

# *The Last Trick in the Bag*

Beatrice Redpath

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# The Last Trick in the Bag

BY BEATRICE REDPATH

he crowd jostled her. A fat man breathing heavily from his exertions was pushing his way into the tent, and Sue wedged herself in closely behind him, taking a step forward each time he moved. Above the sound of the shuffling feet and the noise of laughter and exclamation Sue could hear the voice of the conjuror. She pushed forward eagerly, extending a solid elbow when someone threatened to usurp her place.

It was hot in the tent, for the sun had been blazing on it all day, and there was a nauseating smell of oranges, pop-corn and peanuts. But Sue was determined not to be foiled in her effort to see everything in the circus. She had looked forward to it for so long, with such anticipation; and, if anything, it exceeded her expectations. Now she stood lost in admiration before the lady in crimson tights who had galloped around the ring, standing on a white horse and kissing her hands to the spectators, while a tight-rope walker had held her spell-bound with fear and wonder.

At length some of those in the front row thinned out and Sue found herself standing directly before the little table on which the conjuror had laid out all the paraphernalia of his trade. He was a tall, thin man with hair slightly graying at his temples, and Sue, accustomed to the rustic inhabitants of Beansville, thought she had never seen anyone like him before.

"You see this handkerchief, ladies and gentlemen," he was saying, dangling a bright red handkerchief before the interested spectators.

Sue stood watching him with eager eyes and flushed cheeks, exhibiting an animated interest in his performance, till he paused to smile at her with an appraising glance. She grew crimson, for he appeared to single her out for all his attention as if he were performing his tricks for her alone, while he was laughing lightly as though contemptuous of what he was doing.

There was the bowl of goldfish that appeared magically underneath the handkerchief; there was the rabbit pulled out by its long white ears from the dusty recesses of a dingy silk hat; there was the much-thumbed pack of cards; there were all the usual tricks of the trade; and although Sue had never seen anything like them before her interest in the tricks waned before her interest in the conjuror himself. He was so wholly unlike anyone she had

ever known and she was fascinated by the cool brazen ease of the man. She was glad that she had worn her dress with the pink stripes, even though it had looked like rain, and she was glad that Joe had not brought her after all. At the time she had accused him of unkindness, she had even wept a few tears because he could not be persuaded to take an afternoon from his work to bring her to the circus.

“A woman looks fine going without her husband,” she had complained with some bitterness—but now she was glad that he had stayed away.

Under cover of the general laughter as the conjuror performed a trick with an especial deftness, he whispered a few words to her in praise of her prettiness, and Sue thrilled at his daring.

She left the tent with the remainder of the spectators when the performance was over, but she lingered just a little distance from the tent, for she felt sure that the conjuror would join her when he had packed away his things in readiness for the evening performance. She was amazed at herself, but it was as though he were a magnet attracting her—as though she were powerless to do otherwise. The dullness of her life, the utter monotony of the farm routine had never seemed so unbearable, and she felt as though she must snatch a little of the glamour of the circus for herself before the day was over. She recalled the lady in the crimson tights and she strove to imitate her little airs and graces, practising coquettish glances on an occasional passerby.

And in a few minutes the conjuror came out of the tent looking as though he were seeking someone, and then seeing her he immediately joined her as though they were old friends.

She found little to say to him, but she glanced often at him from under the broad brim of her hat, while he had plenty of conversation, if it was only to laugh at Beansville and its inhabitants. She felt as though he thoroughly despised the little village where she lived, and consequently she hated it the more. Her one fear was that she should appear ignorant and rustic, so she gave full vent to her scorn of everything with a bitterness that surprised him.

She could not help a rising feeling of envy for the life these people lived in contrast with her own on the farm where day followed day in monotonous order. It was so gay in the circus-tent, there was so much glamour, so much life and merriment, while the band played such pretty tunes.

“You can’t be knowing what it is like to be dull,” she complained with a pout, “Why I might as well be a cabbage growing in a field as living all my

life this ways with nothing to see. It's no life at all, and the neighbours about so dull. I be crying my eyes out some days with just the wishing to be away from it all."

