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FEATURES
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The St. John Standard

NEW BRUNSWICK, CANADA

ST. JOHN, N. B., SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 6, 1919

FEATURES
Society—Fiction
Children's Corner

STORIES BY EDNA FREEMAN

THE GAY OLD BOY

There are of you who have dwelt—or even lingered—in Chicago, Illinois (this is not a humorous story), are familiar with the region known as the Loop. For those others of you to whom Chicago is a transfer point between New York and San Francisco there is presented this brief explanation:

The Loop is a clamorous, smoke-filled district, embraced by the iron arms of the elevated tracks. In a city boasting fewer millions, it would be known familiarly as downtown. From Congress to Lake street, from Wabash almost to the river, those thunderous tracks make a complete circle, or loop. Within it lie the retail shops, the commercial hotels, the theatres, the restaurants. It is the Fifth avenue (dubbed) and the Broadway (deleted) of Chicago. And he who frequents it by night in search of amusement and cheer is known, vulgarly, as a Loop-hound.

Jo Hertz was a Loop-hound. On the occasion of those sparse first nights granted the metropolis of the Middle West he was always present, third row, aisle, left. When a new loop-cate was opened Jo's table always commanded an unobstructed view of anything worth viewing. On entering he was wont to look up at the ceiling with careless cordiality to the head waiter, while his eye roved expertly from table to table as he removed his gloves.

That was Jo—a plump and lonely bachelor of fifty. A plethoric, roving-eyed and windy man, clutching vainly at the garments of a youth that had long slipped past him.

The gay-dog business was a late phase in the life of Jo Hertz. He had been a quite different sort of man. The staid and harness-brother of three unwed and selfish sisters is an under-dog.

At twenty-seven Jo had been the dutiful, hard-working son (in the wholesale harness business) of a widowed and gummy mother, who called him Joey. If you had looked close you would have seen that now and then a double wrinkle would appear between Jo's eyes; a wrinkle that had no business there at twenty-seven. Then Jo's mother died, leaving him handicapped by a death-bed promise, the three sisters and "the house" and a basement house on Calumet avenue. Jo's wrinkles became a fixture.

Death-bed promises should be broken as lightly as they are seriously made. The dead have no right to lay their clammy fingers upon the living.

"Joey," she said, in her high, thin voice, "take care of the girls."

"I will, Ma," Jo had choked.

"Joey," and the voice was weaker, "promise me you won't marry till the girls are all provided for." Then as Jo had hesitated, appalled, "Joey," "it's my dying wish, promise!"

"I promise, Ma," he had said.

Whereupon his mother had died, comfortably, leaving him with a completely ruined life.

They were not bad-looking girls, and they had a certain style, too. That is, Stel and Eva had, Carrie, the middle one, taught school over on the West side. In those days it took her almost two hours each way. She said the kind of costume she required should have been corrugated steel. But all three knew what was being worn, and they wore it—or fairly faithful copies of it. Eva, the housekeeping sister, had a needle knock. She could skim the state street windows and come away with a mental photograph of every separate tack, hem, yoke, and ribbon, heads of deprecatory show, and the things they kept in drawers, and she went home and reproduced them with the aid of a two-dollar-a-day seamstress. Stel, the youngest, was the beauty. They called her Babe. She wasn't really a beauty, but some one had once told her that she looked like Janice Meredith (it was when that work of fiction was at the height of its popularity). For years afterward, whenever she went to parties, she affected a single, fat curl over her right shoulder, with a rose stuck through it.

Twenty-three years ago one's sisters did not strain at the household leash, nor crave a career. Carrie taught school, and hated it. Eva kept house expertly and complacently. Babe's profession was being the family beauty, and it took all her spare time. This was Jo's household, and he was the nominal head of it. But it was an empty title.

Most men of Jo's age were standing before their mirror of a Saturday night, whitening blithely and abstractedly while they discarded a blue polka-dot for a maroon tie, whipped off the maroon for a shot-silk, and at the last moment, decided against the shot-silk in favor of a plain black-and-white, because she had once said she preferred quiet ties. Jo, when he should have been preening his feathers for conquest, was saying:

"Well, my God, I am hurrying! Give a man time, can't you? I just got home. You girls have been laying around the house all day. No wonder you're ready."

On those rare occasions when his business necessitated an out-of-door trip he would spend half a day fondling about the shops selecting handkerchiefs or stockings, or feathers, or fans, or gloves for his girls.

