

# **Last Night When You Kissed Blanche Thompson**

Bess Streeter Aldrich

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Junior Mason was twelve. The statement is significant. There are a few peevish people in the world who believe that all twelve-year-old boys ought to be hung. Others, less irritable, think that gently chloroforming them would seem more humane. A great many good-natured folks contend that incarceration for a couple of years would prove the best way to dispose of them.

Just how Springtown was divided in regard to Junior and his crowd of cronies depended largely upon the amiability of its citizens. But practically everyone looked upon that crowd as he looked upon other pests: rust, sparrows, moth-millers and potato bugs. As the boys came out of school tearing wildly down the street with Apache yells, more than one staid citizen had been seen to cross the road hurriedly, as one would get out of the way of fire engines, or molten lava rolling down from Vesuvius.

There were a dozen or more boys in the crowd, but the ringleaders were Runt Perkins, Shorty Marston and Junior Mason, and the only similarity between charity and Junior was that the greatest of these was Junior.

At home, by the united efforts of the other members of the Mason family, he was kept subdued into something resembling civilized man. Mother ruled him with a firm hand but an understanding heart. It is a fine old combination. The girls made strenuous efforts to assist in his upbringing, but their gratuitous services were not kindly looked upon by the young man, who believed it constituted mere butting-in.

Katherine it was who took upon herself the complete charge of his speech. Not an insignificant "have went" nor an infinitesimal "I seen" ever escaped the keen ears of his elder sister, who immediately corrected him. Mother sometimes thought Katherine a little severe when, in the interest of proper-speaking, she would stop him in the midst of an exciting account of a home-run. There were times, thought Mother, when the spirit of the thing was so much more important than the flesh in which it was clothed.

For arithmetic Junior showed such an aptitude that Father was wont to say encouragingly, "You'll be working in the bank one of these days, Son." At which "Son" would glow with a legitimate pride that quickly faded before the sight of a certain dull red book entitled "Working Lessons in English Grammar." Katherine labored patiently many an evening to assist in bringing Junior and the contents of this particular volume somewhere within hailing distance of each other. Painstakingly she would go over the ground with him in preparation for his lesson, to be met with a situation something like this:

"Now we're ready. Read the first sentence, Junior."

And Junior would earnestly and enthusiastically sing-song: "He took his coat down from the nail without a word of warning."

"What's the subject, Junior? Now think!"

"Coat," Junior would answer promptly. Then, seeing Katherine's grieved look, he would change quickly to "Nail." And when the look deepened to disgust he would grow wild and begin guessing frantically: "Warning?"

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Took? From?"

Of the three girls Eleanor was his best friend. Rather boyish herself, she was still not so far removed from the glamour of ball games in the back pasture, the trappings of gophers, and circuses in the barn, but that the two held many things in common.

It was Marcia who was his arch enemy. Not that she committed any serious offenses. It was her attitude that exasperated him. She had a trick of perpetrating a lazy little smile on his every act, a smile that was of surpassing superiority. And she had a way of always jumping at the conclusion that he was dirty. "Go wash your hands!" was her sisterly greeting whenever he approached. She used it as consistently toward him as she used "How do you do?" to other people. Junior would jump into a heated argument over his perfect cleanliness, a discussion that consumed more time than an entire bath would have taken.

Junior's other enemy was Isabelle Thompson. The Thompsons were the Mason's nearest neighbors, the two yards being separated by a low hedge. The family consisted of Mr. and Mrs. Tobias Thompson, and two daughters: Blanche, who was a little older than Eleanor Mason, and Isabelle, aged eleven.

Mrs. Thompson was a little thin woman who reveled in her reputation of being the neatest housekeeper in Springtown. Why do those characteristics so often go together? Does the thin, wiry condition of a woman's body beget neatness? Or does she keep herself worn thin by her energetic scrubbing? Is it a physiological or a psychological problem?

However that may be, Mrs. Thompson continued to lay strips of rag carpet over her best rugs to keep them clean, and then a layer of newspapers over the rag carpet to save that, too. Andy Christensen declared that she came clear out to the gate to meet him whenever he brought up the groceries on a muddy day.

Her neatness extended to the other members of her household. Tobias was proprietor of a combined grocery and meat market; and no pig, dizzily hanging head downward from its peg in the back room, looked more pink or slick or skinned than he.

"It is certainly nice to think our meat comes from such a clean place," Mother often said.

"Yes," the frank Marcia agreed, "if you don't mind a little thing like underweight."

"Believe me!" Eleanor added, "Tobias would pinch a weenie in two if he dared."

