

JEAN WEBSTER

**JERRY
JUNIOR**

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Jerry Junior

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CHAPTER I

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The courtyard of the Hotel du Lac, furnished with half a dozen tables and chairs, a red and green parrot chained to a perch, and a shady little arbor covered with vines, is a pleasant enough place for morning coffee, but decidedly too sunny for afternoon tea. It was close upon four of a July day, when Gustavo, his inseparable napkin floating from his arm, emerged from the cool dark doorway of the house and scanned the burning vista of tables and chairs. He would never, under ordinary circumstances, have interrupted his siesta for the mere delivery of a letter; but this particular letter was addressed to the young American man, and young American men, as every head waiter knows, are an unreasonably impatient lot. The court-yard was empty, as he might have foreseen, and he was turning with a patient sigh towards the long arbor that led to the lake, when the sound of a rustling paper in the summer house deflected his course. He approached the doorway and looked inside.

The young American man, in white flannels with a red guide-book protruding from his pocket, was comfortably stretched in a lounging chair engaged with a cigarette and a copy of the Paris *Herald*. He glanced up with a yawn—excusable under the circumstances—but as his eye fell upon the letter he sprang to his feet.

“Hello, Gustavo! Is that for me?”

Gustavo bowed.

“*Ecco!* She is at last arrive, ze lettair for which you haf so moch weesh.” He bowed a second time and presented it. “Meestair Jayreen Ailyar!”

The young man laughed.

“I don’t wish to hurt your feelings, Gustavo, but I’m not sure I should answer if my eyes were shut.”

He picked up the letter, glanced at the address to make sure—the name was Jerymn Hilliard Jr.—and ripped it open with an exaggerated sigh of relief. Then he glanced up and caught Gustavo’s expression. Gustavo came of a romantic race; there was a gleam of sympathetic interest in his eye.

“Oh, you needn’t look so knowing! I suppose you think this is a love letter? Well it’s not. It is, since you appear to be interested, a letter from my sister informing me that they will arrive tonight, and that we will pull out for Riva by the first boat tomorrow morning. Not that I want to leave you, Gustavo, but—Oh, thunder!”

He finished the reading in a frowning silence while the waiter stood at polite attention, a shade of anxiety in his eye—there was usually anxiety in his eye when it rested on Jerymn Hilliard Jr. One could never foresee what the young man would call for next. Yesterday he had rung the bell and demanded a partner to play lawn tennis, as if the hotel kept partners laid away in drawers like so many sheets.

He crumpled up the letter and stuffed it in his pocket.

“I say, Gustavo, what do you think of this? They’re going to stay in Lucerne till the tenth—that’s next week—and they hope I don’t mind waiting; it will be nice for me to have a rest. A *rest*, man, and I’ve already spent three days in Valedolmo!”

“*Si*, signore, you will desire ze same room?” was as much as Gustavo thought.

“Ze same room? Oh, I suppose so.”

He sank back into his chair and plunged his hands into his pockets with an air of sombre resignation. The waiter hovered over him, divided between a desire to return to his siesta, and a sympathetic interest in the young man’s troubles. Never before in the history of his connection with the Hotel du Lac had Gustavo experienced such a munificent, companionable, expansive, entertaining, thoroughly unique and inexplicable guest. Even the fact that he was American scarcely accounted for everything.

The young man raised his head and eyed his companion gloomily.

“Gustavo, have you a sister?”

“A sister?” Gustavo’s manner was uncomprehending but patient. “*Si*, signore, I have eight sister.”

“Eight! Merciful saints. How do you manage to be so cheerful?”

“Tree is married, signore, one uvver is betrofed, one is in a convent, one is dead and two is babies.”

“I see—they’re pretty well disposed of; but the babies will grow up, Gustavo, and as for that betrothed one, I should still be a little nervous if I were you; you can never be sure they are going to stay betrothed. I hope she doesn’t spend her time chasing over the map of Europe making appointments with you to meet her in unheard of little mountain villages where the only approach to Christian reading matter is a Paris *Herald* four days old, and then doesn’t turn up to keep her appointments?”

Gustavo blinked. His supple back achieved another bow.
“Sank you,” he murmured.

“And you don’t happen to have an aunt?”

“An aunt, signore?” There was vagueness in his tone.

