

Judgment

Beatrice Redpath

Illustrated by

E. J. Dinsmore

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JUDGMENT

By BEATRICE REDPATH

ILLUSTRATED BY E. J. DINSMORE

An Artist Has a Strange Experience in Finding that the Supreme Beauty is of the Soul



If it were not for the curious end to the affair it would not be worth relating. It was so manifestly ironic; one of those cases where life appears in the guise of an irrepressible jester, turning to smile behind his hand. Yet, in spite of the burlesque irony of it all, there was something unquestionably fine in the way in which Knowles cast down his idols, tossed them aside, denied their very existence. For Knowles' idols had been firmly placed. Anyone knowing him at that time would have said that, as he was, so he would have continued to the end. But there is always in life the incalculable factor, the eternal surprise in the play of circumstance upon character which upsets all calculations.

I never knew Lena at all intimately, so I could not be conscious of the personal element as far as she was concerned. To me she was as the character in a play, perhaps even more like a shadowy figure projected on a screen. She passed and re-passed before me a score of times, yet nothing of herself penetrated my consciousness except the fact that she was uncommonly beautiful—and Knowles had told me that.

He would sit and talk of her in quite an absurd fashion; there was no doubt that he was inordinately proud of his wife. My ethics had always

forbidden me to discuss woman, but as I have said before, Lena, for me, was not so much a woman of my acquaintance as a character to be dissected, a Helen of Troy, or a Cleopatra, whose beauty had in it all the potential elements for tragedy. Knowles would sit on my verandah, his arms crossed upon his flat chest, seated with a convenient view of his own front lawn, where perhaps Lena would be playing with the puppy or working over her rose bushes, and he would talk of her while I wondered all the while at the curious fashion in which he could speak of her. It was quite as impersonal as though she were a fine piece of pottery or a portrait which he had been clever enough to pick up at a sale.

Sitting on my verandah one summer evening, the scent of the honeysuckle that sheltered the northern end of the house, seeming to thicken the frail dusk, Knowles as usual started off on his favorite topic.

“Lena was educated to be beautiful,” he said, “she’s been trained to it ever since she was a child.”

I laughed lightly at this without taking the trouble to respond. It was so like Knowles. He was forever making just such absurd remarks. His ideas were usually, from my way of thinking, mere moonshine and fantasy.

“Oh, you may laugh,” he went on calmly, “but why isn’t it possible to teach a child to be beautiful? Is there nothing then in the power of suggestion?”

I smiled in silent acquiescence with any theory which Knowles might care to foist upon me. I was feeling altogether too indolent to enter into a discussion at that moment. You could not argue a point with Knowles. He was too impractical.

“Well, then, it isn’t nonsense in the case of Lena,” he continued. “She regards beauty as I do, as the supreme essential in life.”

I mused thoughtfully over his words and called up to my mind a vision of Lena, picturing to myself the delicate perfection of her face, the golden sheen of her hair, the droop of her heavy lidded eyes, with the stiff lashes which made the pupil appear so bewilderingly star-like. She was disturbingly beautiful. You felt that she should be cast in bronze so that the multiplying years should not blur nor destroy. That such a high perfection of art must needs be perishable, must of necessity fade, filled you with a vague disquietude. And all this beauty Knowles affirmed had been created by suggestion. He was impossible with his exaggerated theories.

“Beauty,” he continued, now leaning his head against the back of his chair and staring out at the summer dusk, “is the will o’ the wisp that calls you over the world. It’s everything and it’s nothing; it’s as elusive as the tail of the rainbow; it’s in the curve of a line, in a shadow thrown by a cloud. It’s the flicker of starlight, the mist over the moon, the bloom on the fruit, the shine of the sea. It’s the nearest approach to Divinity that we know of. It’s everything,” he repeated, with emphasis. “Without beauty life would be worth nothing, simply nothing at all.”

“After all,” I put in meditatively, following up the processes of his thought, “these things are the mere surfaces of life.”

“What are you saying?” he ejaculated, and his tone tossed aside my words as so much chaff. “Beauty is the very core of life.”

