpleasantness, but something illogical as love itself urged him on. "An actor!"

"Oh, Jake," she cried, "please lemme go. I never felt so terrible and mixed up in my life."

"I'll go," he said suddenly. "I don't know what's the matter, except that I'm so mad about you that I don't know what I'm saying. I love you and you don't love me. Once you did, or thought you did, but that's evidently over."

"But I do love you." She thought for a moment; the red-and-green glow of a filling station on the corner lit up the struggle in her face. "If you love me that much, I'll marry you tomorrow."

"Marry me!" he exclaimed. She was so absorbed in what she had just said that she did not notice.

"I'll marry you tomorrow," she repeated. "I like you better than anybody in the world and I guess I'll get to love you the way you want me to." She uttered a single half-broken sob. "But—I didn't know this was going to happen. Please let me alone tonight."

Jacob didn't sleep. There was music from the Ambassador grill till late and a fringe of working girls hung about the carriage entrance waiting for their favorites to come out. Then a long-protracted quarrel between a man and a woman began in the hall outside, moved into the next room and continued as a low two-toned mumble through the intervening door. He went to the window sometime toward three o'clock and stared out into the clear splendor of the California night. Her beauty rested outside on the grass, on the damp, gleaming roofs of the bungalows, all around him, borne up like music on the night. It was in the room, on the white pillow, it rustled ghostlike in the curtains. His desire recreated her until she lost all vestiges of the old Jenny, even of the girl who had met him at the train that morning. Silently, as the night hours went by, he molded her over into an image of love—an image that would endure as long as love itself, or even longer—not to perish till he could say, "I never really loved her." Slowly he created it with this and that illusion from his youth, this and that sad old yearning, until she stood before him identical with her old self only by name.

Later, when he drifted off into a few hours' sleep, the image he had made stood near him, lingering in the room, joined in mystic marriage to his heart.

V

"I won't marry you unless you love me," he said, driving back from the studio. She waited, her hands folded tranquilly in her lap. "Do you think I'd want you if you were unhappy and unresponsive, Jenny—knowing all the time you didn't love me?"

"I do love you. But not that way."

"What's 'that way'?"

She hesitated, her eyes were far off. "You don't—thrill me, Jake. I don't know—there have been some men that sort of thrilled me when they touched me, dancing or anything. I know it's crazy, but—"

"Does Raffino thrill you?"

"Sort of, but not so much."

"And I don't at all?"

"I just feel comfortable and happy with you."

He should have urged her that that was best, but he couldn't say it, whether it was an old truth or an old lie.

"Anyhow, I told you I'll marry you; perhaps you might thrill me later."

He laughed, stopped suddenly. "If I didn't thrill you, as you call it, why did you seem to care so much last summer?"

"I don't know. I guess I was young. You never know how you once felt, do you?"

She had become elusive to him, with that elusiveness that gives a hidden significance to the least significant remarks. And with the clumsy tools of jealousy and desire, he was trying to create the spell that is ethereal and delicate as the dust on a moth's wing.

"Listen, Jake," she said suddenly. "That lawyer my sister had—that Scharnhorst—called up the studio this afternoon."

"Your sister's all right," he said absently, and he added: "So a lot of men thrill you."

"Well, if I've felt it with a lot of men, it couldn't have anything to do with real love, could it?" she said hopefully.

"But your theory is that love couldn't come without it."

"I haven't got any theories or anything. I just told you how I felt. You know more than me."

"I don't know anything at all."

There was a man waiting in the lower hall of the apartment house. Jenny went up and spoke to him; then, turning back to Jake, said in a low voice: "It's Scharnhorst. Would you mind waiting downstairs while he talks to me? He says it won't take half an hour."

He waited, smoking innumerable cigarettes. Ten minutes passed. Then the telephone operator beckoned him.

"Quick!" she said. "Miss Prince wants you on the telephone."

Jenny's voice was tense and frightened. "Don't let Scharnhorst get out," she said. "He's on the stairs, maybe in the elevator. Make him come back here."

Jacob put down the receiver just as the elevator clicked. He stood in front of the elevator door, barring the man inside. "Mr. Scharnhorst?"

"Yeah." The face was keen and suspicious.

"Will you come up to Miss Prince's apartment again? There's something she forgot to say."

"I can see her later." He attempted to push past Jacob. Seizing him by the shoulders, Jacob shoved him back into the cage, slammed the door and pressed the button for the eighth floor.

"I'll have you arrested for this!" Scharnhorst remarked. "Put into jail for assault!"

Jacob held him firmly by the arms. Upstairs, Jenny, with panic in her eyes, was holding open her door. After a slight struggle, the lawyer went inside.

"What is it?" demanded Jacob.

"Tell him, you," she said. "Oh, Jake, he wants twenty thousand dollars!"

"What for?"

"To get my sister a new trial."

