

The Jilt

Mazo de la Roche

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The Jilt

By MAZO DE LA ROCHE

It was a narrow, gray house, with cold, unblinking windows like a cat's eyes, where we three lived with Mrs. Handsomebody, our governess. The bishop's house, next door, was very different, for it was broad and benign; and the two, as they sat very close together on the street, looked like a watchful gray cat hobnobbing with a sleepy mastiff.

Our back yard was covered with planks, but the bishop's was a wonderful grassy lawn, with a fountain boy in the middle who blew cool jets of water through a shell; and the lawn lay almost always in the shade, for next door towered the great cathedral, with its spire against the sky.

With the bishop lived his niece Margery, and between them and ourselves there existed a quaint friendship.

Three motherless little fellows in the care of Mrs. Handsomebody would have touched a sterner heart than the bishop's, so there were frequent invitations to play on his lawn, beside the fountain, or take tea in the brown old library, where Margery's piano stood.

Angel and I intended to be civil engineers like our father, who was in South America, but the Seraph had a leaning toward the church. The dignified elegance of a bishop's life appealed to his love of the comfortable. He would walk solemnly up and down the bishop's garden, with hands clasped behind his back, as he had seen the bishop do. He was "pweparing" his sermon, he said.

Thus we had a feeling of proprietorship in the bishop and his garden and his niece Margery and the fountain boy. Hence what was our astonishment and chagrin to see one morning, from our school-room window, a chit of a girl smaller than myself strutting up and down the bishop's garden, pushing a doll's perambulator. She had fluffy golden hair about her shoulders, and her skirts gave a rhythmic swing as she turned the corners. Now and then she would stop in her walk, remove the covering from the doll, do some idiotic thing to it, and replace the cover with elaborate care.

We stared fascinated. Then Angel blew out his lips in disgust and said:

"Ain't girls the most sickenin' things?"

“There she goes again, messing with the doll’s quilt,” I agreed.

“Le’ s frow somefing at her,” suggested the Seraph.

“Yes, and get into a row with the bishop,” sneered Angel. “But I don’t see myself going over there to play again. She’s spoiled everything.”

“I s’pose she’s a spoiled child,” said the Seraph, dreamily. “Wonder where her muvver is.”

“I say,” said Angel, “let’s rap on the pane, and then, when she looks up, we’ll all stick our tongues out at her. That’ll scare her all right!”

We did.

When her wondering blue eyes were raised to our window, what they saw was three white disks pressed against the glass, with a flattened pink tongue protruding from each. We glared to see the effect of this outrage upon her, but the dauntless little creature never quailed. Worse than that, she put her fingers to her lips and blew three kisses at us, one apiece.

We were staggered. We withdrew our reddened faces hastily, and stared at one another. We were aghast. Almost we had been kissed by a girl!

“Let’s draw the blind,” said Angel. “She sha’n’t see us. Then we can peek through the crack and watch her.”

But no sooner was the blind pulled down than we heard our governess coming, and flew to our seats.

“Boys,” she gobbled, stopping in the doorway, “what does this mean? The boy who pulled down that blind stand up!”

Angel rose.

“The light hurt my eyes,” he lied feebly. “I aren’t very well.”

“Ridiculous!” snapped Mrs. Handsomebody, running up the blind with precision. “This room at its brightest is dim. Your eyes are keen enough for mischief, sir. Now we shall proceed with our arithmetic.”

We floundered through the tables, but my mind still wandered in the bishop’s garden. Resentment and curiosity struggled for mastery within me. In my mind’s eye I saw her covering and uncovering the doll. Why did she do it? What did it feel like to push that “pram”? Would she drink tea from the Indian Tree cups and be allowed to strum on the piano? Oh, I wished she hadn’t come! And yet, anyway, I was glad I was a boy.

As fate had it, Angel and the Seraph had to have their hair trimmed that afternoon. My own straight blond crop grew but slowly, so I was free for an hour to follow my own devices. These led me to climb to the roof of our back kitchen and from there to mount the high brick wall that separated the bishop's garden from our own. From this vantage-point I scanned the surrounding country for signs of the interloper. There she was! There she was!