I fell silent again, convinced that it was of no avail to argue the point with him. Later I watched him go down the steps and cross the road through spreading pools of moonlight, and I wondered about Lena. Was she just the lay figure she appeared to be from the way he spoke of her? Perhaps she herself was quite content merely to fill his requirements; perhaps she cared for nothing beyond her own beauty. Since that was Knowles’ attitude towards her, I sincerely hoped so. If she had been trained to this end ever since she was a child, it was natural to suppose that she was content with the role forced upon her. But the more I thought of Lena in conjunction with Knowles, the more she intrigued me. It was a curious life she led here in the suburbs, for a woman who was so obviously beautiful. I could not imagine that Knowles, with his pale face and plastered hair could inspire in her a great devotion. Knowles was not inspiring. And at that time he was essentially an egoist.

I began to watch Lena rather more closely from my verandah whenever I saw her appear upon her lawn across the road, and I began to realize that I felt rather sorry for Lena. I thought that Knowles had no right to make so clear to her his requirements. It was all very well for him to be on his knees to her beauty, but that he should continually make her aware that he required it of her was another thing. How could she look forward with anything but black dread, to the time when her beauty must fade? That is, if she cared for Knowles. I had not as yet made up my mind upon that point.

I noticed that she always wore a wide-brimmed hat in her garden, and pulled long gloves over her slim hands when she tended her roses. Small indications of her unceasing care to guard that which Knowles so cherished.

Each day at the same hour she went for a walk with the puppy, and each day after lunch I noticed that the yellow blind in the front room upstairs was pulled down; Lena was taking her afternoon sleep.

How could a woman submit to making herself such a puppet, I wondered. I began to lose patience with Lena, and regarded her with a certain amount of contempt, which I realized was not quite deserved. For, after all, if Knowles continually asserted that her beauty was absolutely essential to his happiness and condemned any intellect in a woman as quite superfluous, Lena's course was not to be wondered at. It was Knowles who was in the wrong. Some day, I thought, I would reopen the subject with him and make him see that it was not fair to Lena, and if he cared for her he must widen her scope in life. But, after all, though one may think of pointing out such things to one's friends, one hesitates to do so when the moment arrives.

And then I missed Lena for a day or so. Knowles told me when he came over one evening that she had gone to New York to shop, and for a time I completely forgot about her. I lost interest in the working out of the little drama that I had staged just beyond my front door. Not that at that time I was conscious that it was to develop into drama. But nevertheless I knew a shock of surprise when one evening Knowles appeared on the steps of my verandah, just after I had finished dinner. He had a letter in his hand, and seemed decidedly agitated. I asked him to sit down and light his pipe, but ignoring my invitation he passed me the letter and told me to read it. I glanced over it hurriedly, and then read it through carefully a second time before I looked up. He was standing before me regarding me with close attention, as though to read my first impressions of the letter.

“Well, what do you make of it?” he said at length.

I glanced down at the letter again before replying. It was just a matter of a few lines from Lena, telling him in the most casual manner possible that she had no intention of returning to him. She said that there was nothing to be gained by their seeing one another, as she was quite fixed in her resolve. She finished by saying that he would please her best if he made no effort whatever to seek her out.

“I suppose there is nothing much to make of it,” I responded, turning the letter over in my hands. “Apparently she means what she says. There is nothing for you to do I should say, but to accept it.”

“You think—you think—” he stammered, searching my face, “that there is someone else?”

“Lena is a very beautiful woman,” I responded.

He sat down then and sank into a heavy silence from which I made no effort to rouse him. There seemed nothing to be said further. The curtain had simply gone down on the first act of the little drama which I had anticipated. My surprise was that Lena should have a mind capable of taking any such definite course. I could not find myself blaming her much, nor help feeling that Knowles had only got what he deserved. If he had insisted upon treating Lena as nothing but a beautiful picture to hang upon the walls of his house, it was only fitting that he should make the discovery that after all she was flesh and blood. Her whole course of procedure was puzzling, however. It was so far from what I would actually have expected of Lena. It was so clear cut. It takes character to make a clean and swift decision, and I had almost persuaded myself that Lena had none. I was obliged to alter my ideas concerning her. I wondered about her, building up romantic scenes in my mind, staging Lena as heroine. But somehow they never seemed to fit. It was like a puzzle where some of the pieces are lost.

