Beggars Can Choose

By Margaret Weymouth Jackson

CHAPTER III—The bridal night ... Will admires him, and his patronage means so much, just now."

"Will won't be jealous of any attention I pay to Mr. Poole, or that he pays to me," Ernestine said hesitatingly, "if that's what you mean. It won't hurt Mr. Poole to admire me. He's a nice old man, and he loves to admire women, and men, too, so far as that goes. It's part of his big heart. Will says. Anyhow, Will wouldn't be jealous of me—now." Her small face was so shining that Mrs. Bennett threw her instinct away with a gesture and came and kissed her young friend.

"Have a lovely time, darling. Pastano's has the distinction of being the very touchiest place in all Chicago. It is beautiful, and not so dangerous as Mr. Pastano likes people to think. He is really very careful about the police. And then, too, you will be with Mr. Poole, who is a close friend of Ruby."

Will was at the door, grinning at them, his mobile mouth twisted into a kind of sardonic look that he ... times, and that made him ... ther. He had a great deal ... Ernestine often thought, considering his youth and scanty advantages. Marriage had changed him very little. He was perhaps, somewhat more inflammable, but he took Ernestine and the life with her most naturally and without self-consciousness.

They went on to Pastano's, entered an unmarked doorway and climbed broad wooden steps with double doors at the top which opened upon light, music, heat and the sound of happy voices.

The cafe room was airy, its excellent ventilation a surprise to Ernestine, and an important factor in every one's pleasure and good appetite. Mr. Poole came to meet them, and Ernestine gave him her hand ... her nicest schoolgirl smile. ... wished Mrs. Bennett had not said anything to her about this man. She did not have to heed any warnings except ... her husband gave her!

Following Mr. Poole among the tables, Ernestine thought about the many things Will had told her of this man, until she felt that she knew him perfectly. His remarkable carelessness of himself, his small ... ence and drunkenness and his great ... able gifts, his value to his paper, vanities and prejudices, his indolent charm, she knew. He was as natural and straightforward with every one as a child with other children. Yet he possessed also the authoritative manner of the ... of established reputation. He drew Ernestine's hand within the curve of his arm, and led her to a table reserved for their party.

All the places were filled except theirs, and the men rose to greet Ernestine. There was only one other woman, Mrs. Wiston, the wife of the syndicate editor of the Sun, a small beautiful woman with the face of a siren who can never forget her role. She had been married twice before she had met Wiston, and Ernestine knew that back in New England were the wife and child Wiston had set aside for her. Ernestine was conscious of the indignation common to married women against such an imposter.

Wiston himself, a tall academic man, with a ribbon to his glasses, Ernestine had met at the office, and John Tucker, called Tommy by every one, who was Will's rival for honors in the art room. The third man who was presented to her Ernestine did not know and she failed to catch his name. He was a small powerful looking individual, with a dark mustache, bright gray eyes and a calm and elaborate manner. The other two men, Underwood and Harrison, were from the Sun staff, and happy to be at any party, any time, and place.

They all sat down, Mr. Poole with one of the women on either side, and Tommy Tucker next to Ernestine, the pompous little man next to Mrs. Wiston, with the others grouped about the big table. Ernestine by now had forgotten her self-consciousness and became radiantly happy. She wished Will were beside her. She was only a half, and Will was the other half, and he ought always to be beside her, breathing as she breathed, turning as she turned. The idea delighted her, and she laughed at herself but felt still a deep joy in their unity.

Mr. Poole turned to Ernestine and told her softly that her youth and beauty were sweeter than sweet night itself. He took his glass in his hand.

"And more intoxicating," he said, "than this for which I have wasted half my life and most of my talents."

Ernestine, looking up in his kind face, knew instantly that in spite of his flowery words, and in spite of Mrs. Bennett's conventional fears, this great man had no perdatory impulses toward her. He knew that she was deeply in love with Will. But to watch her, to speak to her, to listen to her voice, gave him pleasure. It was all he would ever want of her. Her instinct in this matter proved true, during the years of Will's association with Mr. Poole.

"And what have you two young ... been doing ... last I saw you?"

