

Jacky's Perversity
by Elizabeth Bigelow

“FIREFLY is nervous and uneasy this morning, Jacqueline; hadn't you better take old Whitey?”

“Bless me, aunty, I shouldn't get back till sundown! I'm not afraid of Firefly, and I'm just in a mood for a good scamper.” And the young lady, seated on a little coal-black pony in the yard, tucked her riding-skirt securely under the saddle, fixed the pert little jockey hat, with its flaming scarlet wing, more firmly upon her head, and chirruped to Firefly.

“Don't forget the pink ribbon, Jacky,” called a girl's voice, “and O Jacky, wait a moment, and you'll have company; there's John Blackburn coming through the lane.”

The sentence was not lost upon Miss Jacky, but instead of waiting, she chirruped again to Firefly, and was off like a thistle-down before a high wind, casting a little backward glance of triumph and defiance at the young gentleman at the further end of the lane who was trying in vain to coax his horse into a canter.

“O, the perversity of that child!” groaned Mrs. Evarts, Jacky's aunt, peering out through the half-closed shutter. “She is determined to stand in her own light always. There is John Blackburn, the handsomest young man in the county—the Blackburns were all handsome—and rich enough to buy out the whole of Shelbyville, ready to get down on his knees to her, and she turns up her nose at him, and is as high and mighty as if she were a princess instead of a poor, penniless orphan. I call it base ingratitude as well as folly for her to do as she does.”

“John's a good fellow, that's a fact,” responded her husband, “and Jacky never'll make a better match; but it's no use to say anything, she's got her mother's blood in her, and she'll do as she likes.”

Mrs. Evarts only sighed again more dolefully than before. Jacky's mother, a sprightly little French girl whom her brother had found on her first foreign voyage, had not been at all to her taste, and it was a great vexation to her to find, when Jacky was thrown an orphan upon her hands, that she had inherited the disposition as well as the “outlandish name” of her mother.

“Money enough to buy out the whole of Shelbyville, as you say, wife, and as much again when his uncle dies—if old Matthew Shelby ever does die,” said Mr. Evarts, musingly. “It *is* a pity that Jacky won't have him.”

Mrs. Evarts was peering out through the shutters again, and did not answer. At the foot of the lane Jacky had stopped Firefly's headlong pace, and was letting him munch the clover-tops by the roadside to his heart's content.

The saddle had become loosened. Uncle John never did make it quite tight. It was *so* provoking just now! Jacky tugged at the girths with her tiny hands, her cheeks growing as crimson as the clover-tops; but all in vain. So she waited with all the nonchalance she could assume for the young man to come up. He watched Jacky's efforts with a little, triumphant smile, and proceeded

very leisurely, now that Fate had taken his part, and put a check upon Miss Jacky's career. The crimson cheeks had abundant time to cool before he reached her side. Firefly, having eaten all the clover within his reach, was stamping and tossing his mane, impatient to be gone. He snapped his teeth fiercely at Mr. Blackburn, as he leaned over to fasten the saddle.

"I don't think it is safe for you to ride that horse," said the young man.

"*Don't* you?" said Jacky, coolly, switching the tall grass with her riding-whip. "Pray don't touch him, if you are afraid he'll hurt you."

The young man went on fastening the saddle-girths in silence, paying no attention whatever to this speech, but noting instead Jacky's downcast eyes, and the flush that came and went on her cheek. Had his presence called that flush there? he thought, with a thrill of hope and triumph. Was she, after all, not entirely indifferent to him? Mr. John Blackburn repeated to himself those four lines that have been the spurs of so many warriors in battles of love and of hate:

"He either fears his fate too much
Or his desert is small.
Who dares not put it to the touch
And win or lose it all."

and resolved that on this day, in spite of all rebuffs, he would say his say.

But Miss Jacky had evidently no inclination to hear it. As soon as the saddle was made fast, she gave him a saucy nod in lieu of thanks, and was off, out of sight by a turn in the road, almost before the young gentleman had swung himself into his saddle.

But when he reached the turn in the road, he saw her, only a little way off, forcing Firefly to walk very slowly, and now and then casting a shy glance backward to see if she were followed. And when she saw him, she actually stopped, drew Firefly up under the shadow of a great oak tree by the roadside, and waited! Mr. John Blackburn's heart beat high with hope and confidence, and when he reached her side, and saw her shy, blushing face, and her eyes drooping in such a sweet, timid, penitent way, he was almost beside himself with delight.

