



***ZONA
GALE***

***MISS
LULU
BETT***

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Miss Lulu Bett

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APRIL

The Deacons were at supper. In the middle of the table was a small, appealing tulip plant, looking as anything would look whose sun was a gas jet. This gas jet was high above the table and flared, with a sound.

"Better turn down the gas jest a little," Mr. Deacon said, and stretched up to do so. He made this joke almost every night. He seldom spoke as a man speaks who has something to say, but as a man who makes something to say.

"Well, what have we on the festive board to-night?" he questioned, eyeing it. "Festive" was his favourite adjective. "Beautiful," too. In October he might be heard asking: "Where's my beautiful fall coat?"

"We have creamed salmon," replied Mrs. Deacon gently. "On toast," she added, with a scrupulous regard for the whole truth. Why she should say this so gently no one can tell. She says everything gently. Her "Could you leave me

another bottle of milk this morning?" would wring a milkman's heart.

"Well, now, let us see," said Mr. Deacon, and attacked the principal dish benignly. "*Let* us see," he added, as he served.

"I don't want any," said Monona.

The child Monona was seated upon a book and a cushion, so that her little triangle of nose rose adultly above her plate. Her remark produced precisely the effect for which she had passionately hoped.

"*What's* this?" cried Mr. Deacon. "*No* salmon?"

"No," said Monona, inflected up, chin pertly pointed. She felt her power, discarded her "sir."

"Oh now, Pet!" from Mrs. Deacon, on three notes. "You liked it before."

"I don't want any," said Monona, in precisely her original tone.

"Just a little? A very little?" Mr. Deacon persuaded, spoon dripping;

The child Monona made her lips thin and straight and shook her head until her straight hair flapped in her eyes on either side. Mr. Deacon's eyes anxiously consulted his wife's eyes. What is this? Their progeny will not eat? What can be supplied?

"Some bread and milk!" cried Mrs. Deacon brightly, exploding on "bread." One wondered how she thought of it.

"No," said Monona, inflection up, chin the same. She was affecting indifference to this scene, in which her soul delighted. She twisted her head, bit her lips unconcernedly, and turned her eyes to the remote.

There emerged from the fringe of things, where she perpetually hovered, Mrs. Deacon's older sister, Lulu Bett, who was "making her home with us." And that was precisely the case. *They* were not making her a home, goodness knows. Lulu was the family beast of burden.

"Can't I make her a little milk toast?" she asked Mrs. Deacon.

Mrs. Deacon hesitated, not with compunction at accepting Lulu's offer, not diplomatically to lure Monona. But she hesitated habitually, by nature, as another is by nature vivacious or brunette.

"Yes!" shouted the child Monona.

The tension relaxed. Mrs. Deacon assented. Lulu went to the kitchen. Mr. Deacon served on. Something of this scene was enacted every day. For Monona the drama never lost its zest. It never occurred to the others to let her sit without eating, once, as a cure-all. The Deacons were devoted parents and the child Monona was delicate. She had a white, grave face, white hair, white eyebrows, white lashes. She was sullen, anaemic. They let her wear rings. She "toed in." The poor child was the late birth of a late marriage and the principal joy which she had provided them thus far was the pleased reflection that they had produced her at all.

"Where's your mother, Ina?" Mr. Deacon inquired. "Isn't she coming to her supper?"

"Tantrim," said Mrs. Deacon, softly.

"Oh, ho," said he, and said no more.

The temper of Mrs. Bett, who also lived with them, had days of high vibration when she absented herself from the table as a kind of self-indulgence, and no one could

persuade her to food. "Tantrims," they called these occasions.

"Baked potatoes," said Mr. Deacon. "That's good—that's good. The baked potato contains more nourishment than potatoes prepared in any other way. The nourishment is next to the skin. Roasting retains it."

"That's what I always think," said his wife pleasantly.

For fifteen years they had agreed about this.

They ate, in the indecent silence of first savouring food. A delicate crunching of crust, an odour of baked-potato shells, the slip and touch of the silver.

"Num, num, nummy-num!" sang the child Monona loudly, and was hushed by both parents in simultaneous exclamation which rivalled this lyric outburst. They were alone at table. Di, daughter of a wife early lost to Mr. Deacon, was not there. Di was hardly ever there. She was at that age. That age, in Warbleton.

A clock struck the half hour.

"It's curious," Mr. Deacon observed, "how that clock loses. It must be fully quarter to." He consulted his watch. "It is quarter to!" he exclaimed with satisfaction. "I'm pretty good at guessing time."

"I've noticed that!" cried his Ina.

"Last night, it was only twenty-three to, when the half hour struck," he reminded her.

"Twenty-one, I thought." She was tentative, regarded him with arched eyebrows, mastication suspended.

This point was never to be settled. The colloquy was interrupted by the child Monona, whining for her toast. And the doorbell rang.

"Dear me!" said Mr. Deacon. "What can anybody be thinking of to call just at meal-time?"

