

PORTRAIT OF
J E N N I E

BY
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The characters and situations in this work are wholly fictional and imaginary, and do not portray and are not intended to portray any actual persons or parties. (This statement obviously does not apply to those established artists whose names or works are mentioned in this book, or to those families of Truro whom I have also mentioned.)

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PORTRAIT OF JENNIE

CHAPTER 1

THERE is such a thing as hunger for more than food, and that was the hunger I fed on. I was poor, my work unknown; often without meals; cold, too, in winter in my little studio on the West Side. But that was the least of it.

When I talk about trouble, I am not talking about cold and hunger. There is another kind of suffering for the artist which is worse than any-

thing a winter, or poverty, can do; it is more like a winter of the mind, in which the life of his genius, the living sap of his work, seems frozen and motionless, caught — perhaps forever — in a season of death; and who knows if spring will ever come again to set it free?

It was not only that I could not sell my work — that has happened to good men, even to great men, before — but that I couldn't seem to get through, myself, to the things that were bottled up inside me. No matter what I did, figure, landscape, still-life, it all seemed different from what I meant — from what I knew, as surely as my name was Eben Adams, was the thing I really wanted to say in the world; to tell people about, somehow, through my painting.

I cannot tell you what that period was like; because the worst part of it was an anxiety it is very hard to describe. I suppose most artists go through something of the sort; sooner or later it is no longer

enough for them just to live — to paint, and have enough, or nearly enough, to eat. Sooner or later God asks His question: are you for me, or against me? And the artist must have some answer, or feel his heart break for what he cannot say.

One evening in the winter of 1938 I was walking home through the Park. I was a good deal younger then; I carried a portfolio of drawings under my arm, and I walked slowly because I was tired. The damp mist of the winter evening drifted around me; it drifted down across the sheep meadow, and through the Mall which was empty and quiet at that hour. The children who usually played there had gone home, leaving the bare, dark trees and the long rows of benches wet and spidery with mist. I kept shifting the portfolio from one arm to the other; it was heavy and clumsy, but I had no money to ride.

I had been trying all day to sell some of my pictures (There is a sort of desperation which takes

hold of a man after a while, a dreadful feeling of the world's indifference, not only to his hunger or his pain, but to the very life which is in him.) Each day the courage with which I started out was a little less; by now it had all run out, like sand from a glass.

That night I was at the bottom, without money or friends, cold, hungry, and tired, without hope, not knowing where to turn. I think I was a little lightheaded, from not having had enough to eat. I crossed the Drive, and started down the long, deserted corridor of the Mall.

In front of me, the spaced, even rows of lights shone yellow in the shadowy air; I heard the crisp sound of my own footsteps on the pavement; and behind me the hiss and whisper of traffic turned homeward at the end of day. The city sounds were muted and far away, they seemed to come from another time, from somewhere in the past, like the sound of summer, like bees in a meadow long ago.

I walked on, as though through the quiet arches of a dream. My body seemed light, without weight, made up of evening air.

The little girl playing by herself in the middle of the Mall made no sound either. She was playing hopscotch; she went up in the air with her legs apart, and came down again as silent as dandelion seed.

I stopped and watched her, for I was surprised to see her there, all alone. No other little children were in sight, only the mist and the long, even rows of lights stretching away to the terrace and the lake. I looked around for her nurse, but the benches were empty. "It's getting pretty dark," I said. "Oughtn't you to go home?"

I don't believe it sounded unfriendly. The child marked her next jump, and got ready; but first she looked at me sideways over her shoulder. "Is it late?" she asked. "I don't know time very well."

"Yes," I said; "it's late."

“Well,” she said, “I don’t have to go home yet.”
And she added in a matter of fact tone,
“Nobody’s ready for me.”

I turned away; after all, I thought, what business is it of mine? She straightened up, and pushed the dark hair back from her face, under the brim of her bonnet. Her arms were thin, they made the sharp, bird-like motions of a child. “I’ll walk a ways with you, if you don’t mind,” she said. “I guess it’s a little lonesome here all by myself.”

I said I didn’t mind, and we went up the Mall together, between the empty benches. I kept looking around for someone she might belong to, but there was nobody. “Are you all alone?” I asked after a while. “Isn’t anybody with you?”

She came to some chalk marks left there by another child, and stopped to jump over them. “No,” she said. “Who would there be?”