She stretched her hand out towards him, still with downcast eyes:

"I am so sorry I treated you so!" she said, softly.

He caught the little hand, and carried it swiftly to his lips. Then looked earnestly into the drooping face.

"Jacky, do you love me?" he said.

"No," said Jacky, lifting her eyes coolly to his.

They rode on in silence, Mr. John Blackburn with a pale, set face, and a keener pain at his heart

than he had ever felt before; yet calling himself a fool and a coward to let this slip of a girl, arrant little coquette that she was, have so much power of him.

They had gone but a very little ways when both Firefly and his mistress grew tired of the sober pace which Mr. Blackburn's horse persisted in keeping.

"If you can't make that great, stupid beast of yours go any faster," said Jacky, pettishly, "I shall be obliged to bid you good-morning. I'm sorry you're so timid about horses; if it weren't for that, I'd lend you Firefly sometime, and let you see what riding was." And with another saucy nod, and a whistle to Firefly, Jacky was off.

But pride went before a fall. In the next two minutes Miss Jacky discovered "what riding was" as she had never known before. A sudden sharp report of a gun sounded in the grove beside the road, and in an instant she had lost all control of Firefly. He started off at a headlong run, with Jacky clinging frantically to his neck. John Blackburn's horse did not lack speed then, but still he was no match for the fiery little pony. Jacky had a vague sense of a terrible shock, and then of earth and sky mingled in chaotic confusion before her eyes. Then she came to herself to find John Blackburn kneeling beside her, rubbing her hands, and sprinkling her face with water, and two other gentlemen, in hunting-dress, standing beside her with faces of grave anxiety. Firefly was composedly munching clover-tops near by.

Jacky had scarcely time to notice this and to think what had happened, when a sharp pain in her arm made her cry out.

One of the strange gentlemen examined it with a professional air.

"It is only a sprain," he said. "It will be very fortunate if that is all the injury she has received."

And then, still in a sort of a dream, Jacky was obliged to listen to explanations, and apologies, and regrets from the gentlemen, who had been shooting game, unconscious that they were so near the road; and at last, to her great relief, she was in a carriage that had been brought from the village, and John Blackburn was driving her home. Then Jacky's wonted spirits began to come back to her in spite of the pain in her arm. She began to think that it was quite a nice adventure, after all, since nobody had suffered any serious injury.

The two gentlemen had come to Willowdale the day before to spend the summer—so they had told her while John had gone to the village for the carriage—and how nice it was to have made their acquaintance before any of the other girls! they were so nice looking and city beaux were held in very high estimation in Willowdale. And, above all, what a delightful opportunity to tease John Blackburn! And just then she bethought herself to ask him if she didn't think the elder gentleman—Mr. Dallas of New York, he had announced himself to be—remarkably handsome, and if he noticed what a *distingue* air the other, the doctor, had.

Mr. John Blackburn did not seem to have been impressed with the beauty or air of either of the strangers. He had not discovered anything remarkable about them except remarkable stupidity in firing guns so near a public road.

“Yes, it was rather careless,” Jacky answered. “It is a wonder that that fiery steed of yours didn’t run away with you! But the trees were so thick how were they to know, as they said, that there was a road there?”

John was apparently convinced that the strangers were excusable for their carelessness, for he said nothing more, only as he helped Jacky out of the carriage at her uncle’s door he held her hand a moment in his, and said:

“Promise me that you will never ride Firefly again!”

“Never ride Firefly again, indeed!” repeated Jacky, disdainfully. “Why Mr. Dallas is going to show me how I can teach him not to be afraid of guns, or anything of the kind.”

Mr. Blackburn bit his lip, but an exclamation that was not a blessing upon Mr. Dallas stole through it, as Jacky ran into the house.

Mrs. Evarts was shocked to hear of the accident, but secretly delighted that anything had happened to send Jacky home with John Blackburn. She insisted upon John’s coming in and staying to dinner, but he declined her invitation, and rode off with a very dark, moody face.

“What have you been saying to John Blackburn, now, to make him look like that, you ungrateful girl?” said Mrs. Evarts, batting and bandaging Jacky’s sprained arm with hands gentler than her words.

“I? I don’t know that I am responsible for John Blackburn’s looks. I am not his keeper,” answered Jacky, not very sweetly.