"We have dined in state at mammà," said Ernestine, smiling mischievously. "Will missed the significance of it entirely. Papa has, under duress, forgiven him. He offered Will a job in his office."

"And what does Will say?"

"He didn't even pay any attention to it. He just said that he was satisfied with the job he had thanks just the same, and went on talking to mamma."

Mr. Poole laughed with delight. "Doesn't he know what papa wants?"

"I don't know whether he does or not. But anyhow, papa knows that, now he has decided to forgive Will. Will doesn't intend to let it make any difference. Papa really would like to let us struggle along. He feels pretty disappointed in me. But mamma can't hear it. She is determined to take care of us, whether we will or not."

"But how can she, if Will does not change his employment?"

Ernestine's face grew firm. "She can't. I won't let her. I've made up my mind to have nothing but what Will can give me. I don't mind being poor."

"You must resist poverty," Mr. Poole said. "It is the deadly enemy of marriage."

Ernestine's small face was scornful. "Poverty was not so black as it was painted, she observed. He looked at her.

"You do not believe me? Wait, then and see."

"But we are poor now. It's fun to be poor."

"You—poor!" His amazement was so genuine that Ernestine looked at him in surprise. "My darling child," he reasoned with her, "you don't know what the word means. You two—still in the flush of first love, without children, without a house to burden you, without a responsibility! One bed will do for both of you, one room will hold two hearts together. You are well, you are eager, you are fed and clothed and housed. You have a trunk full of pretty clothes, an adoring mamma begging to do things for you. You do not know the cold and odious breath of poverty at all. I could show you its dark face; slums, little children with great heads and emaciated bodies, houses held together by strings—shambles! I'll show you pale girls, and prostitution and bare shelves, and empty cupboards, and pride bent double. Lack is a cruel witch. Pray that you may never know her."

"Yet you just told me to wait!"

"Ah, but that was nonsense. Life will never be cruel to you."

They ate the excellent food put before them, and talked, the men arguing among themselves about a technicality in some one's work, Will and Underwood and Mr. Wiston deep in it. Mr. Poole and Tommy competing for Ernestine's attention. Presently Tommy was drawn into the men's talk, and M. Poole leaned close to Ernestine and became very confidential.

"Will tells me you are going to have a child. I think that is the last perfection. I always knew that he was gifted, but his marriage with you has established the certainty of his future. Such things are not accidents! He is the chosen of the gods, or one of their finest gifts would not be his. He has all the elements of success. And a wife and children will do the forging."

Ernestine's cheeks burned. She could not understand how Will could have told his still precious secret to Mr. Poole. But she exercised great self-command to be quiet and responsive to him. He went on praising Will, and assuring her of the brightness of his future, until, after a little, she forgot her confusion and him her own feelings about Will.

The party grew very gay, and Ernestine joined in the general happiness. Without warning the tight little man with the powerful shoulders was on his feet. He bowed to Ernestine, and he bowed around the room, and everywhere hands began to clap and there were shouts of joyous approval at sight of him.

With a gesture indescribably complacent, he held up his hand for silence and got it instantly. Standing so, his chest pushed out like a pouter pigeon's, his body rocking back on his heels, his napkin in his hand, which he flourished from time to time, he began to sing.

It was Siegfried's cry of joy, when he passed through the flames and found the sleeping Burnhilde. Ernestine recognized it, as she recognized the man. He was Mostane, one of the world's greatest tenors. And she had criticized his manner! But now, all else was swept away, and she lived only through her ears on which fell each perfect note. She knew in delightful anticipation what his golden voice would do next, and her heart soared with his voice.

He stopped abruptly, rocked a moment on his heels and then gently, softly, poignantly he sang without accompaniment:

Still wie die Nacht
Tief wie da Meer
Sol deine Liebe sein.

The tears rained down Ernestine's cheeks. He sat down in a storm of excited applause. Ernestine could not stop crying. She leaned on Will's shoulder, for he came and sat beside her and put his arm about her. When at last she could breathe steadily she rose and went around the table to Mostane and took his fat face in her two hands and kissed him.

There was a cheer from all the tables, and Will gleamed at her with approval for her spontaneity.

"Nothing else was adequate," declared Mr. Poole.