The conjuror, if anything, was amused at the violence of her assertions, as he appeared amused at everything. His was a kindly mirth that saw reason for laughter in everything, even were the laughter to be turned on himself. Sue could not understand a laughter that was not three parts scorn. The inhabitants of Beansville were not inclined to merriment of this sort, they laughed mostly to depreciate, so to Sue his laughter struck at the very roots of her life, and in her sudden infatuation for the man she thoroughly despised all that she had ever known. For Joe—what was Joe but one of these rustics whom the conjuror was regarding with such merciless fun.

"You mean it?" he asked, now looking down at her flushed face and blonde prettiness with a smile to himself for her little affected ways. "You mean that you hate all this?—" with a wave of his hand that included a swampy meadow and a mild-looking horse browsing beside a fence.

Sue nodded her head energetically.

"I'm hating it so that I'm near dead with the hating of it," she responded.

The conjuror smiled.

"It's surely a pity to find yourself hating the world we live in," he said, "when there's so much to find pleasure in. Your husband, now. Are you hating him?"

"Yes, I am," snapped Sue, for the moment believing she meant it, in the light of his refusal to take her to the circus.

The conjuror shrugged his shoulders and whistled softly.

"That seems to be always the way with women," he said, "they must be hating what they've got. If they're free, they're all for getting tied up, and if they're tied up they're all for getting free. I've never taken much stock in them myself, though I don't say but that I like a pretty face when I see one—till I see a prettier one. I like it so much that I'm near forgetting everything else."

He looked down at her in a way that brought the colour flying into Sue's face.

"Do you be liking mine?" she asked, striving to be bold, but with a sudden access of shyness.

“I think perhaps I do,” said the conjuror, and with a light laugh he bent over and kissed her.

“You’re a magician, aren’t you?” said Sue, struggling to regain some of her composure. “You can do most anything you want to, I suppose?”

The conjuror laughed. Sue’s mingled archness and naïveté puzzled and at the same time attracted him. That she assumed the naïveté he had no doubt, but she did it cleverly enough to make it attractive.

“I suppose, then,” said Sue, “that you could take a gold coin from under your pillow every morning just by wishing it.”

The conjuror laughed again heartily. She was certainly prettier and more charming with her childlike way of speaking than anything that he could have expected to find in the drab little village of Beansville. Farmers’ wives in his experience were always represented by a checked apron, large feet and a general air of utility. But Sue’s feet in her thick buckled shoes were small and well-shaped, and her dress with the pink stripes mocked at the very idea of usefulness.

“That’s simple,” he answered, and putting his arm around her he kissed her again.

“The circus goes on to-morrow at six o’clock,” he said. “Now, suppose I were magician enough to take you along, what would you say?”

“Oh!” said Sue with a sigh, “If only you were,” and her mouth drooped at the corners as she thought how dull life would be to-morrow—she had forgotten that life would relapse again into its old monotony.

“They’re all the same,” remarked the conjuror to the browsing horse as finally he watched Sue going slowly homeward, “every one of them after what they haven’t got. A happy woman is as rare to find as a snowflake in June,” and with a smile he lounged back in the direction of the circus-tents, which appeared like mushrooms of gigantic size rising out of the green fields. It was late when Sue arrived back at the farm, and she was trembling with excitement as she entered the lighted kitchen. She thought as she flung off her hat that the farmhouse had never appeared so crude and bare, for her mind was full of the conjuror and of all the flattery that he had whispered to her. If she was as pretty as he had said she was surely wasted on a farm hidden away where there was no one to tell her how pretty she was. Joe had never told her that her hair was like sunbeams, or—or any of the pretty things that the conjuror had said.

Joe, who was sitting smoking his pipe in front of the kitchen stove, looked up with a reproachful glance as she came in.

“I suppose that you’re not thinking that a man’s hungry after his day’s work in the fields,” he said with some degree of irritation, “that you must be out till this hour. And now I must be waiting till you go and take off your best things before you get the supper,” he added, with a look of scorn for Sue’s pink dress and her wide hat with the pink ribbons.