Down on her knees at the fountain's brink, her curls almost touching the water, she was sailing boats made of hollyhock petals. The doll's perambulator stood near by.

Noiselessly I crept along the wall till I reached the cherry-tree that stood in the corner. Reaching its friendly branches, I let myself down hand over hand till at last I dropped lightly on the soft turf.

I sauntered then to her side, and gazed at her moodily. If she saw me, she gave no sign.

Despite myself I grew interested in the way she manipulated those boat petals. Evidently there was some system in her game, but it was new to me.

"That little black seed on this boat is Jason," she said at last, without looking up, "and these little white seeds are his comrades. They're searching for the Golden Fleece. My hair is the Fleece. Come and play!"

Mutely I squatted beside her, and our two faces peered at each other in the mirror of the pool.

She gave a funny, eager little laugh.

"Oh," she cried, "we match beautifully, don't we? Your hair is yellow, and my hair is yellow; my eyes are blue, and your eyes are blue."

"My eyes are gray, like father's," I objected.

"No, they're blue, like mine. We match beautifully. Let's play something else." Before I could prevent her, she had swept Jason and his crew away, and, snatching the doll from the perambulator, had set it on the fountain's edge between us.

"This is Dorothea," she announced. "Isn't she sweet? I'm her mother. You should be the father, and Dorothea should want to paddle her toes in the fountain. Now you hold her—so."

Before I was aware of it I was made to grasp the puppet by the waist, while her mistress began to rearrange the pillows in the "pram."

I glanced fearfully at our school-room window lest I should be discovered in so unmanly a posture. It seemed that we were quite alone and unobserved.

A drowsy pleasure stole over my senses. The humming of the bees in the canterbury-bells became a chant as of sirens. Dorothea's silly pink feet dangled in the pool. Surreptitiously I slipped my hand under water and felt them. They were getting spongy and seemed likely to come off. Truly there were compensations for such slavery.

My companion returned and sat down, with her slim body close to mine.

"What is your name?" she cooed.

"John."

"Oh. Mine is Jane. You may call me Jenny. I'm visiting Aunt Margery. The bishop is my great-uncle. What are your brothers' names?"

"Angel and the Seraph. *They* don't like girls." Instantly I wondered why I had said that. Did I like girls? *Not much*. But I didn't want Angel interfering in this. He had better keep away.

"My father is a judge. He sends bad men to prison."

"My father"—I was very proud of him—"is a civil engineer. He's in South America building a railroad; so that's why we live with Mrs. Handsomebody. But some day he's coming back to make a home for us. When I grow up I shall be an engineer, too, and build bridges over cañons."

"What's cañons? Hold Dorothea tighter."

I explained cañons at length.

"P'raps I'll take you with me," I added weakly.

She clapped her hands rapturously.

"Oh, what fun!" she gurgled. "I can keep house, and hang my washing 'cross the cañon to dry!"

Frankly I did not relish the thought of my cañon's being thus desecrated. I determined never to allow her to do any such thing, but at the moment I was willing to indulge her fancy.

"Yes," she prattled on, "I'll wheel Dorothea up and down the bridge and watch you work."

Now, there was some sense in that. What man does not enjoy being admired while he does things? In fact, Jane had hit upon a great elemental truth when she suggested this. From that moment I was hers.

Laying Dorothea, toes up, on the grass, I proceeded to lead Jane into the most cherished realms of my fancy. Together we sailed those

. . . perilous seas, in fairy lands forlorn,

dabbling our hands in the fountain, while the golden August sunshine kissed our necks.

I said not a word of this at tea. I munched my bread and butter in a sort of haze, scarcely aware of the subdued conversation led by Mrs. Handsomebody until I heard her say:

“A little great-niece of Bishop O’Sullivan is visiting next door. You are therefore invited to take tea with her to-morrow afternoon. I trust you will conduct yourselves with decency at table, and remember that a frail little girl is not to be played with as a headlong boy.”

I felt that she couldn’t tell me anything about frail little girls, but I kept my knowledge to myself. The Seraph said:

“Was you ever a fwail little gel, Mrs. Handsomebody?”

