

# The Joke on Jimmy Jellup

by Wilbur Nesbit

**J**IMMY JELLUP was about the awkwardest man you ever saw when he stood at the case digging up the type. He was tall and slim and homely, and when he worked he would take off his collar and let his Adam's apple sag all it wanted to. His skin was so white it was pasty-looking, and his eyes were a washed-out sort of blue, and his hair was kind of a yellowy white. And he was dumb as an ox. He was country-bred, and never got over it.

We roomed together. Jimmy offered to take me in with him when I got my case at the job-shop where he worked, and we chummed together for nearly a year. We got along all right because neither of us cared to do anything the other liked. Jimmy didn't like vaudeville or the drama, and would rather sit in the room and smoke a pipe and read a book, of an evening, while I went out and amused myself.

He was the same way about girls. The rustle of a bunch of skirts was enough to make him turn red and look for a good chance to run. That's how I got the joke on him.

Just before Christmas I got on the train to go to Cincinnati to visit some of my folks. Naturally, having been away from them a good while, I wanted to put up a good front, and so I blew in a wad on some new togs, got me a swell overcoat, and a necktie that was a screamer. When I am lit up that way I am not such a pickle to look at, if I do say it myself.

I came pretty near missing the train, because I had to stop and say good-bye to the lady cashier in the restaurant where I had been getting my breakfasts, and she had a lot to say about how well my clothes hung on me, and how it takes a well-setup man to do justice to a good suit, and all that sort of thing.

You know how they can hand it out to you. I gave her as good as she sent, and wished her a Merry Christmas and beat it for the station. Swung on to the train as it was pulling out.

There was just one vacant seat in the day-coach. There were two or three places for me to sit, but there was only one vacant seat I wanted. There was a girl in it. She was rosy-cheeked and innocent-eyed, and wasn't up with the latest style in pompadours, but she was a good-looker just the same.

She had "farm" written all over her, if she did wear good clothes. I walked down the aisle till I got to the seat where she was, and then I lifted my hat and said I hoped she wouldn't think I was intruding if I sat in the other half of her seat.

She blushed and moved over toward the window, and I sat down. I put my grip in the aisle, fixed my cuffs, and pushed my hat back a little. Then I took a side look at her.

I caught her taking a side look at me. She got red in the face and looked embarrassed, and I thought I would ease her feelings a little, so I said:

"I beg your pardon again, but it seems to me I have seen you in Chicago."

"I don't remember meeting you," she replied, with what I thought was a bit of eagerness. "I met a good many young gentlemen this fall while I've been visiting there, but I don't really recollect you."

"Must have been at a party, or a dance," I said, "for your face is certainly familiar to me. But please excuse me, I don't want to intrude."

"I think it is not necessary to apologize," she said. "There isn't any harm, anyway, in talking with gentlemen one rides

with on the train, is there?"

"Not if they are the right kind of gentlemen," I told her. "Girls can't be too careful how they talk with strangers."

She said that was right, and then I went ahead and told her all about how fresh men are apt to get, and how they will presume on a girl's good nature by trying to flirt with her. She was an innocent thing, as I say, and I felt that she ought to be posted.

"I've had such a fine time in Chicago," she said, "that I am almost sorry to be going home. We live near Logansport, you know."

"That's a pretty country around there."

"Oh, have you been there?"

"Lots of times. I've ridden all through there on a wheel."

"Well, we live about eighteen miles from Logansport, really, but this train doesn't stop at the little town where I ought to get off to have the shortest drive home, so I have to go to Logansport to-day."

It wasn't long until she had told me that her name was Mabel Short, and had described the big brick farmhouse where her folks lived, and told me the name of her cousin she had been visiting in Chicago, and finally she asked me:

"What is your name? You haven't told me yet."

Now, I was about half-way engaged to a girl in Chicago, and you never can tell what may happen, so I didn't want to tell her my real name. And I thought, quick as a wink, that here was a chance to have some fun, so I told her:

"Why, I thought you knew it. My name is Jellup—James Jellup. I'm a printer, you know."

"Oh, I have always heard that printers have to be awfully smart men," she said.

"They do," I replied, and laughed inwardly, thinking of long, lean, clumsy Jimmy Jellup and the show he would have had proving he was smart if he was sitting beside

her right then.

Jimmy wouldn't have been there, though. I went ahead and gave her the address where Jimmy and I roomed.

"I want you to write to me," I said to her.

"But would that be proper?"

"It certainly will."

I wrote down Jimmy's name and the number for her on a leaf I tore from a memorandum-book in my pocket. She said she would think about it, and if time hung too heavily on her hands she would maybe drop me a line just to get some news from Chicago.

Then she asked if I had brought any lunch. I said no, and asked her to come to the diner and eat with me. But she reached under the seat and took out a box full of home-fried chicken and cake, and things like that, and insisted on my eating with her. It was good stuff, too.

When we got to Logansport I got off and helped her to the platform, and shook hands with her, and whispered not to forget she had promised to write to me, and hopped back on the train when I saw a man with whiskers hurrying toward us. She kissed him, and they walked toward a rig.