Mrs. Thompson's mind was as neat as the rest of her. It, too, was a prim, tidy place with symmetrical shelves on which were stored a few meager but immaculate items, such as cleanliness being next to godliness, dancing a device of the devil, and that the only route to heaven was via the particular church to which she belonged. Yes, everything in her mind and heart was small and neat and necessary. Those organs were not all cluttered up with a lot of unessential rubbish like Mother Mason's. There were no tag-ends of emotion over the moon swinging out from behind a swirl of silver clouds, nor messy scraps of thrills because a thrush was singing in a rain-drenched lilac bush at twilight. Mother's was the soul of a poet. Mrs. Thompson's was the soul of a polyp.

She was one of the few people who riled Mother through and through. She would say, "I won't quarrel with any of my neighbors," as though the others ran around seeking trouble. Or, "I've always said honesty was the best policy." It was as though she felt she had invented honesty. You know the type? And even now, some Mrs. Thompson will read this and say, "Doesn't that for all the world remind you of Aunt Abbie?" After all, it is probably a good thing that some power has never yet decided to give us the gifting mentioned by Mr. Robert Burns.

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The Masons, among themselves, always spoke of the elder Thompson daughter as "Blonche," and imitation of the broad and stilted pronunciation her mother used. As for Isabelle, Junior's crowd of boys had a pet name for her also. There is a portion of the human anatomy that is never mentioned in a drawing-room. The said section is bounded on the north by the lungs, on the south by the hip-bone sockets and on the east and west by the ribs. Although it is never spoken aloud in polite society, far be it from anyone to accuse Junior and Runt Perkins and Shorty Marston of constituting polite society. So in the privacy of their own crowd they always spoke of the younger Thompson girl as Is-a-Belly. It was not gallant nor was it kind, but twelve-year-old boys are quite often neither gallant nor kind.

As a consequence of their mother's narrow attitude, the two Thompson girls were self-consciously engrossed in their own attainments. Their mother believed that her daughters, like the king, could do no wrong, a view that was thoroughly shared by the girls themselves. They were perfect in their manners, immaculate as to their persons, flawless in their conduct. But, lacking a sense of humor which would otherwise have been their redeeming quality, they were excellent specimens of that despicable creature — a prig.

The fun-loving Mason girls spoke always of "Blonche" as "The Perfect One," and Junior continued to use that nameless, ungallant appellation for Isabelle whenever his boyish disgust of her faultless record grew too deep.

Boys of this age live on the border between childhood and adolescence. It is a sort of No Man's Land in which they seem not to know just where they belong. In this they are not unlike the maiden with reluctant feet. They are such a queer mixture of Youth and Childhood that one hour, with developing mind, they seem to be reaching out into the future to wrestle with man-sized problems, while the next hour, with no conscious understanding of the change, they abandon that mood to drop back into the trifling plays of babyhood.

This was an hour, this particular warm summer evening, when Junior had slipped back into babyhood. With all the inanity of which he was capable, he had pried off a loose slat in the trellis-work under the back porch, and, with much grunting and wiggling, had managed to crawl through. No, the motives of a twelve-year-old boy are not always governed by a rational cause. He just did it.

Scrouging under the porch, he looked around in the semi-darkness. His eye lighted on an old, battered, rusted tin street-car, a relic of younger if not happier days. He succeeded in pulling off one of the tin wheels. There was a hole in the center of the wheel left by the withdrawing of the hub. He held it to his mouth and blew. It gave forth a weird, plaintive sound like the mewling of a cat. Immediately, with that ability to become all things to all men, Junior felt himself taking on the characteristics of a cat. Fur seemed, in some miraculous way, to spring out on his body. With the erstwhile street-car wheel between his teeth and emitting continuous purring sounds, he pad-padded out from under the porch. With the capacity for sinking himself in an imaginary character, he felt in his heart all the sly, treacherous attributes of a cat. Nay, more, he was a cat.

Out on the lawn he crawled through the grass of the side yard to the hedge, stopped to rub a pair of invisible whiskers against a weed, nibbled daintily at a stalk of catnip, and, settling back on his haunches, laid the street-car wheel aside to lap a presumably clean tongue over a slightly soiled paw. Then, with half-human, half-feline promptings, he cogitated plans for the rest of the evening.

Across the hedge at the Thompson home, someone was sitting in the hammock behind the vine-covered lattice-work of the porch. Junior could hear the steady squeak-squeak of the swaying ropes. It would be Isabelle, curled and beribboned, daintily holding her big doll, likewise curled and beribboned. Just what there is in the contemplation of an immaculately clean, piously good, little girl to rouse the ire of a semi-soiled, ungodly little boy is one with mysteries of the Sphinx and the Mona Lisa smile. Junior, at the thought of Isabelle sitting placidly in the hammock, was seized with an uncontrollable desire to startle her out of the state of calmness into one of sudden agitation.