The hours passed in a trance. The patronage in the dining room changed, grew noiser, more turbulent. Girls came and went on the stage, and danced and sang, and twinkled pretty feet, and flicked bare knees. It was all an unreal blending of sight and sound and color, and Ernestine's heart was far away, in some lonely space with Will. Her being still trembled with that last swelling note. Dimly in her mind she felt an awakening of artistic comprehension, a spiritual understanding of the strength and power of perfect performance. Will had latent in him some such force, but it was far from impulses to such finished authority. Her thought was not that clear, but groping.

It was time to go home, and Ernestine wanted Will to take her away from the others. But she saw that Mr. Poole was not himself at all any longer. Will always took him home, from the office, from such affairs as this, to his flat. Ernestine felt that she could not bear to be parted from Will tonight.

She became conscious of a man standing behind her, a little to one side, regarding her gravely, quietly. She glanced up at him but did not know him. He was a huge man, with a great dark head and clear dark skin. He wore a sack suit, and his narrow tie glittered with a ruby of enormous size, set in a gold circle. On one of his big brown hands, which were covered with coarse black hair, was another such gem. Ernestine remembered with a feeling of faintness all the wild stories she had heard about Pastano's place being so disorderly. Will, at least, was sober, as he always was.

Mr. Poole now saw the stranger, greeted him and called him to the table.

"And this is Mrs. Todd, my young friend's wife. You know Will, of course, and the others. Ernestine this is Ruby Pastano, jewel merchant, ward boss, and the owner of this dive. A bad man—a terrible man. Shake hands with him."

Mr. Poole was enjoying himself and looked up at Pastano with glee. Mr. Pastano did not smile. He still fixed on Ernestine that queer solemn look. He bowed above her.

"Sit down, Ruby, sit down!" commanded Mr. Poole thickly, and motioned for a waiter to bring a chair, which was produced instantly.

Mr. Pastano sat down between Mr. Poole and Ernestine, and she felt his gravity spreading about the table, so that all were a little quieted.

"This is my birthday," Ernestine explained graciously. "I am twenty-one years old today, and Mr. Poole was kind enough to have a party for me. Now that you have come it is more charming."

"Your voice—" he said, his own tone soft and silky. "Where were you born?"

She told him, naively, the address of her mother's house.

"But you have lived in the country."

"Oh, yes, always, in the summer. My Grandmother Langley had a home in Indiana where my father's quarries are. Why do you ask?"

"Never mind me. Tell me of yourself. This house in the country, and your home on Sheridan road is a long way from here."

Ernestine understood his idea, but she refused to be drawn into such a complicated conversation.

"It is only a few miles," she replied, and he gave an impatient exclamation.

"It is a thousand miles and a hundred years at least," he said. "Tell me about your mother's house."

Ernestine thought about it.

"Do you know anything about American period furniture, Mr. Pastano? There is a Duncan Phyfe table, and pierced brass fire-fender, in the living room; four-poster beds upstairs, with hooked rugs and woven counterpanes—all of the things have come into the family honestly, through natural possession, and not from auction rooms. But, of course, you know."

She smiled at him. Her long hands lay together in the immaculate perfection of her yellow chiffon lap. Her voice was low, only for his ears, and though she thought him very strange, she gave him her gravest, youngest courtesy.

"I know nothing about America, at all, it seems."

"It's just the house—I'll take you to see it some day, if you like, although mamma doesn't like people to consider it a museum, as some experts do. Of course, I don't live there since my marriage. We live in a rooming house on Erie street, and it just shows that furniture and things do not mean so much for I am happier now than I was."

"You have left this house of your mother, with pierced brass from your own ancestors, to live in Erie street?"

She nodded and smiled again, and her eyes pleaded for his understanding.

He shook his head sadly. He heaved a vast sigh.

"No, I do not understand America. Continually I am full of new astonishment. Women are somewhat the same the world around—but unAmerican men are outside my comprehension."

"You have been successful here," she reminded him, but he brushed her comment aside, pursuing his own thought aloud.