“No, and I can tell you, Miss Jacky Hartwell, you aint likely to be his keeper, if you go on in the way you do now! You needn’t think he’ll stand your shilly-shallying long, when there’s May Johnson, an heiress, and as pretty again as you are, and all ready to say yes, and I thank you, too, to him.”

“Dear me, aunty, you will drive me crazy! I am so tired of John Blackburn’s name! If May Johnson wants him, she is welcome to him, for all me. O Nan, such a lovely mustache as that Mr. Dallas has got!” And Jacky turned to her cousin, a little, freckle-faced, roly-poly girl, whose lack of beauty was her mother’s great trial; for if Nannie had only been pretty, Mrs. Evarts thought, who knew but that she might have had John Blackburn for a son-in-law, instead of trying until she was almost worn out to persuade that foolish, self-willed Jacky to have him? But yet, in her secret heart, Mrs. Evarts was forced to own that the child of her dead brother was almost as dear to her as her own, and her matchmaking zeal had for its only motive Jacky’s good.

“And the other one, Dr. Forrest, is very wise-looking, and has such a different air from these country youths! But you’ll see them to-morrow. They asked permission to call and see how I was, and of course I couldn’t say no; could I, aunty?” Jacky went on.

Mrs. Evarts only sighed in reply. Already she had a vision of May Johnson installed as mistress of the fine old mansion on the hill, that had been the Blackburn homestead for generations, and the pride of Willowdale for as long, and Jacky and Nannie the prey of these city adventurers, nothing short of bandits in disguise.

But when the two gentlemen made their appearance the next morning, even Mrs. Evarts was forced to acknowledge that they looked very little like bandits; and Nannie agreed that Mr. Dallas's mustache *was* lovely, though on the whole she like Dr. Forrest's looks better. They were both strangers in the village, and little more than strangers to each other, having met accidentally a few days before as they were journeying towards Willowdale—to which they had both been attracted by the fine hunting and fishing.

But, as Mr. Evarts observed, they were evidently not averse to hunting fairer game than could be found in the woods. Every morning Mr. Dallas's stately, high-stepping white mare or pair of dainty bays were to be seen at Mr. Evart's door, and always not far behind was Dr. Forrest; and little, freckle-faced Nannie, having gone to the village herself for the pink ribbon that Jacky didn't get, blossomed out in amazingly piquant little toilets, and really succeeded in making herself so charming that Dr. Forrest seemed to be entirely oblivious to the freckles and the roly-polyness that distressed her mother so much. And every day John Blackburn went to Mr. Evart's, only to find that Jacky was off riding or walking with Mr. Dallas, and when he met her by chance, she had nothing to say but to praise Mr. Dallas, and to tell what a "little saint upon earth" Firefly had become under his teachings.

And every day Mrs. Evarts looked with less hopeful eyes towards that splendid old house on the hill, of which she had hoped to see Jacky mistress, and thought of the airs with which May Johnson would trail her silks through those great rooms.

But Mrs. Evarts might have spared herself that uneasiness; the old mansion was destined never to have another mistress.

One sultry August night, as Jacky and Mr. Dallas were riding home from the village, they saw a bank of smoke, like a thick black cloud, hanging over the hill, and when they came nearer, they saw a great tongue of flame rising against the sky, and growing, as if by magic, into a blaze that seemed to cover the whole sky.

"O, it is the Cedars! It is John Blackburn's house!" cried Jacky. "And he isn't there! I saw him at the post-office as we came through the village. O, drive back as fast as you can! He must know."

But at that moment a horse galloped furiously by them, and Jacky knew the rider's form, even in the darkness.

"It is a splendid sight," observed Mr. Dallas, as the flames shot up higher and higher.

"O, how can you say so?" cried Jacky, excitedly, "it is so terrible! Don't you suppose there is any way to stop it?"

“Probably not,” said Mr. Dallas, coolly, “there is no engine in the village. Are you so very much distressed about it? It is a great ornament to the village, to be sure, but Mr. Blackburn will probably rebuild it.”

“It is a loss to him that nothing can replace. He thought so much of it!” said Jacky.

“And you care so much for his loss?” Mr. Dallas said, in a very low, almost reproachful tone, looking searchingly into Jacky’s face. Jacky grew crimson to the roots of her hair, and then drew herself up haughtily.