"But she hasn't a chance!" exclaimed Jacob. He turned to Scharnhorst. "You ought to know she hasn't a chance."

"There are some technicalities," said the lawyer uneasily—"things that nobody but an attorney would understand. She's very unhappy there, and her sister so rich and successful. Mrs. Choynski thought she ought to get another chance."

"You've been up there working on her, heh?"

"She sent for me."

"But the blackmail idea was your own. I suppose if Miss Prince doesn't feel like supplying twenty thousand to retain your firm, it'll come out that she's the sister of the notorious murderess."

Jenny nodded. "That's what he said."

"Just a minute!" Jacob walked to the phone. "Western Union, please. Western Union? Please take a telegram." He gave the name and address of a man high in the political world of New York. "Here's the message:

The convict Choynski threatening her sister, who is a picture actress, with exposure of relationship stop Can you arrange it with warden that she be cut off from visitors until I can get East and explain the situation stop Also wire me if two witnesses to an attempted blackmailing scene are enough to disbar a lawyer in New York if charges proceed from such a quarter as Read, Van Tyne, Biggs & Company, or my uncle the surrogate stop Answer Ambassador Hotel, Los Angeles.
Jacob C. K. Booth"

He waited until the clerk had repeated the message. "Now, Mr. Scharnhorst," he said, "the pursuit of art should not be interrupted by such alarms and excursions. Miss Prince, as you see, is considerably upset. It will show in her work tomorrow and a million people will be just a little disappointed. So we won't ask her for any decisions. In fact you and I will leave Los Angeles on the same train tonight."

The summer passed. Jacob went about his useless life, sustained by the knowledge that Jenny was coming East in the fall. By fall there would have been many Raffinos, he supposed, and she would find that the thrill of their hands and eyes—and lips—was much the same. They were the equivalent, in a different world, of the affairs at a college house party, the undergraduates of a casual summer. And if it was still true that her feeling for him was less than romantic, then he would take her anyway, letting romance come after marriage as—so he had always heard—it had come to many wives before.

Her letters fascinated and baffled him. Through the ineptitude of expression he caught gleams of emotion—an ever-present gratitude, a longing to talk to him, and a quick, almost frightened reaction toward him, from—he could only imagine—some other man. In August she went on location; there were only post cards from some lost desert in Arizona, then for a while nothing at all. He was glad of the break. He had thought over all the things that might have repelled her—of his portentousness, his jealousy, his manifest misery. This time it would be different. He would keep control of the situation. She would at least admire him again, see in him the incomparably dignified and well adjusted life.

Two nights before her arrival Jacob went to see her latest picture in a huge nightbound vault on Broadway. It was a college story. She walked into it with her hair knotted on the crown of her head—a familiar symbol for dowdiness—inspired the hero to a feat of athletic success and faded out of it, always subsidiary to him, in the shadow of the cheering stands. But there was something new in her performance; for the first time the arresting quality he had noticed in her voice a year before had begun to get over on the screen. Every move she made, every gesture, was poignant and important. Others in the audience saw it too. He fancied he could tell this by some change in the quality of their breathing, by a reflection of her clear, precise expression in their casual and indifferent faces. Reviewers, too, were aware of it, though most of them were incapable of any precise definition of a personality.

But his first real consciousness of her public existence came from the attitude of her fellow passengers disembarking from the train. Busy as they were with friends or baggage, they found time to stare at her, to call their friends' attention, to repeat her name.

She was radiant. A communicative joy flowed from her and around her, as though her perfumer had managed to imprison ecstasy in a bottle. Once again there was a mystical transfusion, and blood began to course again through the hard veins of New York—there was the pleasure of Jacob's chauffeur when she remembered him, the respectful frisking of the bell boys at the Plaza, the nervous collapse of the head waiter at the restaurant where they dined. As for Jacob, he had control of himself now. He was gentle, considerate and polite, as it was natural for him to be—but as, in this case, he had found it necessary to plan. His manner promised and outlined an ability to take care of her, a will to be leaned on.

After dinner, their corner of the restaurant cleared gradually of the theater crowd and the sense of being alone settled over them. Their faces became grave, their voices very quiet.

"It's been five months since I saw you." He looked down at his hands thoughtfully. "Nothing has changed with me, Jenny. I love you with all my heart. I love your face and your faults and your mind and everything about you. The one thing I want in this world is to make you happy."

"I know," she whispered. "Gosh, I know!"

"Whether there's still only affection in your feeling toward me, I don't know. If you'll marry me, I think you'll find that the other things will come, will be there before you know it—and what you called a thrill will seem a joke to you, because life isn't for boys and girls, Jenny, but for men and women."

"Jacob," she whispered, "you don't have to tell me. I know."

He raised his eyes for the first time. "What do you mean—you know?"