Our governess fixed him with her eyes.

“I was a most decorous and obedient little girl, Alexander, and asked no impertinent questions of my elders.”

“Was Mary Ellen a fwail little gel?” persisted the Seraph.

“No,” snapped Mrs. Handsomebody. “Judging from her characteristics as a servant, I should say that she was a very riotous, rude little girl. Now drink your milk.”

“I yike wiotous, wude people,” said the Seraph, with his face in the tumbler; the milk trickled down his chin.

“Leave the table, Alexander,” commanded Mrs. Handsomebody. “Your conduct is quite inexcusable.” The Seraph departed, weeping.

All that evening I thought about Jane. I had no heart for a pillow-fight. At night I dreamed of her, and saw her weekly washing, suspended from a line, fluttering in the wind that raced along my cañon.

I strained toward the hour when I should meet her at tea. I had never felt like this before. True, I had once conceived a violent fancy for a fat young woman in the pastry shop, but she had been replaced by a thin young woman who did not appeal to me, and the episode was forgotten.

But, oh, this bitter-sweetness of my love for Jane, and my despair when I found that she was to sit next Angel at tea, till I discovered that, seated opposite, I could stare at her, and admire how she nibbled her almond cake.

After tea we played musical chairs in the library, with Margery at the piano. First marched the Seraph, with his brown curls bobbing, and after him the stout bishop in his gaiters; next Angel, then Jane on tiptoes, and lastly I in squeaky new boots.

Seraph and the bishop were soon out of it. They were invariably beaten in our games, though afterward they always seemed to think they had won. So Angel, Jane, and I were left, prancing around two solemn carved chairs. The music ceased with a crash. Jane leaped to one chair, while Angel and I fell simultaneously upon the other. We both clung to it desperately, but he dislodged me inch by inch, and I, furious at being balked in my pursuit of Jane, struck him twice in the ribs, then ran into the dim hall and hid myself.

There Jane found me, and there her tender lips kissed my hot cheek, and she squeezed me in her arms. For a moment we did not speak, then she whispered:

“I wish *you* had got the chair, John. I love you best of all.”

That night I hung about the kitchen while Mary Ellen was setting bread to rise. The time had come when I must speak to some fellow-creature of this tremendous new element that had come into my life. In much perplexity I watched Mary Ellen’s stout, red arms as she manipulated the dough. The kitchen was hot, the kettle sang. It seemed a moment for confidence, yet words were hard to find.

At last I got out desperately:

“Mary Ellen, what is love like?”

“Love is it, Masther John? What do the likes o’ me know about love, thin?” She smiled broadly as she dexterously shifted the puffy white mass.

“Oh, *you* know,” I persisted, “ ’cos you’ve been in it often. You’ve had lots of followers, now, Mary Ellen, haven’t you?”

“Well, thin, if ye must know, I’ll tell ye point blunt to kape out av it. It’s an awful thing whin it gits the best av ye.”

“But what’s it *feel like*?” I probed.

Mary Ellen wiped the flour off each red finger in turn, and gazed into the flame of the lamp.

“It’s like this,” she said solemnly: “ye burns yer insides till ye feel like ye had a furnace blazin’ there. Thin whin it seems ye must bust wid the flarin’ av it, ye suddintly turns cowl’d as ice, an’ yer sowl do shrivil up wid fear. An’ thin at last ye fergit all about it till the nixt wan happens along. Och, I haven’t had a spherl fer months! This is an awful’ dull place. I think I’ll be quittin’ it soon.”

“Oh, no, no, Mary Ellen,” I cried, alarmed, “you mustn’t leave us! When Jane and I get married, you can come and live with us.” I blushed furiously.

“And who might Jane be?” demanded Mary Ellen, suspiciously.

“She’s the bishop’s great-niece,” I explained proudly. “I love her terribly, Mary Ellen. It hurts in here.” I pressed my hand on my stomach.

“Well, well.” She shook her head commiseratingly. “I’m sorry fer ye, Masther John, sthartin’ off like this at your age. Here’s the spoon I stirred the cake wid; have a lick o’ that. It’ll mebbe help ye.”