He trod the hall, flung open the street door. Mrs. Deacon listened. Lulu, coming in with the toast, was warned to silence by an uplifted finger. She deposited the toast, tiptoed to her chair. A withered baked potato and cold creamed salmon were on her plate. The child Monona ate with shocking appreciation. Nothing could be made of the voices in the hall. But Mrs. Bett's door was heard softly to unlatch. She, too, was listening.

A ripple of excitement was caused in the dining-room when Mr. Deacon was divined to usher some one to the parlour. Mr. Deacon would speak with this visitor in a few moments, and now returned to his table. It was notable how slight a thing would give him a sense of self-importance. Now he felt himself a man of affairs, could not even have a quiet supper with his family without the outside world demanding him. He waved his hand to indicate it was nothing which they would know anything about, resumed his seat, served himself to a second spoon of salmon and remarked, "More roast duck, anybody?" in a loud voice and with a slow wink at his wife. That lady at first looked blank, as she always did in the presence of any humour couched with the least indirection, and then drew back her chin and caught her lower lip in her gold-filled teeth. This was her conjugal rebuking.

Swedenborg always uses "conjugal." And really this sounds more married. It should be used with reference to the Deacons. No one was ever more married than they—at least than Mr. Deacon. He made little conjugal jokes in the

presence of Lulu who, now completely unnerved by the habit, suspected them where they did not exist, feared lurking *entendre* in the most innocent comments, and became more tense every hour of her life.

And now the eye of the master of the house fell for the first time upon the yellow tulip in the centre of his table.

"Well, *we*!!" he said. "What's this?"

Ina Deacon produced, fleetly, an unlooked-for dimple.

"Have you been buying flowers?" the master inquired.

"Ask Lulu," said Mrs. Deacon.

He turned his attention full upon Lulu.

"Suitors?" he inquired, and his lips left their places to form a sort of ruff about the word.

Lulu flushed, and her eyes and their very brows appealed.

"It was a quarter," she said. "There'll be five flowers."

"You *bought* it?"

"Yes. There'll be five—that's a nickel apiece."

His tone was as methodical as if he had been talking about the bread.

"Yet we give you a home on the supposition that you have no money to spend, even for the necessities."

His voice, without resonance, cleft air, thought, spirit, and even flesh.

Mrs. Deacon, indeterminately feeling her guilt in having let loose the dogs of her husband upon Lulu, interposed: "Well, but, Herbert—Lulu isn't strong enough to work. What's the use...."

She dwindled. For years the fiction had been sustained that Lulu, the family beast of burden, was not strong enough

to work anywhere else.

"The justice business—" said Dwight Herbert Deacon—he was a justice of the peace—"and the dental profession—" he was also a dentist—"do not warrant the purchase of spring flowers in my home."

"Well, but, Herbert—" It was his wife again.

"No more," he cried briefly, with a slight bend of his head. "Lulu meant no harm," he added, and smiled at Lulu.

There was a moment's silence into which Monona injected a loud "Num, num, num-my-num," as if she were the burden of an Elizabethan lyric. She seemed to close the incident. But the burden was cut off untimely. There was, her father reminded her portentously, company in the parlour.

"When the bell rang, I was so afraid something had happened to Di," said Ina sighing.

"Let's see," said Di's father. "Where is little daughter to-night?"

He must have known that she was at Jenny Plow's at a tea party, for at noon they had talked of nothing else; but this was his way. And Ina played his game, always. She informed him, dutifully.

"Oh, *ho*," said he, absently. How could he be expected to keep his mind on these domestic trifles.

"We told you that this noon," said Lulu.

He frowned, disregarded her. Lulu had no delicacy.

"How much is salmon the can now?" he inquired abruptly—this was one of his forms of speech, the can, the pound, the cord.

His partner supplied this information with admirable promptness. Large size, small size, present price, former price—she had them all.

"Dear me," said Mr. Deacon. "That is very nearly salmoney, isn't it?"

"Herbert!" his Ina admonished, in gentle, gentle reproach. Mr. Deacon punned, organically. In talk he often fell silent and then asked some question, schemed to permit his vice to flourish. Mrs. Deacon's return was always automatic: "*Herbert!*"

"Whose Bert?" he said to this. "I thought I was your Bert."

She shook her little head. "You are a case," she told him. He beamed upon her. It was his intention to be a case.

Lulu ventured in upon this pleasantry, and cleared her throat. She was not hoarse, but she was always clearing her throat.

"The butter is about all gone," she observed. "Shall I wait for the butter-woman or get some creamery?"

Mr. Deacon now felt his little jocularities lost before a wall of the matter of fact. He was not pleased. He saw himself as the light of his home, bringer of brightness, lightener of dull hours. It was a pretty rôle. He insisted upon it. To maintain it intact, it was necessary to turn upon their sister with concentrated irritation.

"Kindly settle these matters without bringing them to my attention at meal-time," he said icily.

Lulu flushed and was silent. She was an olive woman, once handsome, now with flat, bluish shadows under her wistful eyes. And if only she would look at her brother Herbert and say something. But she looked in her plate.

"I want some honey," shouted the child, Monona.

"There isn't any, Pet," said Lulu.