For a time I expected each day that I would see Lena appear on the lawn opposite, and hear that she had come back, repentant for an injudicious escapade. I was quite certain that this would be the end of it. It was the only fitting climax that I could foresee. But the days went by and there was no sign of Lena. Knowles never alluded to her. His pride was badly scarred, but I imagined that that was the whole amount of his hurt. It was as though some connoisseur had outbid him for an art treasure. He was thwarted and angry. But he took care not to show even these feelings by any chance remark. He would come over and sit with me just as before, only we did not speak of Lena. That was the only difference. He would talk instead of the decay of the art of the present day; he would rail against some critic whose views he did not hold with, or he would go into an enthusiastic description of a book he had read, or an exhibition of pictures he had seen. He was a curious character, Knowles.

I would sit and look at him, at his long, thin face and plastered hair, while I wondered about him. He had a way of putting so utterly outside of his horizon anything which displeased him. He was heedless to all the suffering in the world. It simply did not interest him. He felt himself detached from it, it was not his concern. He had what appeared to me to be almost an unhealthy craving for beauty around him, and when he perceived it certain pulses would seem to vibrate in the complex organism of his mind. He would become quite oblivious of his surroundings, the conversation as far as he was concerned would become a mere trail of abandoned words, and

he would sit back in his chair, his arms crossed on his thin chest, while his eyes would be positively alight. I have seen him like this over the mere line of a tumble-down dwelling, the curve of a roadway, a bank of cloud. Yes, he was a curious character in every sense.

I used to wonder if he had ever heard anything more about Lena, but apparently the subject was not one to be mentioned between us. I carefully avoided anything which might touch upon it, but I always hoped that some day he would mention her. Lena interested me more than Knowles. I felt that she had a complete sense of drama. The way in which she had walked off the stage was quite majestic in its absolute lack of all explanation. It was so simple in its accomplishment. And, when all's said, it is the simple actions in life that partake of greatness.

I met Knowles one hot summer afternoon, hurrying to the station to catch the suburban train from the city. The streets were crowded at that hour, packed with tired humanity, all eager for an escape from the day's labors. I thought, with a sense of pleasure, of my own cool verandah, shaded by elm trees. The jaded faces I passed wrung me to pity. So many returning to rooms that were even hotter, rooms that were a mere excuse for a dwelling place. I thought of all the hot tossed pillows, pressed by heads seeking to find in dreams some little alleviation of reality, and I felt poignantly the awful unfairness of life. What had I done that I should have so much more than these? What a thing life was for the greater number! When was the balance to be readjusted; when were these to receive full measure to atone for the hungry years? I made some comment of the kind to Knowles, but he brushed it aside as he put away from him everything of the sort. It did not appear on his horizon, therefore there was no necessity for him to be concerned about it. I looked at his anaemic face and wondered, as I had often done, if anything could ever penetrate his armour. I could not understand how anyone who could so vibrate to beauty could go so untouched by suffering. The senses which are acute to the one are usually just as sensitive to the other.

I was thinking over this, when suddenly, just ahead of us, I seemed to recognize the back of a woman who was striving like ourselves to find a passage through the crowd. There was something oddly familiar in the pose of her head and in the line of her shoulders. I was wondering vaguely where I had seen her before, when illumination burst upon me.

“Lena!” I exclaimed involuntarily.

The woman turned and I had a swift and terrible impression of a face scarred beyond recognition. Before I had time to collect my stunned faculties she had turned swiftly away, and in another moment, while I stood stupidly staring after her, she had pushed her way through an opening in the crowd and disappeared.

I turned and looked questioningly at Knowles. I thought, or I may have simply imagined it, that his face was more oddly colourless than usual. He replied to my silent question, while absolutely ignoring my previous exclamation.

“Horrible!” he said. “It is terrible the things you see in a crowd of this description.”

I continued, to look at him still strangely puzzled. His face was quite expressionless. I had been sure that the woman was Lena, but I assured myself now that I had been mistaken. If it had been Lena, Knowles would certainly have known. After all, I could not have been certain of a single feature in the woman’s face. I was only deeply conscious of that red line running at right angles. It was an unfortunate mistake of mine. I wished that Lena’s name had not been wrung from me by that intangible resemblance. Knowles did not refer in any way to my abrupt exclamation, and gradually I dismissed the whole matter from my mind.