I licked pensively at the big wooden spoon, and felt strangely soothed. My admiration for Mary Ellen increased.

As I slowly climbed the stairs for bed, visions of Jane hovered in the darkness above me—airy rainbows, with Jane’s laughing face peering between the bars of pink and gold. I had never known a little girl before, and Jane embodied all things frail and exquisite.

When I entered our room Angel was sitting on the side of the bed, pulling his shirt over his head. The Seraph already slept in his place next the wall.

I stood before Angel with folded arms.

“H-m,” he muttered crossly, “you’ve been lickin’ batter. It’s on the end of your nose. Why didn’t you get me something?”

“There was nothing but dough,” I explained, “and one batter spoon. And—and—I say, Angel—”

“Well?” asked my elder, tersely.

“I—I’m in love something awful. It hurts. It’s like this,—” I hurried on, —“you feel like you’d a furnace blazing in you, an’ then you turn cold, jus’

as if you'd shrivel up, but you *never, never* forget, an'—it's made a 'normous difference in my life, Angel—”

I got no further. Angel had thrown himself backward on the bed and, kicking his bare legs in the air, broke into peals of delighted laughter.

“It's that yellow-faced little Jenny!” he gurgled. “Oh, holy smoke!”

His brutal mirth was short-lived. Mrs. Handsomebody appeared in the doorway, her face genuinely shocked at the sight that met her austere eyes.

At this hour such actions—was her house to be turned into Bedlam? Such indecent display of limbs! She was sick with shame for Angel, would discuss his conduct further with him to-morrow.

She waited while I undressed, and stood over us while we said our prayers at the side of the bed, at last extinguishing the light with a final admonition to be silent.

I was bitterly disappointed in Angel. It was the first time he had failed me utterly. I put my arms around the sleeping Seraph and cried myself to sleep.

We were awakened by the sonorous music of the cathedral chimes. It was Sunday. That meant stiff white Eton collars, and texts gabbled between mouthfuls of porridge, and, later, our three small bodies arrayed in short surplices, and the long service in the cathedral. The Seraph was the very smallest boy in the choir. I think he was tolerated there only through Margery's intervention, because it would have broken his loyal little heart to be separated from Angel and me. He was highly ornamental, too, as he collected the choir offertory in a little velvet bag, his tiny surplice jauntily bobbing, and the back of his neck, as an old lady once said, more touching than the sermon.

Angel had a voice like a flute.

Beyond the tall choir-stalls I could catch fleeting glimpses of Jane's little face beneath her daisied hat, looking on the same prayer-book with Margery. I swelled my chest beneath my surplice, and chanted my very loudest in the hope that Jane might hear me. “O ye Showers and Dew, bless ye the Lord: praise Him, and magnify Him for ever.”

Her dreamy blue eyes peered over the edge of the book, the daisies on her hat nodded, she smiled; I smiled ecstatically back at her, and so two childish hearts stemmed the flood of praise that rose above the old gray pillars.

At dinner, over his bread pudding, the Seraph murmured in a throaty voice: “When you is in love, first you burns yike a furnace, an’ en you shwivel up wiv the cold. It’s a vewy bad fing to be in love.”

I threw Angel a bitter look. This was his doing. So contemptuously had he treated my confidence, made as man to man. To tell the irresponsible Seraph of all people!

“What’s that, Alexander?” questioned Mrs. Handsomebody, sharply.

“It’s love,” replied the Seraph, meekly; “you catch it off a girl. John’s got it.”

Mrs. Handsomebody sank back in her chair with a groan.

“Alexander,” she said solemnly, “I *tremble* for your future. You are not the boy your father was. I tremble for you. John,” she continued, turning to me, “you will come into the parlor with me. I wish to have a talk with you. David and Alexander, you may amuse yourselves with one of my bound volumes of ‘The Quiver.’ ”

I followed her with burning cheeks into the stiff apartment dominated by a case of stuffed birds and a portrait of the late Mr. Handsomebody in mutton-chop whiskers and a cynical smile.

