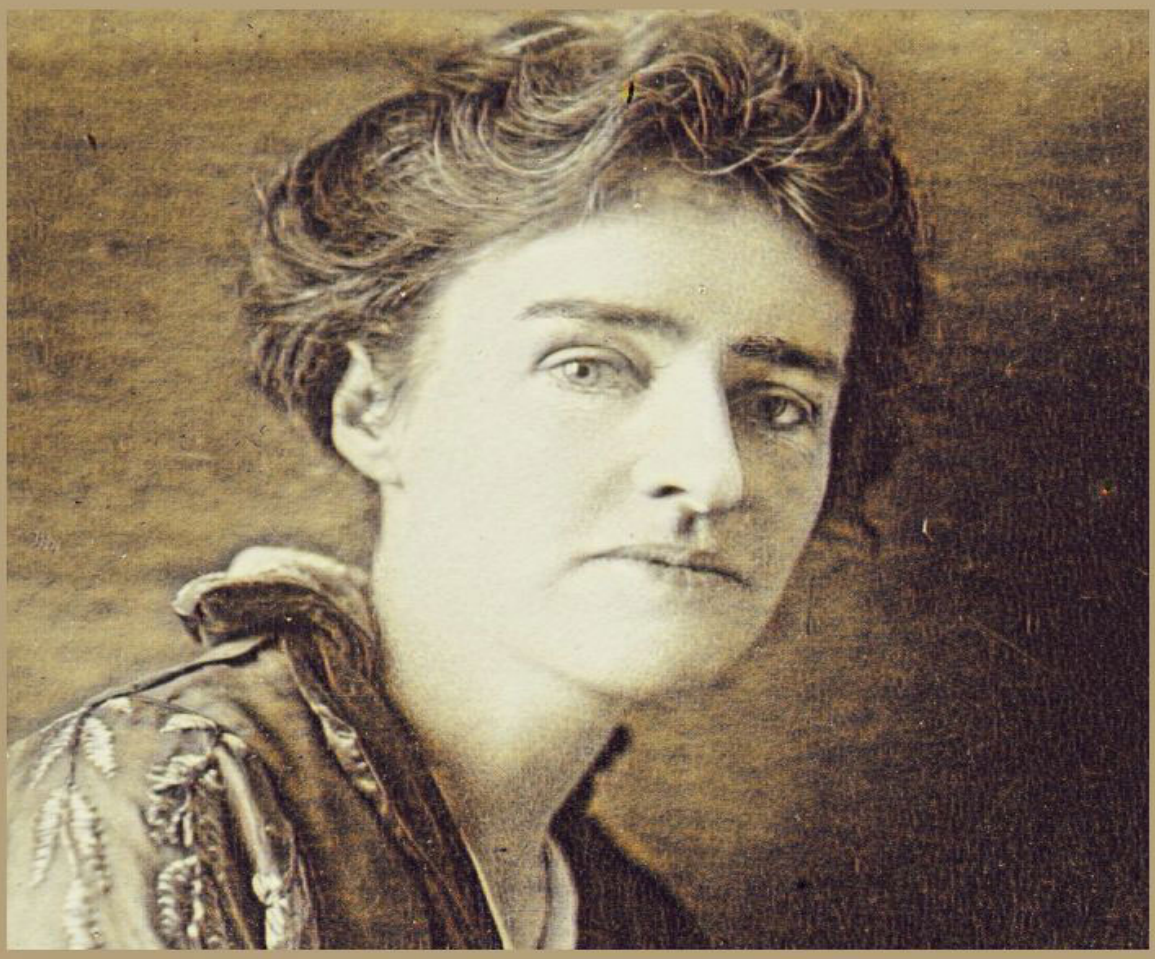

DADDY-LONG-LEGS

JEAN WEBSTER

Daddy-Long-Legs

JEAN WEBSTER

Daddy-Long-Legs, J. Webster
Jazzybee Verlag Jürgen Beck
86450 Altenmünster, Loschberg 9
Deutschland

ISBN: 9783849658816

www.jazzybee-verlag.de
admin@jazzybee-verlag.de

CONTENTS:

November 12th.
“Stone Gate,” Worcester, Mass., December 31st.
6.30, Saturday.
Jan. 20th.
February 4th.
March 5th.
March 24TH, maybe the 25th.
April 7th.
April 10th.
April 11th.
May 4th.
June 2d.
June 5th.
June 9th.
Lock Willow Farm, August Third.
August 10th.
August 25th.
September 10th.
September 26th.
September 30th.
November 9th.
December 7th.
December 20th.
January 11th.
February 11th.
March 5th.
April 24th.
May 15th.
June 4th.
June Tenth.
August 19th.

Introduction

JEAN WEBSTER

Being descended from illustrious people has its obvious disadvantages. One of these is the difficulty of winning recognition for one's work entirely apart from consideration of the conspicuous name of one's ancestors. Jean Webster had the distinction of belonging to a famous family, but she constantly felt that such an inheritance stood in the way of achieving on her own merits. Her mother, Annie Clemens, was a niece of Mark Twain and her father, Charles Luther Webster, was a member of the publishing firm to which Mark Twain once belonged. Bom and reared in a literary atmosphere of this sort, she rather naturally came by the gift of telling a good story, and of course the quality of humor which permeates her writing was inherent in her. Her mother was a southerner and her father a New Englander of British and German lineage. Among her eminent forebears were also Daniel Boone and Eli Whitney.