This was too much for Sue in her present state of mind. Her eyes blazed with anger.

“That’s all you’re ever thinking of,” she stormed, “whether you get your supper on time. I suppose that’s all a woman’s for, just to see that you get fed. It’s never of my enjoyment that you think so long as you’re satisfied and not kept waiting. Well, I should have known better than to have married a common farmer. I was foolish for sure not to be looking higher—not to be marrying someone who would be thinking more of me than that I was just here to get his meals.”

The tears came into her eyes as she thought how little she was appreciated and how different it might have been if she had married someone like the conjuror. Joe, surprised by her sudden outburst, put down his pipe and got up rather awkwardly.

“There, there,” he said, “I was surely forgetting all about the circus. I was a bit tired, and a man’s bound to be hasty when he’s hungry for his supper and kept waiting. Run along now and take off your pretty things and I’ll set the table. The kettle’s boiling already.”

But Sue refused to be propitiated. She was angry, and she was determined to remain so, and she continued throughout the evening to treat Joe with an air of lofty disdain. She was sure that no woman had ever been quite so unhappy, and her life appeared inexpressibly dreary and without interest after the glamour of the circus and in the light of the conjuror’s attractions.

Long after Joe had fallen asleep she lay in the darkness with the tears wet on her cheeks as she ruminated on her unhappiness. Beyond the little village of Beansville the world was surely full of wonderful things, and she had so many more years of life stretching before her in which she might enjoy them. But in Beansville she would grow old without ever having lived, with lines appearing on her smooth face while the lustre left her hair.

All night Sue tossed restlessly on her pillow, and in the morning rose still aggrieved to prepare an early breakfast, as Joe had some business to transact in the next town and must make an early start. She still persisted in her anger against him and watched him drive off with a frown, refusing a parting word. Then slowly she went upstairs and took down her pink dress and her broad hat with the pink ribbons and slowly and determinedly she put them on. She knew now that she had intended this all along—she was going with the conjuror!

The morning was fresh and sweet and dewy as Sue started off across the fields in the direction of the circus-tents. The sky was brilliantly, vividly blue, and the air seemed full of the song of birds, although there were no birds to be seen. It was as though the air itself was singing whilst the smell of early primroses came pleasant and sweet from the hedges. Sue's spirits bounded, and it was with a pleasant excitement that she ran across the fields, her shoes damp from the thick dew. As she came near the circus fields she saw that everything was noise and confusion, with people running hither and thither, and much shouting going on as wagon after wagon was loaded or tents were taken down. There was not much glamour here, and for a few moments Sue stood bewildered and wished that she had not come. No one paid any attention to her, they were all too busy to notice her, and she was just thinking that after all she had better turn back when she saw the conjuror leaning against a fence some distance off, a cigarette between his lips. He greeted her without any apparent surprise except with a slight lifting of his eyebrows.

"This is good of you," he said, "to come and see us off."

Sue felt the colour rushing into her cheeks, and she tried to keep up her head and not look embarrassed. It was harder than she had imagined.

"I'm coming with you," she announced defiantly. "I want to join the circus. I'm never going back to Joe."

The conjuror regarded her in silence while he blew the smoke from his cigarette in slow spirals.

"So that's it," he said slowly, "You're coming with me."

Sue looked at him from under the brim of her hat, smiling and blushing.

"Aren't you wanting me, after all?" she questioned.

The conjuror was silent for a moment, and then he laughed lightly and threw away his cigarette.

“Of course, I’m wanting you if that’s how it is,” he said, looking down at her till she blushed even more vividly, “I’m not one to be refusing a pretty face for a travelling companion.”