It seems to me that I did not see so much of him for some time after this incident. I was away for a time and when I came back I found a pile of work which had accumulated in my absence, which kept me busy in the evenings as well as during the day. When at length I did see Knowles, he appeared to me, or was it merely my imagination, to have changed in some indefinite way. He was more silent, he would sit for long periods without speaking, his arms folded, peering out into the darkness beyond the verandah, a curious expression upon his face. I did not care to force his confidence, so I smoked my pipe in silence and left him to his own thoughts. Sometimes I wondered at the cause for this change in him, and could not help thinking that it dated from the unfortunate incident in the crowded street. But I dismissed this as absurd. I knew my imagination was too prone to manufacture a cause to fit the effect.

He began to come even more often than before, and asked me in almost a humble fashion if I objected to his sitting so much on my verandah.

“It’s lonely sitting there in an empty house,” he said, with a curious self-conscious laugh. “I am beginning to dislike my own society.”

I became accustomed to seeing him sitting in the corner of my verandah, a dark, silent figure, and I felt vaguely sorry for him. Whatever was the cause, there was no doubt that in some way the man was suffering intensely, he who had always banished suffering from his horizon. And yet I did not feel that it would do him any harm. It might make him more human, more sympathetic to the misfortunes of others. Already I felt that he was more capable of understanding a wider scope of life than he had hitherto done. How this had been accomplished, I did not conjecture even to myself.

I was feeling very much more in sympathy with him than I had ever done before, as late one afternoon we swung out of the woods bordering High Park, sheltering it from the full sweep of the sea wind. Knowles had been speaking of his student days in Paris, of his dreams and ambitions, and of how little he had accomplished of all he had set himself to do. He had been pulled too many ways in his continual quest for perfection; sadly he stated that he had succeeded in none. We were arguing as to the meaning of success in life, as the full panorama of the sea swept upon us, silencing us by the pure magic of the view. The cliffs dropped sheer to a sea of amethyst, shaken into silver by the light wind, the sky clear amber, broken only by the sharp edge of the new moon. Far on the horizon a tramp steamer seemed to lie motionless, only the betraying smoke clinging golden to the sky indicating movement. We stood silent, until the echo of a remark spoken by Knowles some time ago came to my lips.

“It’s the nearest approach to Divinity that we know of. I think you are right, Knowles . . . something like this . . . it seems to lift one right out of oneself.”

I was not prepared for the swift change that swept over him. He turned his back on it all, on the sea, the sky, and the circle of the young moon, and walked rapidly down the road ahead of me. The expression of his face as I came up to him filled me with wondering surprise. He did not speak until we had gone some distance, and I was afraid to break in upon his curious preoccupation. This chance remark of mine had set flowing some dark currents through his mind. I rather imagined that I understood, but until this moment I had not known Knowles to turn his back on beauty. The scene itself had roused him to some emotion, I fancied, rather than my remark.

“Don’t speak to me of beauty,” he said suddenly, “I have done with beauty forever.”

I could make no reply to this. Then abruptly he turned and faced me, a tall, dark figure, against the green gloom of the trees which surrounded us on the outskirts of the park. "It was Lena," he said, with an amazing suddenness, and then was silent again, waiting for my surprised ejaculation. But I made none. I was not surprised, except in the manner of his telling it to me. After a moment's pause, as I made no reply, he said curiously:

"You knew?"

"I couldn't be sure," I replied briefly.

He took a few more steps in silence.

"Curious," he said, speaking in a strained tone of voice, "what one will do in a crisis. You don't know, say whatever you like, but you can't tell what you will do. Lay the situation before me just as it was and I would have said that any man would have rushed forward, no matter what his feelings might have been. Even the veriest cur . . . but I didn't I held back . . . I couldn't have stirred I felt frozen with the utter horror of it."

He paused and I vaguely murmured something ineffectual.

"I suppose," he went on, "that it was the training of years. I had always refused to look at suffering, at ugliness, at everything that was abominable. It hurt too much. Ever since I was a child I'd close my eyes if I saw a cripple in the street. I couldn't bear anything of the sort. Cowardly, yes! I would only admit of the beautiful side of life. I abandoned the rest. You can train yourself to that the same as to anything else."

He stopped to strike a match, and the flare of it lit up his face. The man was baring his soul to me, dissecting his most hidden feelings, and the mark of them was upon his features.