Jean Webster's real name was Alice Jane Chandler Webster, the Jane being after Mark Twain's mother. When she went to college, her room-mate's name was also Alice, so Miss Webster was asked to take her second name. But since to her Jane seemed a little old-fashioned, she changed it to Jean and ever after went by that name. She was born in Fredonia, New York, July 24, 1876, and her early school days were spent there. Later she attended Lady Jane Grey School at Binghamton, New York, from which she was graduated in 1896. At Vassar College, where she took her degree in 190 1, she proved herself an able student but a

poor speller. Once upon being asked by a horrified teacher, "On what authority do you spell thus?" she replied, "Webster."

She learned early to write easily and well. At college she majored in English and economics and there began to fit herself for a literary career. While a student, she was not only correspondent for Poughkeepsie newspapers but also a contributor of stories to the *Vassar Miscellany*. Her work in economics meant visits to institutions for delinquent and destitute children — visits which impressed her greatly and directed her imagination in her writing. Once while writing for the newspaper, her imagination quite ran away with her, and she converted some fanciful information into a practical joke which nearly cost her the job.

She had great difficulty in getting her earliest stories recognized, but once she had succeeded her fame rapidly grew. After being graduated from college, she became an independent writer, and her first venture was to publish a collection of stories which she had written as a student. The book bore the title *When Patty Went to College*, and began the famous Patty series which remains unmatched in this field.

Miss Webster traveled widely, spending much time in Italy where during donkey rides in the mountains she found the setting for *Jerry Junior*. Her Italian experiences resulted also in *The Wheat Princess* which she is said to have written while living with some nuns in a convent in the Sabine Mountains. But her happiest and most productive days were probably spent in an old house at 55 West Tenth Street, New York, for here she came in touch with life in Greenwich Village where the social workers came to know her and to love her.

During these days she was an indefatigable worker, and the charm of her stories is due quite as much to her ardor for application as to innate ability. She spent long periods in writing her stories and then cut them down to desired

length. Concerning her at the beginning of her literary career in New York one critic said: "She was a sane and hopeful realist on her way, it was predicted, to leadership, and was already felt indirectly as a humanitarian. Her literary discipline was diligent and practical; she experienced directly, wrote profusely, and cut ruthlessly." This last fact is illustrated by the story of the Italian boy who used to work about Miss Webster's home and with whom she used to enjoy talking in his native language. Upon being asked if he had read *Daddy -Long-Legs*, he replied that he had, but it was discovered that he really had read what the author had thrown into the scrap basket.

Of course Daddy -Long-Legs was inspired by Miss Webster's love for children which was the basis for her serious and critical interest in humanity. The charm and friendliness of her personality carried great influence to positions of importance which she constantly held. Her particular interest was in improving life in orphanages, a concern which is manifest in *Dear Enemy*, and she likewise served on special committees having to do with children and prison reform. Her work among the prisoners at Sing Sing is particularly creditable. Here she made friends with the prisoners whom she often invited to call on her when they were freed, jestingly warning them that her silver was but "plate."

On September 7, 1915, Miss Webster was married to Glenn Ford McKinney, a lawyer, after which her life alternated between her Central Park home in New York and a country estate in Tyringham, Massachusetts, where she and her husband enjoyed the mutual hobby of raising ducks and pheasants. Her promising career was not destined to continue, however, for she died on June 11, 1916, less than a year after her marriage, and a day or two after the birth of her infant daughter. In her memory there were appropriately endowed a room at the Girls' Service League

in New York and a bed at the County branch of the New York Orthopedic Hospital near White Plains.

The following passages help to make an interesting picture of the character and habits of Jean Webster:

Jean Webster was in no sense a reformer. Daddy-Long-Legs was the spontaneous creation of her brain, inspired, no doubt, by her passionate love for children. As a play, even more than in book form, it did more good than a thousand tracts in pointing the need of institutional reforms. Its effect was so immediate and so widespread that the author found herself at the center of a reform movement. As a result she wrote her last published work, Dear Enemy, which, beneath the light, engaging love-story that plays about the surface, presents the last word in the care of dependent children — a book destined to do more effective service in behalf of these unfortunates than all the treatises yet published. Such is the magic of personality when combined with a seeing eye and a singing pen. The names of her characters, whimsically enough, she usually chose from the telephone-book, but the characters themselves, were always taken from life both in her fiction and in her play-writing.

She had evolved a thorough technic; she was master of the tools she wrought with; and at the time of her death she lacked only complete maturity of mind and experience to achieve the great things she was potentially capable of. As it is, what she left us will stand the test of time, I believe, as the best of its kind.