“Yes, Gustavo, an aunt. A female relative who reads you like an open book, who sees your faults and skips your virtues, who remembers how dear and good and obliging your father was at your age, who hoped great things of you when you were a baby, who had intended to make you her heir but has about decided to endow an orphan asylum—have you, Gustavo, by chance an aunt?”

“*Si*, signore.”

“I do not think you grasp my question. An *aunt*—the sister of your father, or perhaps your mother.”

A gleam of illumination swept over Gustavo’s troubled features.

“*Ecco!* You would know if I haf a *zia*—a aunt—yes, zat is it. A aunt. *Sicuramente*, signore, I haf ten—leven aunt.”

“Eleven aunts! Before such a tragedy I am speechless; you need say no more, Gustavo, from this moment we are friends.”

He held out his hand. Gustavo regarded it dazedly; then, since it seemed to be expected, he gingerly presented his own. The result was a shining newly-minted two-lire piece. He pocketed it with a fresh succession of bows.

“*Grazie tanto!* Has ze signore need of anysing?”

“Have I need of anysing?” There was reproach, indignation, disgust in the young man’s tone. “How can you ask such a question, Gustavo? Here am I, three days in Valedolmo, with seven more stretching before me. I have

plenty of towels and soap and soft-boiled eggs, if that is what you mean; but a man's spirit cannot be nourished on soap and soft-boiled eggs. What I need is food for the mind—diversion, distraction, amusement—no, Gustavo, you needn't offer me the Paris *Herald* again. I already know by heart the list of guests in every hotel in Switzerland."

"Ah, it is diversion zat you wish? Have you seen zat ver' beautiful Luini in ze chapel of San Bartolomeo? It is four hundred years old."

"Yes, Gustavo, I have seen the Luini in the chapel of San Bartolomeo. I derived all the pleasure to be got out of it the first afternoon I came."

"Ze garden of Prince Sartonio-Crevelli? Has ze signore seen ze cedar of Lebanon in ze garden of ze prince?"

"Yes, Gustavo, the signore has seen the cedar of Lebanon in the garden of the prince, also the ilex tree two hundred years old and the india-rubber plant from South America. They are extremely beautiful but they don't last a week."

"Have you swimmied in ze lake?"

"It is lukewarm, Gustavo."

The waiter's eyes roved anxiously. They lighted on the lunette of shimmering water and purple mountains visible at the farther end of the arbor.

"Zere is ze view," he suggested humbly. "Ze view from ze water front is consider ver' beautiful, ver' nice. Many foreigners come entirely for him. You can see Lago di Garda, Monte Brione, Monte Baldo wif ze ruin castle of ze Scaliger, Monte Maggiore, ze Altissimo di Nago, ze snow cover peak of Monte—"

Mr. Jerymn Hilliard Jr. stopped him with a gesture.

"That will do; I read Baedeker myself, and I saw them all the first night I came. You must know at your age, Gustavo, that a man can't enjoy a view by himself; it takes two for that sort of thing—Yes, the truth is that I am lonely. You can see yourself to what straits I am pushed for conversation. If I had your command of language, now, I would talk to the German Alpine climbers."

An idea flashed over Gustavo's features.

"Ah, zat is it! Why does not ze signore climb mountains? Ver' helful; ver' diverting. I find guide."

"You needn't bother. Your guide would be Italian, and it's too much of a strain to talk to a man all day in dumb show." He folded his arms with a weary sigh. "A week of Valedolmo! An eternity!"

Gustavo echoed the sigh. Though he did not entirely comprehend the trouble, still he was of a generously sympathetic nature.

"It is a pity," he observed casually, "zat you are not acquaint wif ze Signor Americano who lives in Villa Rosa. He also finds Valedolmo undiverting. He comes—but often—to talk wif me. He has fear of forgetting how to spik Angleesh, he says."

The young man opened his eyes.

"What are you talking about—a Signor Americano here in Valedolmo?"

"*Sicuramente*, in zat rose-color villa wif ze cypress trees and ze *terrazzo* on ze lake. His daughter, la Signorina Costantina, she live wif him—ver' yong, ver' beautiful—" Gustavo rolled his eyes and clasped his hands—"beautiful

like ze angels in Paradise—and she spik Italia like I spik Angleesh.”

Jerymn Hilliard Jr. unfolded his arms and sat up alertly.

“You mean to tell me that you had an American family up your sleeve all this time and never said a word about it?” His tone was stern.

“*Scusi*, signore, I have not known zat you have ze plaisir of zer acquaintance.”