They started in advance of the rest of the circus and Sue felt a trifle disappointed in his manner towards her, for she had been inclined to be very dramatic, and his careless good humour seemed scarcely suitable for an occasion of such solemn import. But the glamour of the life before her and the conjuror’s attraction soon made her forget everything but how pleasant it was to be walking along the country roads in the sweet-smelling morning air with such a companion. He had so much to talk about, he made her laugh so constantly that she thought a lifetime spent with such a companion would be one of continuous happiness. She never questioned but that he was in love with her—had he not whispered words to her the evening before that had sent the colour flying into her cheeks—and had he not kissed her? She thrilled even now at the memory of those kisses.

They scarcely met anyone as they went along the road, only an occasional cart jogged past, going slowly in the ruts that seamed the road. Sue talked to him now quite naturally, forgetting to assume her little mannerisms of yesterday. She was as a thoughtless child out on a frolic, and as he listened to her, as he watched her, his manner underwent a subtle change.

The sun was hot and at times they stopped to rest under a tree that threw an inviting shade, he lying on his back with his arms under his head, while Sue crouched down on the soft moss beside him. It was pleasant there with the fields stretching away as far as the eyes could see, the fences dwindling to a mere line in the distance. But Sue did not care to look at the fields, nor at the blue sky with its white fleece of clouds. Her eyes were tired of these—she wanted to hear him talk instead of the life of cities—of night made brighter than day by a thousand lights.

“Those like Joe are happy enough in the fields,” she said with scorn, “but you are different. You’d hate it just like I do. Joe’s only a common farmer. He don’t know how dull it be for those whose tastes are different.”

The conjuror was silent, staring up into the sky where the clouds were white foam spreading across the blue.

“You’re a magician, you are,” said Sue with pride, “That’s different to being a farmer.”

The conjuror sifted some pine needles between his fingers before he answered.

“I’m by way of being a poor sort of magician,” he said at last. “I’m not working as much magic as your Joe is doing when he’s simply planting a field. I can take a rabbit out of a hat—so long’s I have the rabbit—but I couldn’t put life into even a blade of grass. Your Joe is nearer being a magician than I am—Oh, life is not so dull,” he went on more slowly, “life is not so dreary—it’s what you bring to life that makes it what it is. It’s like those that come to look at my tricks. Some come ready to scoff—others come to be amused—and they find amusement. And so it is with life. There’s plenty to scoff at in life—but if you’re happy yourself you’ll find plenty to be happy about—if you’re interested you’ll find lots that’s interesting—but if you’re dull yourself—you’ll find life dull. Oh, don’t you see it’s what we bring to life every time. Life itself is about the same for most of us. It’s what we bring to life that makes it what it is.”

Sue listened wide-eyed. She had never heard anyone talk like this before. In Beansville people accepted things without question or thought. If there was a bad harvest they grumbled and complained at the hardness of their life, and if there was a good one they were thankful, but only considered it their due. The conjuror was opening up new vistas to her, but there was no longer between them the attitude of woman and lover. It was all gone—he did not even look at her with the eyes of yesterday—he did not seem to notice that she was pretty any more, and she wondered if he was disappointed in her. And now she glanced anxiously up at the sky, for thick dark clouds were rising in heavy banks and there was a low murmur of thunder that was coming nearer and nearer. Sue was afraid of thunderstorms. In the corner of the big kitchen there was a wide settle where she always went to hide her head beneath cushions in the advent of a storm. And here she was out in the open fields with no sign of shelter and the storm would break upon them in a few moments. She was ashamed to tell the conjuror of her fears, for he had grown so distant, so remote, as though he scarcely noticed her any more. He was not noticing the storm either, and now a few big drops splashed down on her thin dress and Sue shrank from them with a little shiver as she glanced at the angry sky.

She felt very frightened and lonely and more and more she longed for the comfortable homelike kitchen with Joe coming in with a laugh for her fears, but at the same time shutting the blinds to prevent her from seeing the lightning darting into the room. For now the rain was coming down in thin shining sheets, and the conjuror laughed as it trickled down his face.

“We get used to this sort of thing,” he said. “I suppose you don’t mind a bit of rain. Sometimes one is glad enough of it after a hot dusty day tramping the roads. Rain is a tenderer thing than sun, I think, as a woman’s tears are tenderer than her smiles.”