“Anyway,” she added a moment later, “you’re with me.”

And for some reason that seemed to her quite enough. She wanted to know what I had in the portfolio. When I told her, she nodded her head in a satisfied way. "I knew they were pictures," she said. I asked her how she knew.

"Oh, I just knew," she said.

The damp mist drifted along beside us, cold, with the smell of winter in it. It was my not having eaten all day that made everything seem so queer, I thought, walking up the Mall with a little girl no higher than my elbow. I wondered if I could be arrested for what I was doing; I don't even know her name, I thought, in case they ask me.

She said nothing for a while; she seemed to be counting the benches. But she must have known what I was thinking, for as we passed the fifth bench, she told me her name without my asking. "It's Jennie," she said; "just so's you'll know."

"Jennie," I repeated, a little stupidly. "Jennie what?"

“Jennie Appleton,” she said. She went on to say that she lived with her parents in a hotel, but that she didn’t see them very often. “Father and mother are actors and actresses,” she declared. “They’re at the Hammerstein Music Hall. They do juggling on a rope.”

She gave a sort of skip; and then she came over to me, and put her hand in mine. “They’re not home very much,” she said; “on account of being in the profession.”

But something had begun to worry me. Wait a minute, I said to myself, there’s something wrong here. Wait, I thought . . . wait a minute . . . and then I remembered. Of course — that was it: the Hammerstein Music Hall had been torn down years ago, when I was a boy.

“Well,” I said; “well . . .”

Her hand in mine was real enough, firm and warm; she wasn’t a ghost, and I wasn’t dreaming. “I go to school,” she said, but only in the

mornings. I'm too little to go all day yet."

I heard her give a child's sigh, full of a child's trouble, light as air. "I don't have very exciting lessons," she remarked. "They're mostly two and two is four, and things like that. When I'm bigger, I'm going to learn geography and history, and about the Kaiser. He's the King of Germany."

"He was," I said gravely. "But that was long ago."

"I think you're wrong," said Jennie. She walked a little away from me, smiling to herself about something. "Cecily Jones is in my class," she said. "I can fight her. I'm stronger than she is, and I can fight her good."

"She's just a little girl."

She gave a skip. "It's fun having somebody to play with," she said.

I looked down at her: a child dressed in old fashioned clothes, a coat and gaiters and a bonnet. Who was it painted children like that? Henri?

Brush? One of the old fellows. . . . There was a picture in the Museum, somebody's daughter, it hung over the stairs as you went up. But children always dressed the same. She didn't look to me as though she played with other children very often.

I said yes, I supposed it was fun.

"Don't you have anyone to play with?" she asked.

"No," I said.

I had an idea that she was sorry for me, and at the same time glad that I had nobody else but her to play with. It made me smile; a child's games are so real, I thought, for children believe everything. We came to an interesting crack, and she hopped along on one foot until she got to the end of it. "I know a song," she said. "Would you like to hear it?"

And without waiting for me to answer, looking up at me from under the brim of her bonnet, she sang in a clear, tuneless voice:

Where I come from
Nobody knows;
And where I'm going
Everything goes.
The wind blows,
The sea flows —
And nobody knows.

The song caught me off my guard, it was so unlike what I had expected. I don't know what I had been waiting for — some nursery rhyme, perhaps, or a popular tune of the day; little girls whose parents were actors and actresses sometimes sang about love. "Who taught you that?" I asked in surprise.

But she only shook her head, and stood there looking at me. "Nobody taught me," she said. "It's just a song."

We had come to the great circle at the end of the Mall, and my path led away to the left, across

the drive again, and out the west gate. The winter evening wrapped us round in mist, in solitude and silence, the wet trees stood up dark and bare around us, and the distant city sounded its notes, falling and fading in the air. “Well, goodbye,” I said; “I have to go now.”

I held out my hand to her, and she took it gravely. “Do you know the game I like to play best?” she asked. “No,” I said.

“It’s a wishing game.”

I asked her what she wished for most.

“I wish you’d wait for me to grow up,” she said. “But you won’t, I guess.”

A moment later she had turned and was walking quietly back down the Mall. I stood there looking after her; after a while I couldn’t see her any more.

When I got home I heated a can of soup on the gas burner, and cut myself a slice of bread, and some cheese. It was heavy in my stomach, but it made me feel better. Then I took my paintings out