“The pleasure of their acquaintance! Good heavens, Gustavo, when one ship-wrecked man meets another ship-wrecked man on a desert island must they be introduced before they can speak?”

“*Si*, signore.”

“And why, may I ask, should an intelligent American family be living in Valedolmo?”

“I do not know, signore. I have heard ze Signor Papa’s healf was no good, and ze doctors in Americk’ zay say to heem, ‘you need change, to breave ze beautiful climate of Italia.’ And he say, ‘all right, I go to Valedolmo.’ It is small, signore, but ver’ *famosa*. Oh, yes, *molto famosa*. In ze autumn and ze spring foreigners come from all ze world—Angleesh, French, German—*tutti*! Ze Hotel du Lac is full. Every day we turn peoples away.”

“So! I seem to have struck the wrong season.—But about this American family, what’s their name?”

“La familia Veeldair from Nuovo York.”

“Veeldair.” He shook his head. “That’s not American, Gustavo, at least when you say it. But never mind, if they come from New York it’s all right. How many are there—just two?”

“But no! Ze papa and ze signorina and ze—ze—” he rolled his eyes in search of the word—“ze aunt!”

“Another aunt! The sky appears to be raining aunts today. What does she do for amusement—the signorina who is beautiful as the angels?”

Gustavo spread out his hands.

“Valedolmo, signore, is on ze frontier. It is—what you say—garrison *città*. Many soldiers, many officers—captains, lieutenants, wif uniforms and swords. Zay take tea on ze *terrazzo* wif ze Signor Papa and ze Signora Aunt, and most *specialmente* wif ze Signorina Costantina. Ze Signor Papa say he come for his healf, but if you ask me, I sink maybe he come to marry his daughter.”

“I see! And yet, Gustavo, American papas are generally not so keen as you might suppose about marrying their daughters to foreign captains and lieutenants even if they have got uniforms and swords. I shouldn’t be surprised if the Signor Papa were just a little nervous over the situation. It seems to me there might be an opening for a likely young fellow speaking the English language, even if he hasn’t a uniform and sword. How does he strike you?”

“*Si*, signore.”

“I’m glad you agree with me. It is now five minutes past four; do you think the American family would be taking a siesta?”

“I do not know, signore.” Gustavo’s tone was still patient.

“And whereabouts is the rose-colored villa with the terrace on the lake?”

“It is a quarter of a hour beyond ze Porta Sant’ Antonio. If ze gate is shut you ring at ze bell and Giuseppe will open.

But ze road is ver' hot and ver' dusty. It is more cooler to take ze paf by ze lake. Straight to ze left for ten minutes and step over ze wall; it is broken in zat place and quite easy."

"Thank you, that is a wise suggestion; I shall step over the wall by all means." He jumped to his feet and looked about for his hat. "You turn to the left and straight ahead for ten minutes? Good-bye then till dinner. I go in search of the Signorina Costantina who is beautiful as the angels in Paradise, and who lives in a rose-colored villa set in a cypress grove on the shores of Lake Garda—not a bad setting for romance, is it, Gustavo?—Dinner, I believe, is at seven o'clock?"

"*Si*, signore, at seven; and would you like veal cooked Milanese fashion?"

"Nothing would please me more. We have only had veal Milanese fashion five times since I came."

He waved his hand jauntily and strolled whistling down the arbor that led to the lake. Gustavo looked after him and shook his head. Then he took out the two-lire piece and rang it on the table. The metal rang true. He shrugged his shoulders and turned back indoors to order the veal.

CHAPTER II

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The terrace of Villa Rosa juts out into the lake, bordered on three sides by a stone parapet, and shaded above by a yellow-ochre awning. Masses of oleanders hang over the wall and drop pink petals into the blue waters below. As a study in color the terrace is perfect, but, like the court-yard of the Hotel du Lac, decidedly too hot for mid-afternoon. To the right of the terrace, however, is a shady garden set in alleys of cypress trees, and separated from the lake by a strip of beach and a low balustrade. There could be no better resting place for a warm afternoon.

It was close upon four—five minutes past to be accurate—and the usual afternoon quiet that enveloped the garden had fled before the garrulous advent of four girls. Three of them, with black eyes and blacker hair, were kneeling on the beach thumping and scrubbing a pile of linen. In spite of their chatter they were working busily, and the grass beyond the water-wall was already white with bleaching sheets, while a lace trimmed petticoat fluttered from a nearby oleander, and a row of silk stockings stretched the length of the parapet. The most undeductive observer would have guessed by this time that the pink villa, visible through the trees, contained no such modern conveniences as stationary tubs.