Needless to recall the lecture I received, the probing into my reluctant heart, the admonitions which I could not heed for my fearful watching of that hard, gray face. But at last it was over. I slipped into the hall, closing the door softly behind me, and listened. Silence abounded. On tiptoe I made my way to the kitchen. It was clean and empty. I noiselessly opened the back door. On the door-step sat the Seraph busily engaged with a caterpillar.

“Where’s Angel?” I demanded curtly.

“I fink,” breathed the Seraph, stroking the caterpillar the wrong way and then looking at his fingers—“I fink that he’s w’itin’ to father to tell on you. So there!”

I waited to hear no more. Casting my care behind me, I sped lightly down the narrow laneway between the houses, crossed the bishop’s lawn, and sought Jane in the garden.

There I stood a moment dazzled by the golden August sunshine, the iridescent spray of the fountain, and the brilliant colors of the hollyhocks beside the wall.

I saw Jane there, and my heart swelled with disappointment and rage, for she was not alone!

Too late I repented my confidence to Angel; I might have known that he would never let the grass grow under his feet till he had tasted this new excitement. Well, he had not let the grass grow.

Jane, I remember, had on a pale-blue sash, and a fluffy white frock, beneath the frills of which her slender black-silk legs moved airily. By her side sauntered the traitorous Angel, his head bent toward her tenderly, and, most sickening of all, pushing before him, with an air of proprietorship, the perambulator containing the doll Dorothea. Jane was simpering up at him in a way she had never looked at me.

I saw at a glance that all was over, yet I was not to be cast aside thus lightly. I strode across the garden, and, pushing myself between them, I laid my hand masterfully on the handle of the “pram,” beside Angel’s. Neither of them uttered a word. So the three of us walked for a space in tense silence.

Then suddenly, Angel began to hammer my hand with his fist.

“You let go of that!” he snarled. “Ge—tout of here!”

“I won’t!” I roared tragically. “She said I was the fa-ather of it.”

“She did not,” yelled Angel. “I’m the father.”

Jenny glanced fearfully at the windows of the bishop’s house. All was silent there. Then, with a scornful little kick at me, she said:

“Go ’way, you nasty boy! *I* don’t want you. I only like Angel.”

There was nothing more to be said. I hung my head and, with a sob in my throat, turned away. I could hear them whispering behind me.

Before I reached our own yard Angel came running after me.

“Tell you what I’ll do, John,” he said as he came abreast—“tell you what I’ll do: I’ll fight you for her. Like knights of old, you know. We could go down to the coal-cellar and have a reg’lar tourney. It ’u’d be bully fun. We could have pokers for lances. Say, will you?”

I was not in a fighting mood, but I had never refused a challenge, and somehow the thought of bloodshed eased my pain a little. So, half reluctant, I followed him as he eagerly led the way to the coal-cellar.

Even on this August day it was cold down there. Long cobwebs trailed specter-like from the beams, and a faint squeaking of young mice could be

heard in the walls.

We searched among the debris of years for suitable weapons. Finally, brandishing pokers, and with two rusty boiler-lids for shields, we faced each other, uttering our respective battle-cries in muffled tones. Angel had put a battered coal-scuttle over his head for a helmet, and through a break in it I could see his dark eyes gleaming threateningly.

With ring of shield we clashed together. I delivered, and received, stunning blows. Dust, long undisturbed, rose, and blinded us.

How many a gallant fray has been broken up by a screaming woman! Now Mary Ellen, true to the perversity of her sex, rushed in to separate us.

“Oh, losh! I niver seen the beat o’ ye!” she cried. “Ye’ve scairt me out av a year’s growth. Sure, the missus’ll put a tin ear on ye if she catches ye in the cellar in yer collars an’ all!” Imperiously she disarmed us, and without ceremony we were hustled up the dark stairs to the kitchen sink.

“It was a tournament, Mary Ellen, about a lady,” I explained with as much dignity as I could muster. “You shouldn’t have interrupted.”

