

The Challenge

Written for The Western Home Monthly By Jessie Findlay Brown

It is just like him," Penelope stood before the portrait with clasped hands and expression rapt and adoring. "How noble he looks—dear boy. He is so fine and good. Such a dear brother."

Bishop, standing aside and slightly in the rear, marked the beauty of her delicate profile outlined against the dull blue of the plush curtain. He cleared his throat before replying.

"I'm glad you like it. I put my best work on it. I wanted to please you."

She seemed not to hear him, and continued as though thinking aloud. "He is so like his father. Strange, isn't it, that two persons so utterly unlike in nature should in appearance be so similar? Jack's father was a careless scamp. He broke my mother's heart." She turned to her caller, brightly.

"Jack is only my half-brother, you know. I am seven years older than he. Mother left him in my charge, a dear tiny baby, when she died—and he has been such a dear boy."

Bishop's quiet gray eyes met hers with an inscrutable look. He was thinking that if Jack Bateman's father had been a scamp, then, from what he had heard of the son, the lad resembled his sire in more ways than one, and he marvelled at the love that could blind a girl of Penelope's perception to faults as glaring as those of her brother. He felt sorry for her, and impatient with the handsome young scapegrace upon whose portrait he had labored so painstakingly and with such success.

"You will miss him," he said somewhat lamely, and Penelope caught up the word with a wistfulness that touched him

acutely. "Miss him! How I have missed him already and he has been gone only one month. He is all I have, you see, and I have been both sister and mother to him. Oh, I shall miss him. But I must be brave. I shall be busy. I intend to take a position downtown. It will be better for me. And I shall have my Red Cross work. I must keep occupied, and I shall not have time to brood."

"That's right. I think to go to business is the very best thing you can do. You will make new friends and the daily close contact with other lives will keep you, as you say, from brooding."

She brightened at his approval and smiled upon him with such grateful sweetness that Bishop, twirling his hat in half-embarrassed fashion, took courage to add "Miss Bateman, won't you let me be a friend to you? I've no sister of my own, but I imagine that if I had one and were obliged to go to the war and leave her behind, I'd be mighty

glad of some chap to take an interest in her. Will you count me your friend?"

For the first time Penelope looked at him with real interest—this quiet photographer man who had done such good work on Jack's picture. He had a slight limp, he was not handsome, but his face was strong and pleasant and—that was it—friendly. She put out her hand with a frankness that matched his own.

"It is so kind of you," she said earnestly. "I shall be glad to have you as a friend. You will come and see me soon? Thank you so much for doing the picture so beautifully, and for being so good as to bring it over yourself."

She bowed him out very graciously indeed, but looking back from the street at the lighted window he saw the slender figure posed before the mantel with clasped hands and face upraised, and he knew that no sooner had the door closed upon him than she had flown to her shrine, whole-hearted and devoted, her entire thought for the wayward youth over the sea.

Bishop felt a little lonely himself as he took his way down the avenue beneath the burgeoning chestnut trees. It was the middle of May, the night was warm and balmy, and Bishop in his present mood felt inclined for a stroll.

Norman Bishop possessed neither brother nor sister, father nor mother. He had been obliged to stand on his own feet at a very early age, and make his own way in the world. It had been an honorable way, and was beginning to be an easier way, but to-night he felt the loneliness of it as never before. Why was it, he asked himself, that a scamp like Jack Bateman should have lavished upon him a devotion that was esteemed but lightly by him, while he, Bishop, went hungry for even a crumb? Well, it was a world of unequal divisions, and the workings of the law of compensation were not always easy to follow.

During the months that followed Bishop gradually lost the feeling of aloofness that had haunted him from the days of his cheerless, unloved childhood. For the first time in his experience he found himself almost indispensable to another, and that other the sweetest, gentlest, most delightful little lady in the world. Penelope had taken him at his word and made him a friend indeed, consulting him upon numberless matters, now deferring to his judgment with flattering respect, again dissenting with flat contradiction, sharing with him her impressions and experiences in the office life which was new to her, depending always upon him for the sympathy and understanding which were so necessary to her and in which he never failed her. She gave, too. There was no sponge-like quality in her nature. She drew him out so that he, who had always thought himself a quiet fellow, was surprised at his fluency and range of knowledge.

Best of all, of course, she loved to talk about Jack and read extracts from the boy's brief letters, to which Bishop forced himself to listen patiently. The dear boy was chafing at being kept so long in England—he was asking to be transferred, to get across the channel more quickly—she was cabling him money again, his own of course, which he had assigned to her—it was so difficult for a boy to do on so little. He was such a good boy, too—she must read him the letter telling of his visit to the little country church in England—and so on.

She had mailed the boy a cabinet size reproduction of the portrait in the parlor. "Mr. Bishop has done good work on it," she wrote. "I think it is a splendid likeness. What I like best about it is that it is just exactly like you. He has managed to get you just as you are, and I am so glad. Just imagine if I had been left with a picture that was stiff and unnatural, and not like you at all, how horrid it would have been." To this Jack replied modestly that the camera-man had flattered him, but he was glad she liked the picture.

At length word came that Jack had been transferred to another unit, and expected to leave any day for France. Dropping in one evening, Bishop found Penelope wistful and sad, with a letter "But he was my baby brother, you know, and when he was a little boy he would jump so at a sudden noise—how the big

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