"No, I do not understand. If my son is penniless; if he is an artist, starving in a garret, and the great, the incredible good fortune come to him that he shall marry a girl of noble birth, who has a quiet voice, and gentle still hands, and a brow where breeding shows its lovely smile—If my son have the grace and the smile of fortune to marry such a girl, and he bring her to a place like this—" He looked about him with scorn. "If he bring his wife to this brothel—this sink—I take a knife in my own hand and stab him through the heart. You must go away from her instantly—now! There is activity in this room that pollutes the very air. You will strangle in it—"

Ernestine's heart stopped beating in her astonishment. She felt that she had been unbearably affronted, and she rose and stood pale with anger. Mr. Pastano rose and stood before her, and met with approval the blaze of her eyes. A waiter appeared instantly with her coat, and he took it and wrapped it about her with immense dignity.

"So, go, princess!" he exclaimed, and bowed a little, and looked at her again, his own eyes alight. "You have only my good wishes. It is unfortunate I must confess the title to a place unfit for you, but this place was not made for you. The unfit, the broken, the abnormal must have their haunts, and they are not for others. Some day, perhaps, it will be my fortune that we shall be friends."

Every one was staring at them. Will had risen and stood beside her, smiling uncertainly, not knowing at all what was going forward.

"I want to go home," Ernestine said to him icily.

"Tommy will take you," Will answered easily, "I have to take Mr. Pooole to his flat."

Ernestine felt herself beginning to tremble with the indignities heaped upon her. She had been so in love, so exposed, that it all hurt her incredibly. She looked about her uncertainly, then laughed and answered Will with composure.

"I don't believe I'll have to depend on Tommy. Here are Lillian and Loring. They'll take me home."

Will swung about in astonishment, and there, indeed, coming through the room uneasily, were Lillian and her lover. Ernestine stood smiling malignantly, as they came forward.

"Ernestine," exclaimed Lillian, when she was near enough, "I wanted to see you. We went to Mrs. Bennett's, but the maid said you were here, so we followed you. Can you come with us?"

"I was just going," answered Ernestine. "But wait and meet our friends. This is my sister, Miss Briceland, Mrs. Wiston, and Mr. Poole, Lillian, and Monsieur Mostane, and Mr. Wiston of the Sun, and Mr. Underwood, and Mr. Heywood—and this is Mr. Pastano, who owns this charming place. And this is Mr. Hamilton, Mrs. Wiston—".

The men had risen and were fumbling over the acknowledgements of the introductions. Ernestine seemed the most composed person present, and no one could have guessed that her knees were trembling.

"We wanted to get on, if you and Will can come with us," said Loring, while Mr. Pastano stood and regarded the newcomers evenly.

"I'll come with you, but Will has an engagement before he returns home. Goodby, Mr. Poole. Thank you for the evening."

She gave her hand to her host, and he put his own hand on her shoulder to steady himself. Loring winced and scowled at this contact, but Ernestine was now in complete command of herself and smiled steadily. Mr. Poole's heavy face, his confusion, did not dismay her. She bade him an affectionate good night, then turned to the others.

"Good night, all of you. I'm sorry to run away, from my own party, but someebody must start. If you will excuse me— Good night, Will, I'll see you later."

She gave Will a luminous look. He did not answer but stared at her silently, and she turned, sweeping her wrap about her, carrying herself like a queen of the realm, and went off, Loring's black bulk between the sisters, his face dark with forebodings.

Down the wooden stairs they passed in complete silence. A new sedan stood at the curb, and Loring in majestic silence opened the car door for the girls who got in the back seat. He closed the door and got in the driver's seat and started the engine. Lillian and Ernestine sat close together in the warmth and comfort of the heated upholstered, glass-enclosed interior. Ernestine felt for the first time a poignant homesickness for comfort and convenience.

"Why didn't Will come with us?" asked Loring from the front seat.

Ernestine decided to be frank.

"You could see that Mr. Poole had been drinking too much, couldn't you? Well, Will felt that he ought to take him home and see that he got there safely. He often does that. They're good friends, you know. And you mustn't think badly of Mr. Poole. He's old, and, really, he is a wonderful man."

"But how about you? How would you have got home? Our coming along was an accident."