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So he crept through an opening in the hedge into the Thompson yard, pausing with an imaginary distended tail, to crouch and spring at a robin in the grass. Failing to capture his prey, he crawled noiselessly toward the porch, placed his forepaw on the lattice-work, and emitting a low whining purr peered through the vines.

It was not Isabelle. It was Blanche. In the hammock with her sat Frank Marston, his arm casually thrown across the back of the hammock, his face in close proximity to hers.

The cat did not purr again. Open-mouthed, he took in the little scene before him, which spectacle included the placing of a hasty, boyish kiss on Blanche's cheek. Then the leading man and lady both giggled rather foolishly. They were very young.

Once again in the annals of history had curiosity killed the cat, for all feline characteristics immediately left the onlooker, and he became a twelve-year-old masculine biped.

He slipped noiselessly away, waiting until he had turned the corner of the Thompson house before he allowed the pent-up laughter within him to trickle forth. It was too rich for words that he had witnessed it. Wouldn't everyone laugh when he told them! He ran down the Thompson's side terrace, walked nonchalantly across the street and around the next block. On the way, he told the joke to three people, Runt Perkins and Hod Beeson, who delivered coal, and Lizzie Beadle, the town dressmaker. The reason he told no one else was the very simple one that those were all the people he met.

Reaching home by this circuitous route, he burst in upon the family with the tale.

"With my own eyes I seem 'em," he finished breathlessly

"Saw them," corrected Katherine, didactically.

"Saw 'em," Junior repeated.

If Katherine was concerned with Junior's manner of speaking, Mother was immediately concerned with the moral aspect of his spying, but Marcia and Eleanor thought only of the news.

"What do you know about that?" It was Marcia.

"Mrs. Thompson would have a fit and fall in it." Katherine, too, was growing interested.

"I wonder if Frankie was all scrubbed and sterilized," Eleanor put in.

"Girls!Girls!" Mother remonstrated.

"Young folks are 'most of all fools," was Tillie's affable contribution. At which Marcia and Eleanor wrung their hands and pretended to weep.

"Junior!" It was Mother who spoke severely. "You probably meant no harm, but let this be a lesson to you about sneaking up on anyone. Promise me you'll not tell a soul."

"I promise," Junior said glibly. But even as he spoke he cast a guilty thought at the gossip he had left behind him like the long tail of a Chinese kite.

The next night, the Mason family had just finished supper, for in Springtown one eats dinner as the sun crosses the meridian and supper as it sinks down behind the elms that line the distant banks of old Coon Creek.

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Chairs were pushed back. Tillie had begun to pick up the dishes. Father was opening the evening paper. The white ruffled curtains swayed in and out. The girls were humming in concert "Somewhere a Voice is Calling." It was as peaceful a scene as the Acadian village of Grand Pré.

Just then The Voice called, but it was neither tender nor true. It came in clicking, indignant tones from Mrs. Thompson at the dining-room door. She came in like a hawk in a chicken yard. In angry tones she told them that Blanche had just heard what Junior had been telling around town about her, that there was not one word of truth in it, and that she wanted something done about it. On and on she went, delivering vindictive verbal uppercuts to Junior, making a self-righteous speech on the excellent quality of her girls' upbringing, and finished with "Neither one of my girls would allow a thing like that."

For one brief, fleeting moment, Mother had an unholy desire to retort, "Oh, of course, I've taught my girls to spoon."

During the onslaught the members of the family had remained rooted to their respective places like the king's family during the curse on the "Sleeping Beauty." When she had finished, the spell broke. Father was the first to stir. He stirred himself so thoroughly that he slipped quietly out of the dining-room into the kitchen. Do not be unduly harsh in your criticism of him. There are so many good American fathers like that. He could have diplomatically refused a loan to the governor. He might even have unflinchingly faced a masked bank robber. But he could not face his little angry neighbor. Mother, in exasperation, sometimes wondered how so successful a business man could be so helpless in domestic crises.

So it was Mother who took the stage. She questioned Junior. The latter, very red and visibly embarrassed, wanted nothing in the world so much as that the painful scene should end, even as that older masculine member of the family. So he did what almost any little boy would have done, what George Washington might have done, had there been twelve feminine eyes gazing at him in grief or anger or concern. He lied.

"I was just—" he mumbled, "just jokin'."

"You mean," Mother asked coldly, "that you made it up?" Junior nodded his head. And his guardian angel in sorrow, probably made a long black mark in The Book.

"Then," said Mother calmly, "you will go to every person you told and try to make right your very poor joke." She assured Mrs. Thompson that they would do all in their power to rectify matters, and that Junior would apologize to Blanche. Mrs. Thompson was mollified. She simpered a little. "You know me, Mrs. Mason. I don't like neighborhood quarrels."