Sue could not tell him how she dreaded the crash of the thunder that seemed to come so close. She longed with her whole heart to go back, but she feared his mocking laugh should she tell him that she had already changed her mind. Anyway, it was too late, for she was miles away from home, and terrible as it was to be out in the storm with the conjuror beside her, she could not think of being out in it alone—she did not even know the way back, and dusk was already creeping among the trees and along the hedges.

It was all so different from what she had thought when she had left her home so gaily that morning with the soft words of the conjuror still echoing in her ears. All her big romance had faded away into something quite despicable, and it seemed to be the conjuror himself who was showing it to her in that light. She walked with her eyes on the ground and occasionally a tear ran down her cheeks and mingled with the rain-drops. She wondered what Joe would be thinking when he came back to the empty house and found her gone, and with all her heart she wished herself there to fling her arms around him when he came in. And now she had done something irretrievable, and she could never go back to him.

All the time the conjuror was talking half to himself and half to her, Sue thought, although part of the time she was not even listening to what he was saying.

“Some say it’s nature—and some call it spirit,” he was saying, “but I call it the Great Conjuror—none of us can learn His tricks no matter how hard we try. Why, child, you say you’ve never seen anything so wonderful as the few cheap tricks I do to fool some simple rustics by. What about day and night—life and death—tricks, real tricks these, and having need to be done by the Master Conjuror. Oh, there are no end to the tricks He does every day before our eyes, and you never grow tired watching—you never know the next trick that He will take out of the bag to startle and amaze. Oh, child, you won’t find the days dull if you just keep watching the tricks that the Great Conjuror is doing. You won’t think much of my cheap tricks then, and you won’t think much of me either. I guess your Joe is more nearly in touch with the Great Conjuror than I am. I guess he can show you more than I can if you just ask him. I’m only a poor kind of conjuror with a bagful of tricks.”

The rain had all cleared away now and the smell of the damp earth rose pleasantly, fragrantly, fresh. The hedges and trees dripped and drooped heavily, while the conjuror breathed the fresh air with a pleased satisfaction, but Sue's heart was heavier than before as she looked up at a few faint stars coming out in the sky. It was terrible what she had done, and now there was no help for it. She was here at night alone with this stranger—and Joe—oh, how she longed for Joe and his clumsy kindly ways!

"It's what's in a man's heart, not what's in his head that matters," the conjuror continued, "and I guess the man that is nearest to the great simple things has the best in his heart. You can't work out in the sun and smell the good earth and know the wind on your face and take up with evil thoughts."

It was Joe that he was showing her—Joe—now that she had lost him forever! She had never felt so lonely—so wretched—so ignorant of life.

"I didn't know at first," the conjuror said thoughtfully, "the kind you were. You had all the ways of a different sort. But you're only a child crying out for the sun—and we don't get the sun, you know—we're not intended to. If we just catch a glimpse of it now and then that's all that's good for us."

Sue was sobbing now, her fingers covering her face.

"I think you've had your lesson," he said, "and there's one trick we conjurors don't do—we don't turn children into sorrowful women. But there's still one more trick I can do," he continued cheerfully, "the very last trick in the bag—if you cross that stile and yonder field you'll be at home in five minutes, and in time to cook your husband's supper."

Sue uncovered her face and looked about her in astonishment. There was the chimney of her own house with the smoke curling up in a thin spiral, and there was the top of the tall elm. The conjuror had led her back through the dusk while he had been talking—and she had thought herself miles away from home—he had led her back to her own door!

She was speechless in her sudden joy and relief, and in her embarrassment she found no words to say to him as he stood tall and silent and remote in the gathering dusk. With the tears still wet on her cheeks and with a little sob that was all relief she turned and ran in the direction he had pointed out, while the conjuror stood with a smile on his lips watching the last flicker of her dress in the dusk. Then with a careless shrug he turned back into the fields.

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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[End of *The Last Trick in the Bag* by Beatrice Redpath]