There was something selfish in his living, as there always is in any gift. Truly and joyfully made. They never suspected the exquisite pleasure it gave him to select these things; these fine, soft, silken things. There were

many things about this slow-going, amiable brother of theirs that they never suspected. If you had told them he was a dreamer of dreams, for example, they would have been amused. Sometimes, dead-tired by nine o'clock, after a hard day down town, he would dose over the evening paper. At intervals he would wake, red-eyed, to a snatch of conversation such as "Yes, but if you get a blue you can wear it anywhere. It's dressy, and at the same time it's quiet, too." Eva, the expert, wrestling with Carrie over the problem of the new spring dress. They never guessed that the commonplace man in the frayed old smoking jacket had banished them all from the room long ago; had banished himself for that matter. In his place was a tall, debonair, and rather dangerously handsome man to whom six o'clock spelled evening clothes. The kind of man who can lean up against a mantel, or propose a toast, or give an order to a man-servant, or whisper a gallant speech in a lady's ear with equal ease. The shabby old house on Calumet avenue was transformed into a broad-caded and chandeliered rendezvous for the brilliance of the city. Beauty was here, and wit. But none so beautiful and witty as she, Mrs. Mrs.—er—Jo Hertz. There was wine, of course; but no vulgar display. There was music; the soft, hushed, satiny laughter. And he, the gracious, tactful host, king of his own domain—

"Jo, for heaven's sake, if you're going to snore-go to bed!"

"Why—did I fall asleep?"

"You haven't been doing anything else all evening. A person would think you were fifty instead of thirty."

And Jo Hertz was again just the dull, grey, commonplace brother of three well-meaning sisters.

Which brings us to one Sunday in May. Jo came home from a late Sunday afternoon walk to find company for supper. Carrie often had in on her school-teacher friends, or Babe one of her frivolous intimates, or even Eva a staid guest of the old-girl type. There was always a Sunday night supper of potato salad, and cold meat, and coffee, and perhaps a fresh cake. Joe rather enjoyed it, being a hospitable sort. But he regarded the guests with the undazzled eye of a man to whom they were just so many netticoats, timid of the night streets and requiring escort home.

This Sunday night it turned out to be one of Carrie's friends.

Emily," said Carrie, "this is my brother, Jo."

Jo had learned what to expect in Carrie's friends. Drab-looking women in the late thirties, whose facial lines all slanted downward.

"Happy to meet you," said Jo, and looked down at a different sort altogether. A most surprisingly different sort, for one of Carrie's friends. This Emily person was very small, and duffy, and blue-eyed, and sort-of-well, crinkly looking. You know. The corners of her mouth when she smiled and her eyes when she looked up at you, and her hair, which was brown, had had the miraculous effect, somehow, of being golden.

Jo shook hands with her. Her hand was incredibly small, and soft, so that you were afraid of crushing it, until you discovered she had a firm little grip all her own. It surprised and amused you, that grip, as does a baby's unexpected clutch on your petronizing forehead. As Jo felt it in his own big clasp, the strangest thing happened to him. Something inside Jo Hertz stopped working for a moment, then lurched sickeningly, then thumped like mad. It was his heart. He stood staring down at her, and she up at him until the other laughed. Then their hands fell apart, haphazardly.

"Are you a school-teacher, Emily?" he said.

"Kindergarten. It's my first year. And don't you call me Emily, please."

"Why not? It's your name. I think it's the prettiest name in the world."

Which he didn't mean to say at all. In fact, he was perfectly agitated to find himself saying it. But he meant it.

At supper he passed her things, and stared, until everybody laughed again, and Eva said acidly: "Why don't you feed her?"

It wasn't that Emily had an air of helplessness. She just made you feel you wanted her to be helpless, so that you could help her.

Jo took her home, and from that Sunday night he began to strain at the leash. He took his sisters out, dutifully, but he would suggest, with a carelessness that deceived no one: "Don't you want one of your girls friends to come along? That little What's-her-name—Emily, for something. So long as I've got three of you, I might as well have a full squad."

For a long time he didn't know what was the matter with him. He only knew he was miserable and yet happy. Sometimes his heart seemed to ache with an actual physical ache. He realized that he wanted to do this for Emily. He wanted to buy things for Emily—useless, pretty, and expensive things that he couldn't afford. He wanted to buy everything that Emily desired. He wanted to marry Emily. That was it. He discovered that one day, while he was in the midst of a transaction in the harness business. He stared at the man with whom he was dealing until that startled person grew uncomfortable.

"What's the matter, Hertz?"

"Matter?"

"You look as if you'd seen a ghost or

found a gold mine. I don't know which."