“I am not so unfeeling as not to be sorry for the misfortune of any friend,” she said. But she said very little more about the fire, but sat and watched the flames, sinking one moment as if conquered, and streaming up defiantly again in the west, like a blood-red banner against the dark gray sky; and then, worst of all it seemed to Jacky, flickering in fantastic wreaths and chains over the branches of the grand old trees that had stood sentinel around the house for so many years.

The next morning, when Jacky looked out of her window, she saw only a pile of blackened ruins on the hill, and the trees standing about it were stripped of all their leaves, and their trunks scorched and blackened. At twilight John Blackburn came walking down the lane. For a wonder, Mr. Dallas was not with Jacky, but John had very little to say; he had only come to bid them all good-by, as he was going to leave Willowdale, he said.

“Leave Willowdale?” Jacky said. And John could not help fancying that her cheeks grew a little paler, and a shade of sadness mingled with the surprise in her eyes.

“There is nothing to keep me here, and my business in C—, requires my attention,” said John.

Jacky looked down, and patted her foot nervously on the stone step where they were standing. John Blackburn looked keenly up under the downcast eyelids.

“Jacky, are you quite sure that what you told me is true—that you can never love me, never be my wife?”

Just then there came the click of the gate-latch. Jacky looked up to see Mr. Dallas coming up the path.

“Sure? of course I am! What does make you so persistent?” she answered, giving her head a coquettish little toss.

John turned away without a word.

“But let us be friends, John. Won’t you say good-by?” faltered Jacky, in a very different tone, holding out her hand.

He took the hand, and held it for an instant in a clasp that hurt her.

“Good-by, Jacky. I wish the old house had burnt up with its master in it last night,” he said, and was gone.

Mr. Dallas did not find so gay a companion as usual on that morning. Jacky was silent and distraught.

A few days after this, Miss Price, the pert little village dress-maker, having come to Mrs. Evarts for a day’s work, opened her budget of gossip even more eagerly than usual.

“Well, misfortune didn’t come singly to John Blackburn! Did you know he’s failed? Gone all to pieces! can’t pay his creditors five cents on the dollar; squandered all his money on foolish speculations, they say, and of course his uncle, such an old miser as Matthew Shelby, wont help him a bit. I always thought John was a good, steady, prudent fellow, but they say he’s been terribly reckless about money.”

Before night the story of John Blackburn’s misfortunes was in everybody’s mouth, and Mrs. Evarts, in her worldly wisdom and prudence, was fain to thank her stars over and over again for what had always been her greatest trial—Jacky’s perversity. For John Blackburn, penniless, was a very different person, to her mind, from John Blackburn, the richest man in the county. How fortunate it was that Jacky had no entanglement with him, now, for there was Mr. Dallas! rich, of course he must be, of quite as good appearance as John Blackburn, and every way quite as eligible as John had been in his palmier days. So, vainly but zealously, Mrs. Evarts took up her lance in Mr. Dallas’s behalf, and this time counting success as certain. But in less than a month after the news of John Blackburn’s failure had been spread abroad, a new stone fell into the stagnation of Willowdale society, and for a time all private interests were forgotten in the general surprise and consternation.

The house of old Matthew Shelby, John Blackburn’s uncle, who had spent all the days of his life in hoarding up money, was entered at night, and the strong box which he kept in his bedroom, rifled of its contents, the old man being rendered insensible by chloroform. Such a thing was almost unheard-of in Willowdale. Who could be the thief? In a very short space of time, that question was answered definitely enough to satisfy the majority of gossip and marvel lovers. John Blackburn had been seen in Willowdale on the day of the robbery; he had disappeared as suddenly as he came. Moreover, on the ground beneath the window by which the thief was supposed to have made his exit, was found a gold sleeve-button, with John Blackburn’s initials upon it. Could anything be more conclusive proof, especially when it was known that John was so much in need of money, and that his uncle had refused to assist him? To be sure it was a great shock to the community, and there were not a few who stoutly refused, in the face of all evidence, to believe that John Blackburn could have been guilty of such a thing.

“But whether he did it or not, Jacky,” said Mrs. Evarts, “it’s very fortunate that you are not engaged to him. What a terrible disgrace it would be!”

And Jacky said not a word.

Before the end of the third day after the robbery, John Blackburn was arrested, and lodged in the county jail at G—, five miles from Willowdale.