I had almost forgotten the incident when I got back to Chicago. I got to the room about eight o'clock at night, and found Jimmy sitting (here with his feet up on a chair in front of him and a puzzled look on his face.

"Al," he said, after he got up and shook my hand, "here's the queerest thing you ever heard of."

"What?"

"Why, some girl down in Indiana has got hold of my name and is writing me letters."

I grinned, but he thought I did so because I didn't believe him, so he shoved a letter at me.

"What do you think of that?" he demanded.

Sure enough, she had written. It was just the kind of a letter she would write, innocent and confiding, as she was. No beginning with, "You will think I am terribly forward," or anything like that, but an honest, unassuming little letter, saying that she got home all right and was glad to have met me—Jellup—and hoped I had had a pleasant trip and a nice visit. And then a lot of description of the weather and things on the farm.

I lay back on the bed and laughed till I cried. Jellup sat there, his pipe hanging from his thick lips, and stared at me as if he thought I had gone crazy.

When I could get my breath I told him all about it.

"But why did you give her my name?" he wanted to know.

I explained to him, but it was hard to make him understand. He argued that it wasn't fair to fool her that way, and a lot of things like that.

"I'll not write to her," he said at last. "I never wrote a letter to a girl in my life."

"You don't have to write to her," I answered. "I'll do that. I'll write, and sign your name, and we'll have some fun out of it."

But he didn't want me to do that. Finally I made this suggestion:

"Listen. I'll write the letters, and make them as entertaining and interesting as I can, and then you can copy them and send them to her. She's all right. She's a pretty girl. And it will give you a chance to begin mixing up with society."

So, he agreed to that. He said he would rather copy the letters I would write, because then he would know what was in them.

Next night I stayed in the room with him and fixed up a letter that was a corker. Just thing in a lot of long words and put on style generally, you know—made a real polite letter of it. I handed it over to Jimmy, and he read it through and shook his head sadly.

"I wish I could think of that kind of

Stuff," he said. "If I had your gift for composing letters I'd be mighty glad. I generally quit after I've written that it is a nice day and I am well."

"You've got to throw bouquets when you write to the girls," I told him.

He copied the letter, and mailed it the next morning. The answer came back the following Monday. That was a sign that she hadn't any regular beau, I told Jimmy.

"How do you figure that out?" he asked me.

"Because she takes Sunday afternoon or evening to write letters."

"I never would have thought of that."

"You've got to think of these things."

I wrote an answer to her letter for him. He kept putting in, wanting me to say this and that. He had an idea that the thing to do in corresponding with any one was to start a discussion about Dickens or Thackeray or Scott, or some of those literary people whose books he was always reading.

But I told him the way to get a reputation with a girl, was to tell her how many dances he went to, and how busy his social duties kept him, and how many plays he had seen. I didn't convince him, but he let it go that time.

Next letter, though, he simply made me work in something about one of Hall Caine's books, and hanged if she didn't write back to him and say that she agreed with him on that point, but what did he think of Marie Corelli? By gracious! before I knew it I was in deep water. Instead of me working the game along and having all the fun to myself, he was taking it out of my hands.

After this had gone on for a couple of months I wrote in one of the letters that I would like to have a photograph of her—meaning, of course, that Jellup would like it. Jimmy wanted to cut that out, but I made him leave it in.

"Whose girl is this, anyway?" I asked

him.

"Mine," he argued.

"Not on your life! Your name is just being used. Why, you never saw her!"

That stumped him, and after thinking a few minutes he concluded to let the request for the picture go in.

Next time she wrote she sent the picture, and she said she wanted one of his. Jimmy was slouching around the room, setting her picture on the dresser, and then on the mantel, and trying it here and there, to see where it would hang with the best effect.

The funny side of it struck me all of a heap. The idea appealed to me. Here was Jimmy taking this all seriously, and never realizing for a minute that she had really sent the picture to me, and that it was my picture she wanted.

"She's pretty," he said, holding the picture under the light. "She's got a good, sensible face, and looks like a girl that will make some fellow a good wife."

"She's a peach," I agreed. "I've got half a notion to send her my picture."

"You? Your picture? Why, Al, she asked for mine."

"But, you chump, don't you see she thinks it is me that is writing to her?"

He studied her picture a long time, as if he hadn't heard me.

"I never had my picture taken in my life," he said.

"I haven't any good ones of myself right now," I added.

He stopped and looked at me queerly.

"Say, Al, you wouldn't—you wouldn't be so mean as to send her your picture, would you?"

"Lord! You wouldn't be so mean as to send her one of yourself, would you?"

He couldn't seem to get it into his head that he was merely a figure of speech in the game, so to say. He had got so interested in the correspondence, although I was writing the

letters for him, that he actually thought he was doing it himself. It was all straight goods with him.

Then his eyes got a whipped look in them when it flashed on him. He put her picture down, and his lips trembled, and he said:

"It's a—it's a darn shame, Al. It's not right to fool a girl that way."