"Gold mine," said Jo. And then, "No Ghost." For he remembered that high, thin voice, and his promise. And the harness business was either down-hill with dreadful rapidity, as the automobile business began its amazing climb. Jo tried to stop it. But he was not that kind of business man. It never occurred to him to jump out of the down-going vehicle and catch the up-going one. He stayed on, vainly applying brakes that refused to work.

"You know, Emily, I couldn't support two households now. Not the way things are. But if you'll wait, if you'll only wait. The girls, might—that is, Babe and Carrie."

She was a sensible little thing, Emily. "Of course I'll wait. But we mustn't just sit back and let the years go by. We've got to help."

She went about it as if she were already a little match-making matron. She corralled all the men she had ever known and introduced them to Babe, Carrie, and Eva separately, in pairs and en masse. She arranged parties at

WHERE'S MY SON?
ANSWER ME
THAT YOU TWO
MISERABLE
WOMEN
OUT OF MY
HOUSE! OUT OF
MY HOUSE!
BEFORE I
HURT YOU!



which Babe could display the curl. She got up places. She stayed home while Jo took the three about. When she was present she tried to look as plain and obscure as possible, so that the sisters should show up to advantage. She schemed, and planned, and contrived, and hoped, and smiled into Jo's despairing eyes.

"And three years went by. Three precious years, Carrie still taught school, and hated it. Eva kept house, and more and more complacently as prices advanced and allowance retreated. Stel was still Babe, the family beauty; but even she knew that the time was past for curls. Emily's hair, somehow, lost its gilt and began to look just plain brown. Her crinkliness began to iron out."

"Now, look here!" Jo argued desperately, one night. "We could be happy, anyway. There's plenty of room at the house. Lots of people begin that way. Of course, I couldn't give you all I'd like to, at first. But maybe, after a while—"

No dreams of salons, and brocade, and velvet-footed servants, and satin damask now. Just two rooms, all their own, all alone, and Emily to work for. That was his dream. But it seemed less possible than that other absurd one had been.

You know that Emily was as practical a little thing as she looked fluffy. She knew women.

"No! No! We'd be miserable. I know. Even if they didn't object. And they would. Jo wouldn't they?"

His silence was miserable assent. Then, "But you do love me, don't you, Emily?"

"I do Jo. I love you—and love you and love you. But, Jo, I—can't."

though he was a great deal older than she. She moved to the North Side (trust Eva for that) and Babe assumed the management of the household on Calumet Avenue. It was rather a pinched little household now, for the harness business shrank and shrank.

"Ben says if you had the least bit of—"

Ben was Eva's husband, and a quotable, as are all successful men.

"I don't care what Ben says," about Jo, goaded into rage. "I'm sick of your everlasting Ben. Go and get a Ben of your own, why don't you, if you're stuck on the way he does things."

And Babe did. She made a last desperate drive, aided by Eva, and she captured a rather surprised young man in the brokerage way, who had made up his mind not to marry for years.

Babe had as useless a trousseau, and as flimsy with extravagant pink-and-blue and lacy and frilly things as any daughter of doing parents. Jo seemed to find a grim pleasure in providing them. But it left him pinched.

There was nothing domestic about Carrie. She had given up teaching two years before, and had gone into Social Service work on the West Side. Jo took to providing about department store basements, and household goods sections. He was always sending home a bargain in a ham, or a sack of potatoes, or fifty pounds of sugar, or a window clamp, or a new kind of peeling knife. He was forever doing odd little jobs that the janitor should have done. It was the domestic in him clinging to its old acquaintances of fitting things. They spoke of them as "splendid girls." Between thirty-six and forty. The following Thursday Eva would

say: "How did you like her, Jo?"

"Like who?" Jo would spar feebly.

"Miss Matthews."

"Now don't be funny, Jo. You know very well I mean the girl who was here for dinner. The one who talked so well on the emigration question."

"Oh her! Why, she was all right. Seems to be a smart woman."

"But didn't you like her?"

"I can't say I did, Eva. And I can't say I didn't. She made me think a lot of a teacher. I had in the fifth reader. Name of Times, as I recall her, she must have been a fine woman. But I never thought of her as a woman at all. She was just Teacher."

"You make me tired," snapped Eva impatiently. "A man of your age. You don't expect to marry a girl do you? A child!"

"I don't expect to marry anybody," Jo had answered.

And that was the truth, lonely though he often was. Any one who got the meaning of the Loop knows the significance of a move to a north-shore suburb, and a house. Eva's daughter, Ethel, was growing up, and her mother had an eye on society.