The fourth girl, with gray eyes and yellow-brown hair, was sitting at ease on the balustrade, fanning herself with a wide brimmed hat and dangling her feet, clad in white

tennis shoes, over the edge. She wore a suit of white linen cut sailor fashion, low at the throat and with sleeves rolled to the elbows. She looked very cool and comfortable and free as she talked, with the utmost friendliness, to the three girls below. Her Italian, to an unaccustomed ear, was exactly as glib as theirs.

The washer-girls were dressed in the gayest of peasant clothes—green and scarlet petticoats, flowered kerchiefs, coral beads and flashing earrings; you would have to go far into the hills in these degenerate days before meeting their match on an Italian highway. But the girl on the wall, who was actual if not titular ruler of the domain of Villa Rosa, possessed a keen eye for effect; and—she plausibly argued—since one must have washer-women about, why not, in the name of all that is beautiful, have them in harmony with tradition and the landscape? Accordingly, she designed and purchased their costumes herself.

There drifted presently into sight from around the little promontory that hid the village, a blue and white boat with yellow lateen sails. She was propelled gondolier fashion, for the wind was a mere breath, by a picturesque youth in a suit of dark blue with white sash and flaring collar—the hand of the girl on the wall was here visible also.

The boat fluttering in toward shore, looked like a giant butterfly; and her name, emblazoned in gold on her prow, was, appropriately, the *Farfalla*. Earlier in the season, with a green hull and a dingy brown sail, she had been prosaically enough, the *Maria*. But since the advent of the girl all this had been changed. The *Farfalla* dropped her yellow wings with the air of a salute, and lighted at the foot of the water-

steps under the terrace. The girl on the parapet leaned forward eagerly.

“Did you get any mail, Giuseppe?” she called.

“*Sì*, signorina.” He scrambled up the steps and presented a copy of the London *Times*.

She received it with a shrug. Clearly, she felt little interest in the London *Times*. Giuseppe took himself back to his boat and commenced fussing about its fittings, dusting the seats, plumping up the cushions, with an air of absorption which deceived nobody. The signorina watched him a moment with amused comprehension, then she called peremptorily:

“Giuseppe, you know you must spade the garden border.”

Poor Giuseppe, in spite of his nautical costume, was man of all work. He glanced dismally toward the garden border which lay basking in the sunshine under the wall that divided Villa Rosa from the rest of the world. It contained every known flower which blossoms in July in the kingdom of Italy from camellias and hydrangeas to heliotrope and wall flowers. Its spading was a complicated business and it lay too far off to permit of conversation. Giuseppe was not only a lazy, but also a social soul.

“Signorina,” he suggested, “would you not like a sail?”

She shook her head. “There is not wind enough and it is too hot and too sunny.”

“But yes, there’s a wind, and cool—when you get out on the lake. I will put up the awning, signorina, the sun shall not touch you.”

She continued to shake her head and her eyes wandered suggestively to the hydrangeas, but Giuseppe still made a feint of preoccupation. Not being a cruel mistress, she dropped the subject, and turned back to her conversation with the washer-girls. They were discussing—a pleasant topic for a sultry summer afternoon—the probable content of Paradise. The three girls were of the opinion that it was made up of warm sunshine and cool shade, of flowers and singing birds and sparkling waters, of blue skies and cloud-capped mountains—not unlike, it will be observed, the very scene which at the moment stretched before them. In so much they were all agreed, but there were several debatable points. Whether the stones were made of gold, and whether the houses were not gold too, and, that being the case, whether it would not hurt your eyes to look at them. Marietta declared, blasphemously, as the others thought, that she preferred a simple gray stone villa or at most one of pink stucco, to all the golden edifices that Paradise contained.

It was by now fifteen minutes past four, and a spectator had arrived, though none of the five were aware of his presence. The spectator was standing on the wall above the garden border examining with appreciation the idyllic scene below him, and with most particular appreciation, the dainty white-clad person of the girl on the balustrade. He was wondering—anxiously—how he might make his presence known. For no very tangible reason he had suddenly become conscious that the matter would be easier if he carried in his pocket a letter of introduction. The purlieus of Villa Rosa in no wise resembled a desert island; and in the