"I want some," said Monona, eyeing her stonily. But she found that her hair-ribbon could be pulled forward to meet her lips, and she embarked on the biting of an end. Lulu departed for some sauce and cake. It was apple sauce. Mr. Deacon remarked that the apples were almost as good as if he had stolen them. He was giving the impression that he was an irrepressible fellow. He was eating very slowly. It added pleasantly to his sense of importance to feel that some one, there in the parlour, was waiting his motion.

At length they rose. Monona flung herself upon her father. He put her aside firmly, every inch the father. No, no. Father was occupied now. Mrs. Deacon coaxed her away. Monona encircled her mother's waist, lifted her own feet from the floor and hung upon her. "She's such an active child," Lulu ventured brightly.

"Not unduly active, I think," her brother-in-law observed.

He turned upon Lulu his bright smile, lifted his eyebrows, dropped his lids, stood for a moment contemplating the yellow tulip, and so left the room.

Lulu cleared the table. Mrs. Deacon essayed to wind the clock. Well now. Did Herbert say it was twenty-three to-night when it struck the half hour and twenty-one last night, or twenty-one to-night and last night twenty-three? She talked of it as they cleared the table, but Lulu did not talk.

"Can't you remember?" Mrs. Deacon said at last. "I should think you might be useful."

Lulu was lifting the yellow tulip to set it on the sill. She changed her mind. She took the plant to the wood-shed and

tumbled it with force upon the chip-pile.

The dining-room table was laid for breakfast. The two women brought their work and sat there. The child Monona hung miserably about, watching the clock. Right or wrong, she was put to bed by it. She had eight minutes more—seven—six—five—

Lulu laid down her sewing and left the room. She went to the wood-shed, groped about in the dark, found the stalk of the one tulip flower in its heap on the chip-pile. The tulip she fastened in her gown on her flat chest.

Outside were to be seen the early stars. It is said that if our sun were as near to Arcturus as we are near to our sun, the great Arcturus would burn our sun to nothingness.



In the Deacons' parlour sat Bobby Larkin, eighteen. He was in pain all over. He was come on an errand which civilisation has contrived to make an ordeal.

Before him on the table stood a photograph of Diana Deacon, also eighteen. He hated her with passion. At school she mocked him, aped him, whispered about him, tortured him. For two years he had hated her. Nights he fell asleep planning to build a great house and engage her as its servant.

Yet, as he waited, he could not keep his eyes from this photograph. It was Di at her curliest, at her fluffiest, Di conscious of her bracelet, Di smiling. Bobby gazed, his basic aversion to her hard-pressed by a most reluctant pleasure.

He hoped that he would not see her, and he listened for her voice.

Mr. Deacon descended upon him with an air carried from his supper hour, bland, dispensing. Well! Let us have it. "What did you wish to see me about?"—with a use of the past tense as connoting something of indirection and hence of delicacy—a nicety customary, yet unconscious. Bobby had arrived in his best clothes and with an air of such formality that Mr. Deacon had instinctively suspected him of wanting to join the church, and, to treat the time with due solemnity, had put him in the parlour until he could attend at leisure.

Confronted thus by Di's father, the speech which Bobby had planned deserted him.

"I thought if you would give me a job," he said defencelessly.

"So that's it!" Mr. Deacon, who always awaited but a touch to be either irritable or facetious, inclined now to be facetious. "Filling teeth?" he would know. "Marrying folks, then?" Assistant justice or assistant dentist—which?

Bobby blushed. No, no, but in that big building of Mr. Deacon's where his office was, wasn't there something ... It faded from him, sounded ridiculous. Of course there was nothing. He saw it now.

There was nothing. Mr. Deacon confirmed him. But Mr. Deacon had an idea. Hold on, he said—hold on. The grass. Would Bobby consider taking charge of the grass? Though Mr. Deacon was of the type which cuts its own grass and glories in its vigour and its energy, yet in the time after that which he called "dental hours" Mr. Deacon wished to work in

his garden. His grass, growing in late April rains, would need attention early next month ... he owned two lots—"of course property *is* a burden." If Bobby would care to keep the grass down and raked ... Bobby would care, accepted this business opportunity, figures and all, thanked Mr. Deacon with earnestness. Bobby's aversion to Di, it seemed, should not stand in the way of his advancement.

"Then that is checked off," said Mr. Deacon heartily.

Bobby wavered toward the door, emerged on the porch, and ran almost upon Di returning from her tea-party at Jenny Plow's.

"Oh, Bobby! You came to see me?"

She was as fluffy, as curly, as smiling as her picture. She was carrying pink, gauzy favours and a spear of flowers. Undeniably in her voice there was pleasure. Her glance was startled but already complacent. She paused on the steps, a lovely figure.

But one would say that nothing but the truth dwelt in Bobby.

"Oh, hullo," said he. "No. I came to see your father."

He marched by her. His hair stuck up at the back. His coat was hunched about his shoulders. His insufficient nose, abundant, loose-lipped mouth and brown eyes were completely expressionless. He marched by her without a glance.

She flushed with vexation. Mr. Deacon, as one would expect, laughed loudly, took the situation in his elephantine grasp and pawed at it.

"Mamma! Mamma! What do you s'pose? Di thought she had a beau----"