Early the next morning, before any one else was stirring, a little figure stole noiselessly out of Mr. Evert's door, went into the stable, and slipped a saddle on to Firefly's back, and rode off. It was Jacky, of course, but the pert little turban and the bright face beneath it were shrouded in a thick veil. Firefly was urged at his fleetest pace over the road to G—. It was not easy to gain access to the jail, and Jacky's cheeks grew very hot as the keeper asked if she were a relative of the prisoner. But he let her go in at last. John came forward to meet her, looking pale and worn, but the flush rose to his temples as he saw her. He held out his hand, quietly.

"You were very kind to come and see me," he said. "You know that this story is not true—that I am not guilty of what they accuse me of? You would not have come else."

"Of course I know it is not true. I didn't know whether you would care to see me after—after I treated you so badly. But I wanted to ask you to forgive me, at least."

It was strange to see Jacky so embarrassed, so utterly bereft of her little coquettish ways.

"Forgive? I have nothing to forgive, Jacky. If you could not care for me, as I wished you to, you could do no less than tell me so."

"But I teased you," faltered Jacky. "and I—I—"

Her voice broke in sobs, and she hid her face, burning with blushes in her hands, like a shame-faced child.

John's voice trembled when he spoke again.

"Do you mean, Jacky, that if I were free from this disgrace, and not poor, I might ask that question again, and with hope of a different answer?"

"You—you might now, as it is!" faltered Jacky.

A few moments after, Jacky said:

"O, how could I forget for a moment! It wasn't to tell you this that I came, John. It was to tell you that I know—I am sure I know who it was that stole your uncle's money! You will be surprised—you will laugh at me, perhaps, but just listen. On the night of the robbery I was restless and uneasy, and at about twelve o'clock I got up and sat by the window, and before I had been there ten minutes, I saw a man go by. I watched him, and saw him turn up the road that leads to your uncle's house. John, it was Mr. Dallas! More than that; you know there were tracks under the window and through the garden. I am working Mr. Dallas a pair of slippers—only for a philopona, John—and he gave me a slipper of his to measure by, and I took it up there myself, last night, and it fitted into the tracks exactly, only that they had been made by a boot with heels!"

John had grown very pale. He evidently thought Jacky's evidence was worth something.

"Time's up, mum," called the man at the door.

"O, do tell me what to do, John!" cried Jacky. "Who shall I tell?"

"Go and tell my uncle, Jacky, if you will, and Mr. Evarts, too," he answered, and Jacky went away cheered, almost happy, confident that John would be cleared.

She had no thought of doubting his innocence for a moment, and had asked him for no proof or explanation, but he had given it to her.

He had been in Willowdale on the day of the robbery, as was reported, he said. He had gone there to see his uncle, but had left town before five o'clock. The sleeve-button was one that he had lost the previous summer.

Jacky went, with her heart in her mouth, to Mr. Shelby. He was much more eager and interested in her story than she had hoped, and called a council of Mr. Evarts and a few of the principal men of the village, at once. Before noon the news spread like wildfire, and of course there was an instant reaction of public sentiment in John's favor. It was astonishing to see how few had ever had the least idea that John was guilty, and how many had had a very small opinion of Mr. Dallas.

Additional evidence of the latter individual's guilt was discovered in the fact that he had suddenly left for parts unknown. Detectives were sent after him, and discovered him in a distant city, bearing an assumed name, but to which it was proved that he had as much right to, as to the name of Dallas. The good people of Willowdale were horrified to know that they had harbored in their midst an old offender, escaped by stealth from the clutches of the law. A part of the money was found upon his person, and this old Mr. Shelby, to the great amazement of all Willowdale, bestowed upon Jacky, as a wedding portion.

No one was surprised when a few months afterward he quietly departed this life, for, after breaking the great rule and habit of his life by making a present, he could live no longer, they said. He made no will, but all his money went to John Blackburn, as the nearest relative. The old house on the hill was rebuilt, and very soon there was a double wedding in Mrs. Evarts's parlor, Jacky became Mrs. John Blackburn, and Nannie Evarts Mrs. Dr. Forrest. Mrs. Evarts's satisfaction was unbounded, and to herself she took all the credit. Only the other day she said to a lady, who remarked what a happy couple Mr. and Mrs. John Blackburn were:

"Yes, but I had a hard time to make Jacky have John. There never was anything like that child's perversity!"

The Flag of our Union, July 11, 1868