"I get what you mean. Oh, this is terrible! Jacob, listen! I want to tell you. Listen, dear, don't say anything. Don't look at me. Listen, Jacob, I fell in love with a man."

"What?" he asked blankly.

"I fell in love with somebody. That's what I mean about understanding about a silly thrill."

"You mean you're in love with me?"

"No."

The appalling monosyllable floated between them, danced and vibrated over the table: "No—no—no—no—no!"

"Oh, this is awful!" she cried. "I fell in love with a man I met on location this summer. I didn't mean to—I tried not to, but first thing I knew there I was in love and all the wishing in the world couldn't help it. I wrote you and asked you to come, but I didn't send the letter, and there I was, crazy about this man and not daring to speak to him, and bawling myself to sleep every night."

"An actor?" he heard himself saying in a dead voice. "Raffino?"

"Oh, no, no, no! Wait a minute, let me tell you. It went on for three weeks and I honestly wanted to kill myself, Jake. Life wasn't worth while unless I could have him. And one night we got in a car by accident alone and he just caught me and made me tell him I loved him. He knew—he couldn't help knowing."

"It just—swept over you," said Jacob steadily. "I see."

"Oh, I knew you'd understand, Jake! You understand everything. You're the best person in the world, Jake, and don't I know it?"

"You're going to marry him?"

Slowly she nodded her head. "I said I'd have to come East first and see you." As her fear lessened, the extent of his grief became more apparent to her and her eyes filled with tears. "It only comes once, Jake, like that. That's what kept in my mind all those weeks I didn't hardly speak to him—if you lose it once, it'll never come like that again and then what do you want to live for? He was directing the picture—he was the same about me."

"I see."

As once before, her eyes held his like hands. "Oh, Ja-a-ake!" In that sudden croon of compassion, all-comprehending and deep as a song, the first force of the shock passed off. Jacob's teeth came together again and he struggled to conceal his misery. Mustering his features into an expression of irony, he called for the check. It seemed an hour later they were in a taxi going toward the Plaza Hotel.

She clung to him. "Oh, Jake, say it's all right! Say you understand! Darling Jake, my best friend, my only friend, say you understand!"

"Of course I do, Jenny." His hand patted her back automatically.

"Oh-h-h, Jake, you feel just awful, don't you?"

"I'll survive."

"Oh-h-h, Jake!"

They reached the hotel. Before they got out Jenny glanced at her face in her vanity mirror and turned up the collar of her fur cape. In the lobby, Jacob ran into several people and said, "Oh, I'm so sorry," in a strained, unconvincing voice. The elevator waited. Jenny, her face distraught and tearful, stepped in and held out her hand toward him with the fist clenched helplessly.

"Jake," she said once more.

"Good night, Jenny."

She turned her face to the wire wall of the cage. The gate clanged.

"Hold on!" he almost said. "Do you realize what you're doing, starting that car like that?"

He turned and went out the door blindly. "I've lost her," he whispered to himself, awed and frightened. "I've lost her!"

He walked over Fifty-ninth Street to Columbus Circle and then down Broadway. There were no cigarettes in his pocket—he had left them at the restaurant—so he went into a tobacco store. There was some confusion about the change and someone in the store laughed.

When he came out he stood for a moment puzzled. Then the heavy tide of realization swept over him and beyond him, leaving him stunned and exhausted. It swept back upon him and over him again. As one rereads a tragic story with the defiant hope that it will end differently, so he went back to the morning, to the beginning, to the previous year. But the tide came thundering back with the certainty that she was cut off from him forever in a high room at the Plaza Hotel.

He walked down Broadway. In great block letters over the porte-cochere of the Capitol Theater five words glittered out into the night: "Carl Barbour and Jenny Prince."

The name startled him, as if a passer-by had spoken it. He stopped and stared. Other eyes rose to that sign, people hurried by him and turned in.

Jenny Prince.

Now that she no longer belonged to him, the name assumed a significance entirely its own.

It hung there, cool and impervious, in the night, a challenge, a defiance.

Jenny Prince.

"Come and rest upon my loveliness," it said. "Fulfill your secret dreams in wedding me for an hour."

JENNY PRINCE.

It was untrue—she was back at the Plaza Hotel, in love with somebody. But the name, with its bright insistence, rode high upon the night.

"I love my dear public. They are all so sweet to me."

The wave appeared far off, sent up whitecaps, rolled toward him with the might of pain, washed over him. "Never any more. Never any more." The wave beat upon him, drove him down, pounding with hammers of agony on his ears. Proud and impervious, the name on high challenged the night.

JENNY PRINCE.

She was there! All of her, the best of her—the effort, the power, the triumph, the beauty.

Jacob moved forward with a group and bought a ticket at the window.

Confused, he stared around the great lobby. Then he saw an entrance and walking in, found himself a place in the vast-throbbing darkness.

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