"Tommy Tucker would have taken me," said Ernestine calmly. "Or the Wistons, or Monsieur Mostane. I'd have gone home all right."

There was a silence of disapproval and adjustment. The car rolled smoothly along the quiet streets.

"Then everything's all right?" asked Lillian difficulty.

"Of course, darling."

"I'm so glad. Will you come and have lunch with mamma and me tomorrow and let me tell you all our plans?"

"I'll see," said Ernestine. "Now, I'll have to go home. I'm terribly tired."

"Of course you are. It's late. I'm tired, too. But, Ernestine, I'm so happy that I wonder if I can be any happier." Her voice was bright and clear—quick and competent. Ernestine remembered the tears and passion of her own engagement.

"You will be happy always. You will," she said with intensity.

They left her at the stone steps and watched until she opened the door with her latchkey and disappeared into the dark prison-like house. Then Loring turned the car about and, with Lillian at his side, started back north. Lillian cuddled against him.

"Oh, Lorrie," she said sorrowfully, "she isn't happy. You know she isn't. It wouldn't be so bad for her to be poor, if only he were good to her. But you can see that he neglects her. If he cannot provide for her decently he could at least be a gentleman to her. But after all she has done for him, he mistreats her."

"Don't be disturbed about it, darling," said Loring in a low voice. "There's nothing we can do now. Only be good to her and wait for her to waken."

In Mrs. Bennett's boarding house

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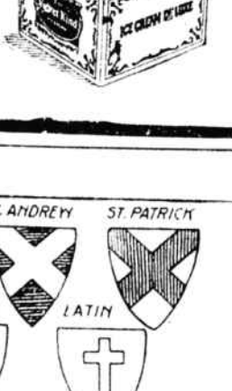

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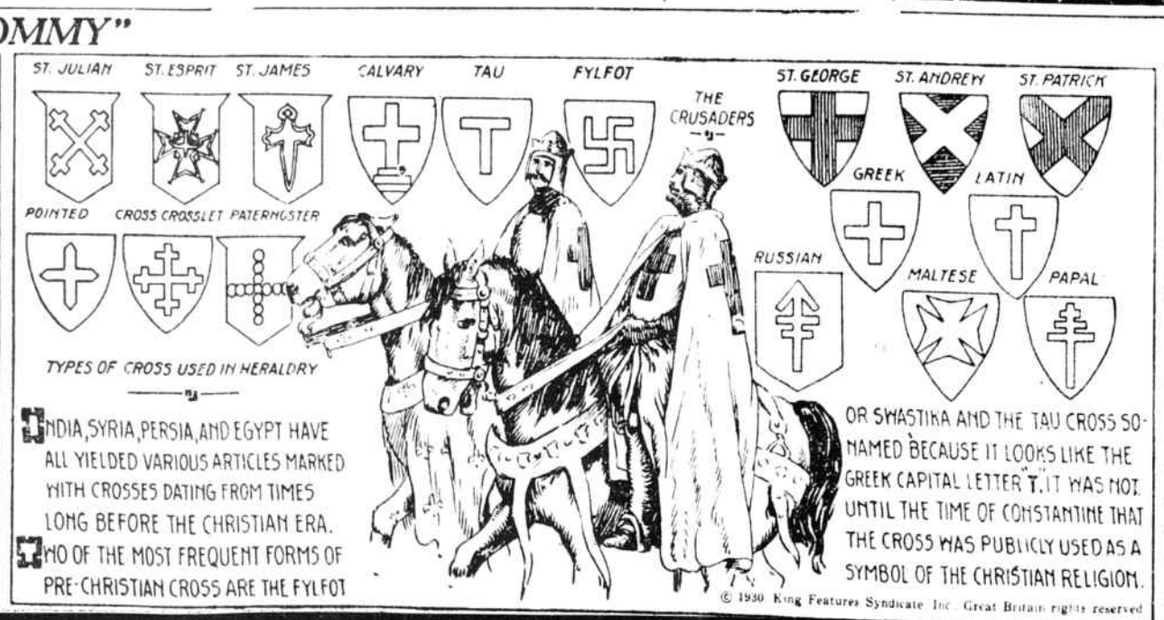
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