Only a few intimates know of the wide benefactions and the generous giving of time and thought that filled the days of her busy life. But those who have caught in her writings the friendliness and good humor of her attitude toward life will not be surprised to know that she lived as she wrote. And there is poignant pathos in the fact that this sturdy optimist who did so much in her later years for the cause of

childhood should at the last have given her life for a little child. [D. Z. D. in The Century Magazine, November, 1916.]

It is a matter of opinion whether her writer's art was more effective in the form of the novel or the form of the play. But certain it is that she was craftsman enough to convert the one medium into the other, and with a skill that showed mastery of both. It is true that the dramatic form came to her mind the more quickly for she had been a close student of the technique of the drama, and it was her custom, at least in her later work, to first cast her plot as a play, and then convert it into the novel. It is in this wise that Daddy-Long-Legs was fashioned.

It has been said of a distinguished modem that he was too self-conscious to find the straight path to the heart of a friend. The converse of this almost epitomizes Jean Webster's habit of thought, and habit of action. Whatever her plan or purpose, whether it was in work or friendship, the straight path without shadow of self -consciousness was the one she followed. And it was this characteristic that made those who knew her best feel that all the work she had done thus far was constructive and substantial, but that the straight path led to wider fields, and that her next ten years would have revealed the real purpose to which she had directed herself.

To transilluminate the commonplace of life so that faith, hope, and love shone through was Jean Webster's special gift. Her dailyness revealed this, whether it was in starting the machinery of her household; in giving counsel to varied types of friends, for she dominated whatever group she stayed among; in furthering some alleviation of another's sorrow, or securing an adjustment for better ways in social conditions, her vision carried through any darkness, and in every situation she saw that this age-long trinity linked together made for the largest happiness to the greatest number. In short, her philosophy of life. [Elizabeth Gushing in The Vassar Quarterly, November, 1916.]

The following sonnet in memory of Jean Webster appeared in The Century Magazine, November, 1916.

TO J. W.
Ruth Comfort Mitchell
Jean Webster went in golden glowing June,
Upon a full-pulsed, warm-breathed, vital day,
With rich achievement luring her to stay.
Putting her keen, kind pen aside too soon
In the ripe promise of her ardent noon.
Yet, sturdy-souled and whimsical and gay,
I think she would have chosen it that way,
On the high-hill note of her life's clear tune.
And while gray hearts grow green again with mirth,
And wakened joy and beauty go to find
The small, blue-ginghamed lonely ones of earth,
While charm and cheer and color work their will
In the glad gospel that she left behind,
She will be living, laughing with us still.

“BLUE WEDNESDAY”

THE first Wednesday in every month was a Perfectly Awful Day—a day to be awaited with dread, endured with courage and forgotten with haste. Every floor must be spotless, every chair dustless, and every bed without a wrinkle. Ninety-seven squirming little orphans must be scrubbed and combed and buttoned into freshly starched ginghams; and all ninety-seven reminded of their manners, and told to say, “Yes, sir,” “No, sir,” whenever a Trustee spoke.

It was a distressing time; and poor Jerusha Abbott, being the oldest orphan, had to bear the brunt of it. But this particular first Wednesday, like its predecessors, finally dragged itself to a close. Jerusha escaped from the pantry where she had been making sandwiches for the asylum’s guests, and turned upstairs to accomplish her regular work. Her special care was room F, where eleven little tots, from four to seven, occupied eleven little cots set in a row. Jerusha assembled her charges, straightened their rumpled frocks, wiped their noses, and started them in an orderly and willing line toward the dining-room to engage themselves for a blessed half hour with bread and milk and prune pudding.

Then she dropped down on the window seat and leaned throbbing temples against the cool glass. She had been on her feet since five that morning, doing everybody’s bidding, scolded and hurried by a nervous matron. Mrs. Lippett, behind the scenes, did not always maintain that calm and pompous dignity with which she faced an audience of

Trustees and lady visitors. Jerusha gazed out across a broad stretch of frozen lawn, beyond the tall iron paling that marked the confines of the asylum, down undulating ridges sprinkled with country estates, to the spires of the village rising from the midst of bare trees.

The day was ended—quite successfully, so far as she knew. The Trustees and the visiting committee had made their rounds, and read their reports, and drunk their tea, and now were hurrying home to their own cheerful firesides, to forget their bothersome little charges for another month. Jerusha leaned forward watching with curiosity—and a touch of wistfulness—the stream of carriages and automobiles that rolled out of the asylum gates. In imagination she followed first one equipage then another to the big houses dotted along the hillside. She pictured herself in a fur coat and a velvet hat trimmed with feathers leaning back in the seat and nonchalantly murmuring “Home” to the driver. But on the door-sill of her home the picture grew blurred.

Jerusha had an imagination—an imagination, Mrs. Lippett told her, that would get her into trouble if she didn’t take care—but keen as it was, it could not carry her beyond the front porch of the houses she would enter. Poor, eager, adventurous little Jerusha, in all her seventeen years, had never stepped inside an ordinary house; she could not picture the daily routine of those other human beings who carried on their lives undiscommoded by orphans.

Je-ru-sha Ab-bott
You are wan-ted
In the of-fice,
And I think you ’d
Better hurry up!

Tommy Dillon who had joined the choir, came singing up the stairs and down the corridor, his chant growing louder