That did away with Jo's Thursday dinner. Then Stel's husband bought a car. They said it was getting so when she knew it he would be out, and that made objected to Sunday dinners, anyway. Besides, they were unhealthy, old-fashioned things. They always meant to ask Jo to come along, but by the time their friends were placed, and the lunch, and the boxes, and sweaters, and George's camera, and everything, there seemed to be no room for a man of Jo's bulk. So that eliminated the Sunday dinners.

"Just drop in a second time during the week," Stel said, "for dinner. Except Wednesday—that's our bridge night—and Saturday. And, of course, Thursday. Cook is here every night. Don't wait for me to phone."

And so Jo drifted into that sad-eyed, despondent family made up of those who sat in a second-rate restaurant.

And came the War. The war that spelled death and destruction to millions. The war that brought a fortune to Jo Hertz, and transformed him over night, from a baggy-kneed old bachelor, whose business was a failure, to a prosperous manufacturer whose only trouble was a shortage in hides for the making of his product—leather! The armies of Europe called for it. Millions of straps. More! More! Millions of straps. More! More!

The musty old harness business over on Lake street was magically changed from a dust-covered and half-dead concern to an orderly hive that hummed and glittered with success. Orders poured in. Jo Hertz had inside information on the War. He knew about troops and horses. He talked with French and English and Italian buyers—noblemen, many of them—commissioned by their countries to get American-made supplies. And now, when he said to Ben or George "Take Frimstance your raw hides and leathers," they listened with respectful attention.

And then began the gay-dog business in the life of Jo Hertz. He developed into a Loop-hound, ever keen to the scent of fresh pleasure. That side of Jo Hertz which had been repressed and cramped and ignored began to bloom, unhealthily. At first he spent money on his rather contemptuous nieces. He sent them gorgeous furs, and watch bracelets, and velvet bags. He took two expensive rooms at a downtown hotel, and there was something more tear-compelling than grotesque about the way he glowered over the luxury of a separate ice-water tap in the bathroom. He explained it.

"Just turn it on. Ice-water! Any hour of the day or night."

He bought a car. Naturally. A glittering affair, in color a bright blue, with pale blue leather straps, and a great deal of gold fittings, and wire wheels. Eva said it was the kind of thing a sous-brette would use, rather than an elderly business man.

And he was lonesome. He was very lonesome. So he searched about in his mind and brought from the dim past the memory of the luxuriously furnished establishment of which he used to dream in the evenings when he dozed over his paper in the old house on Calumet. So he rented an apartment, many-roomed and expensive, with a man-servant in charge, and furnished it in styles and periods ranging through all the Louises.

The War went on, one on, and on. And the money continued to roll in a flood of it. Then one afternoon Eva, in town on shopping bent, entered a small, exclusive and expensive shop on Michigan avenue. Exclusive, that is, in price. The room was becoming by rose-illuminated and somewhat dim, so that some minutes had passed before she realized that a man seated on a raspberry brocade settee not five feet away—was a man with a walking stick, and yellow gloves, and tan spats, and a check suit—was her brother Jo. From him, Eva's wild-eyed glance leaped to the woman who was trying on hats before one of the many long mirrors.

Eva turned sharply and encountered her own sales-woman returning, hatless. "Not today," she gasped. "I'm feeling ill. Suddenly." And almost ran from the room.

The next time it was Stel who saw them. In a restaurant. She said she spotted her evening. And the third time it was Ethel. She was one of the guests at a theatre party given by Nicky Overton II. You know. The Nicky Overton Overtons. Lake Forest. They came in late, and occupied the entire third row at the opening performance of "Believe Me!" And Ethel was Nicky's partner. She was glowing like a rose. When the lights went up after the first act Ethel said that her uncle Jo was seated just ahead of her

with what she afterward described as a blonde. Then her uncle had turned around, and seeing her, had been surprised into a smile that spread broadly all over his plump and rubicund face. Then he had turned to face forward again, quickly.

"Who's the old bird?" Nicky had asked. Ethel had pretended not to hear, so he had asked again.

"My Uncle," Ethel answered, and flushed all over her delicate face, and down to her throat, it spilt Ethel's evening. More than that, as she told her mother of it later, weeping, she declared it had spoiled her life.

Eva talked it over with her husband in that intimate, kinnooned hour that proceeds bedtime. She gesticulated heatedly with her hair brush.

There exists a strange and loyal kinship among men. "Well, I don't know," Ben said now, and even grinned a little. "I suppose a boy's got to sow his wild oats some time."

"All right," Eva retorted. "If you're not man enough to stop it I'll have to, that's all. I'm going up there with Stel this week."

They did not notify Jo of their coming. Eva telephoned his apartment, and a little. "I suppose a boy's got to sow his wild oats some time."

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