This was rich. It was better than I ever thought it would be. I began to laugh, but Jimmy went so white and looked so peculiar that I choked off the laugh and told him:

"I'll not send her my picture. I'll tell you what to do. We'll write her that you haven't had one taken for a good while, but as soon as you get one you'll send it to her."

This satisfied him, and we fixed up the letter. But after that I couldn't make any more jokes about her; and when she would gently hint in her letters that she thought it was about time for him to send his picture he would sit around and mope, and say we never should have started the fool letter-writing, and he had a notion to stop it.

"Why don't you drop it?" I asked him once.

"Then what would she think of me?"

"Hang it all, Jimmy, she doesn't know you are on earth! She thinks I am the one."

"But I don't think so," he said stupidly.

One day he put on his best clothes—it was Sunday morning. He put a high collar on that hid his Adam's apple, and slicked his hair down, and acted so fidgety that I couldn't imagine what was coming over him.

"How do I look, Al?" he asked.

"Like a fashion-plate," I lied. "What's up?"

"I'm going to have my picture taken."

I just looked at him. I couldn't say a word. His face had the expression that you see on pictures of people going to the stake.

I let him go alone. He did not come back until noon. His collar was melted down,

and his hair was tangled, and he looked miserable.

“It’s an ordeal,” he said.

When the pictures were finished he showed them to me, and in spite of his clothes and his agonized look, the camera had reproduced him faithfully. It couldn’t help it.

“Are you going to send one of them to her?” I inquired.

“That’s what I had it taken for.”

He said he would write the letter to go with the picture. He didn’t want any help on it. He put in most of the afternoon composing it, and after he had it folded up and ready for the envelope he looked at me soberly for a while and then said:

“I guess it’s only fair that I should let you read it.”

I took it and looked it over. He had begun by telling her that she was the victim of a deception, and that he was not the man she thought. Then he continued:

When you get my picture you will realize this completely. The man you met on the train was my roommate, Albert Randall, and, he thought it would be a good joke on both of us for him to give you my name. It was. I am sorry about it. I can stand the joke on myself, all right, but it hasn’t been fair to play the joke on you. Ever since you sent your picture I have felt pretty bad about it, and I wanted to stop writing to you, but Randall convinced me that it was as mean to drop the correspondence as it had been to begin it.

I never did anything of this sort before. I never will again. It will serve me right if you are angry and never write to me again, but I want to put myself as straight as possible with you, and show you that I am not altogether to blame. Please consider me as making a thousand apologies to you and meaning every one of them. When you look at my picture you will get some idea of how penitent I am,

for surely I must feel very regretful if I have the courage to send you a picture of myself.

There was some more to the letter, but that covers the main ground. I tried all I could to talk Jimmy out of it, but he wouldn’t listen and insisted upon its despatch.

He said a lot of things to me that I didn’t like—said I was lacking in a lot of different instincts, and that I had put him in quite a false position, and a lot more like that. It made me sore and very angry.

“I know what’s the matter with you,” I said hotly. “You’re in love with the girl yourself! Any one can see that at a glance.”

“What if I am?” he snapped. “That’s more than you ever were, or ever had a right to be.”

He wrapped up the picture and sealed the letter, and went out and mailed them.

All that week he was the funniest-looking man you ever saw. He worked away at his case as patiently as a dog would in a treadmill, humping over and picking out the type and then dropping it in his stick with a nervous, false motion that was always one of his peculiarities.

The more I looked at him the funnier it got to me. I could imagine that girl’s surprise when she opened that photograph-envelope. I suppose she had been bragging to her friends about the swell acquaintance she had made in Chicago, and talking about what a fine time she would have next time she went there visiting.

And from her letters I had gathered that her daddy owned something like six hundred acres of as good farm land as there is in Indiana—and that is pretty good. So I figured that she must be a belle in her section of the State.

And here would come this comic valentine of a photograph—and she would simply faint! I laughed over and over again at

that notion throughout the day.

That week went by, and another went by—and still no word from her.

Jimmy was getting whiter and thinner and more nervous. Remorse was eating him up.

Then one evening, when we got to our room, there was the old familiar square envelope addressed to him in her handwriting.

“Hello! We’ve got our answer,” I said, taking the letter and tearing the envelope open.

He grabbed it from my Hands.

“I’ve got my answer,” he corrected me. “That’s my letter, this time, old fellow!”

Would you believe it? That fool girl wrote him a letter at least a dozen pages long, forgiving him for the deception he had played, and simply flaying me alive.

Her opinion of me was fierce. And she wrote for Jimmy to come down and visit them on the farm!

Well, I urged him to go. I knew that as

soon as they laid eyes on him down there it would be twenty-three for him. And along early in the spring I persuaded him to tog up and take the train to Logansport, where she and her father would meet him.

He went. I had a blissful week picturing to myself Jimmy cooking his own goose.

Saturday morning I got a note from him. It read:

DEAR AL:

Pack up my things and express them to me in my trunk. I am going to stay here on the farm. Mabel and I will be married the 15th. Come to the wedding if you are not too busy. I am certainly grateful to you.

Yours truly,

JAMES JELLUP.

And I’ll be hanged if I’ve ever been able to understand it. You simply can’t tell what a woman will do.