"I wonder if you can understand," he went on, "Lena, because she was no longer beautiful, simply did not exist for me. There was a woman standing there who had a natural claim upon me but for me the claim no longer held. Lena had been beautiful then since Lena was no longer beautiful it simply wasn't Lena. I stood there and let her pass on in the crowd. I allowed her to vanish from before my eyes and I tried to forget to blot her out to say that Lena actually did no longer exist."

He paused again. Difficult words these. I did not choose to break the thread of his recital. Painful as it was to listen, I felt that the man must speak. Each word was a relief to his pent up feelings, which he could no longer endure by himself.

“What a fool!” he exclaimed, “oh, what a fool!”

And then he threw back his head and clasped his hands behind his back and strode forward with a new vigor.

“Lena wasn’t a mere puppet,” he said, “there was more to Lena than I knew anything about.”

I nodded without speaking. I had come to believe the truth of that.

“It’s a difficult thing to know a beautiful woman,” he continued. “One is so satisfied with the mere shell, one does not require that the kernel shall be rich within.”

We reached the end of the path and came out into the wide sweep of the park. Knowles paused, hesitating as though he had more to say, and would say it all in the secret enclosure of the trees. Words seem to lose half their meaning spoken in broad spaces. Perhaps that was what he felt.

“Beauty,” he said, “oh, beauty is nothing at all. Nothing at all,” he reiterated with firmness, as though to impress upon himself something that his heart did not really feel. The very emphasis of his words denied them weight. One can not alter one’s whole character at one’s immediate desire. “It is only the glaze on life,” he said earnestly, “curious how it can satisfy until the surface is scratched.”

I wondered was Lena to be ignored, to be left with her poor scarred features, while he played again with words and theories. Could the man never be practical? Could he never learn of life as it was?

“I am only now beginning to know Lena,” he said, breaking in upon my thoughts.

I glanced at him quickly. What did he mean? Had she come back then? Where was Lena? I had not seen her nor had he given me the faintest idea that she had returned.

“Where is she?” I asked, curiously.

He shook his head.

“I don’t know,” he said dejectedly. “I can’t find a trace of her. Every clue ends in failure.”

“But then—” I began.

“What I mean to say,” he explained, “is that when I sit and think of her now, I no longer think of her actual features, of the colour of her hair, or the

contour of her face . . . and I see the real beauty of Lena. It's something quite different," he went on, "the actual beauty of Lena is something which I can't talk about, something I know and feel, and yet can't find words to express. Oh God!" he said suddenly, and I noticed how his shoulders were bowed as beneath the weight of the whole world's woe. "Do you think I shall ever be able to find her?"

That was what I was beginning to wonder myself, as time went by.

He came in late one evening and sat down without lighting his pipe. To my offer of tobacco or cigarettes he shook his head.

"I just came over to say good-bye," he said. "I'm sailing in the morning."

"Sailing," I inquired, astonished.

"Yes," he said, "I have an idea that Lena has gone abroad. I am going to look for her until I find her. I have sold the house and settled all my affairs. It may take a long time, so I have made my arrangements in case it should. Of course the detectives will continue the search over here, but I feel certain she has gone farther away. But she can't hide herself forever," he said firmly.

"You think," I said, "that she will never come back to you on her own accord?"

"Never," he replied. "No, Lena as now I know her would crucify herself rather than that I should have to bear with her poor marred features." His face glowed as he spoke. It seemed to me in that moment that Knowles had attained a veritable spiritual ecstasy of loving.

I watched him cross the road for the last time and felt the curious irony of his fate. Can't you see him, going down the sordid byways of life, peering into the marred and terrible faces, in search for his Lena? He with his innate shrinking from everything that is grim and ugly in life. At first it seems almost too cruel a judgment, but to me it takes on all the semblance of a pilgrimage after his own soul. Whatever he might say, whatever change might have taken place in him, he with his innate love of beauty, could not so alter his character that ugliness would not always be pain . . . beauty the will o' the wisp that called to him over the world.

But for all the pitiful tragedy of it, I like to think of him at times. It gives me a great faith, an incontestable argument, when certain cynics whom I

know speak slightingly of love.

THE END

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 *Judgment* by Beatrice Redpath]