“There ain’t a lady livin’ that’s worth messin’ up yer clane clothes for,” said Mary Ellen, sternly. “Lord! to see the cinders in yer hair an’ the soot in yer ears! It does bate all—” As she talked she scrubbed us vehemently with a washcloth.

“Ouch!” moaned Angel. “O Mary El-len, you’re *hurting* me! That’s my so-ore spot, eeeoow!”

“Well, Masther Angel,” said Mary Ellen, “I don’t want to hurt ye, but it do make me heart-sick to see ye bashin’ aitch other wid pokers fer the sake av a bit girl that’s not worth a tinker’s curse to ye. Now, thin, here’s a piece of cowl’d puddin’ to each av ye. Sit on the dure-step where the missus won’t see ye an’ git outside av it.”

In a chastened mood we sat outside the back door and ate our pudding. It was cold, clammy, very sweet, and deliciously satisfying.

To our right the wall excluded any glimpse of the bishop’s garden, and beyond loomed the cathedral, with two gray pigeons circling about its spire.

I yearned to know what was going on beyond the wall. I could not help fancying that Jane, touched by remorse, was weeping by the fountain for me, and me only. Angel spoke:

“I say,—” he hunched his shoulders mischievously,—“let’s go round and see what she’s doin’ all alone, eh?”

I leaped to the proposal. I had an insatiable desire to hear her speak once more, if it was only to taunt me.

We made the passage stealthily; all the world seemed drowsing on that hazy Sunday afternoon. The blinds in the bishop’s study were drawn. Little did he guess the life his great-niece led!

The grass was like moist velvet beneath our feet. A pair of sparrows were quarreling over their bath at the fountain rim. We heard a low murmur of voices. A glint of Jane’s white frock could be seen behind a guelder-rose near the fountain. We crept up behind and peered through the foliage.

There on a garden bench sat Jane, and there, clasped in her slim white arms, was—the Seraph! The wretched Dorothea lay face downward on the grass at their feet.

We strained our ears to hear what was being said. Jane spoke in that silvery voice of hers:

“Say some more drefful things, Seraph. I jus’ love to hear you.”

There was a moment’s silence, then the Seraph said in his blandest tone the one word:

“Blood!”

Jane gave a tiny, ecstatic shriek.

“Oh, go on!” she begged. “Say more.”

“Blood,” repeated the Seraph, firmly, “hot blood, told blood—wed blood—thick blood—thin blood—bad blood.”

Jane squealed in fearful pleasure.

“Go on!” she urged. “Worser!”

Thus encouraged, the Seraph rapped out without more ado:

“Tiger blood—effelant blood—caterpillar blood—ole witch blood,”—then, after a pause, that the horror of it might sink deep in,—“baby blood!”

Angel and I gave each other a look of enlightenment. It was gore, then, that this delicately nurtured young person craved—good red gore, and plenty of it! Well, enough; we were free. Wait! What was she saying?

“I *hate* those other boys, Seraph darling. Let’s jus’ you and me play together always. And you shall be Dorothea’s *father*, and Dorothea shall want to paddle in the—”

Away! Away! With sardonic laughter we sped along the pebbled drive, nor stopped until we reached our own domain.

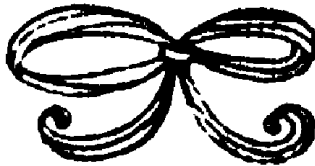
Then in the planked back yard we sat on our steps, with a volume of “The Quiver” on our knees, in case Mrs. Handsomebody should invade our privacy, and played a rollicking game of pirates. And when any of the fair sex fell into our hands we were none too gentle with them.

“Chuck ’em overboard, Lieutenant!” was Captain Angel’s way of dealing with the case.

Just as the cathedral clock struck five the Seraph swaggered up. He stopped before us, hands deep in pockets.

“Well,” said Angel, eyeing him resentfully, “you’ll make a nice bishop, you will, usin’ the language we heard a bit ago!”

“Maybe I sha’n’t have time to be a bishop, after all,” replied the Seraph, condescendingly. “You see, I’m goin’ to marry Jane. It’ll keep me vewy busy.”



TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

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[The end of *The Jilt* by Mazo de la Roche]