"Neither do I," said Mother dryly.

Mrs. Thompson, in a state of mental satisfaction, wrapped her mantle of self-complacency about her and left.

"The old pole-cat!" Tillie remarked sweetly when the door closed. Although Tillie found plenty of faulty with the Mason children, herself, let some outsider do it and she was immediately on the warpath.

Everyone was perturbed. "Who did you tell?" Katherine demanded, and the fact that she did not say "whom" was proof positive that she was upset.

"I happened to tell Lizzie Beadle," Junior whimpered.

"Good night!" Eleanor threw up her hands. "You might just as well have put it on the front page of the Springtown 'Headlight.'"

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They all talked to him at once. Katherine gave a hurried résumé of the poem that concerns shooting arrows and words into the air. It was all very hard on his nerves. So he got his cap and started to the door. Action, even if it were attempting to pick up spent and scattered arrows, seem preferable to the society of the critical women of his household.

Strangely enough it was Marcia who followed him out onto the porch. There were tears in her eyes. Careless, tender-hearted Marcia had impulsively erred so often herself that she felt more sympathy for her little brother than anyone else did.

"Junie!" She threw an arm around his shoulder. "You're like a knight of old — why, Junie, you're Sir Galahad. You're going on your white horse in search of the Holy Grail, only this time the Grail is Truth."

It pleased Junior's fancy. His drooping head lifted a little. He ran down the steps, and by the time he had unhitched an invisible white charger with gold trappings, mounted him and started down the street, he was quite impressed with the nobility of his journey.

Sustained by the thought of the character he was impersonating, he stopped at the Thompson's and mumbled a hasty apology to the red-eyed Blanche. It was noticeable that neither the maker of the apology nor the recipient looked directly at the other.

He went next to Hod Beeson's. It was rather trying to explain his errand to him, Hod not knowing what Junior was talking about, as he had let the scandal go in one coal-grimed ear and out the other. Eventually, Hod closed the rambling confession with "All right, Sonny. That's all right."

So Junior rode next to the Beadles' little weather-beaten house and told fat, untidy Lizzie his message. Lizzie looked disappointed over the news. Perhaps she was thinking of a few arrows about it she, herself, had shot into the air. But she said, "You're some kid, Junie, to take all that trouble for a smartie like Blanche Thompson. Have a cookie."

Junior, further impressed with his praiseworthy conduct, rode on to the Perkinses, where he made known his errand to Runt and his mother.

"Now, look at that." Mrs. Perkins turned to her own offspring. "What a gentlemanly thing for Junior to do!"

After this Junior hated to give up his holy mission. It seemed uninteresting to turn around and go home after so few visits. So he began telling other people what he was doing. He told several of the boys of his crowd and Mrs. Hayes and the Winters's hired girl. He stopped Grandpa McCabe on the street and explained his self-abasement to that deaf old man. Grandpa couldn't sense it, but gathering that something was wrong at the Thompsons', he stopped in front of their home and leaned a long time on his cane, looking anxiously toward the house.

After that, with sudden inspiration, it struck Junior that no one had mentioned his apologizing to Frank. Surely that was an oversight on his mother's part. Did not one owe an apology to the kisser just as much as to the kissee?

So he rode up to the Marstons' Colonial home, dismounted and went in. The Marstons were eating dinner, as Springtown people do when they have company from the city. There was a rich uncle there and his pretty daughter, to say nothing of a charming friend she had brought with her. Nicky and Frank and Shorty all sat at the table, clothed in their best suits and manners.

Junior, standing humbly just inside the dining-room door, cap in hand, felt that here, before so appreciative an audience, was opportunity for the grand climax of his self-humiliation. So, in the polite tones of a well-bred boy, he respectfully apologized to Frank. It could not have been done with more deference or Chesterfieldian grace.



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Junior had a swift desire that his sisters might have witnessed it.

A dull brick-red color surged over Frank's long, lean face. "What you talkin' about, kid?"

Junior dropped the rather formal, stilted tones of his former speech and dropped into his own familiar boyish-ones. He seemed deadly in earnest. Anyone hearing him could not help but be impressed with his sincerity. "You know, Frank, last night when you kissed Blanche Thompson—you thought you heard a cat mew? Well, Frank, it wasn't a cat. It was me. I'm around to all the neighbors apologizin' for sayin' I seen you."

Amid smiles from the guests, an embarrassed laugh from his mother, and unrestrained shouts from his dearly loved brothers, Frank got up. Junior sensed the fact that he was to pass out with Frank also. Not everyone is gifted with as delicate and acute sensibilities.

Out in the hall Frank grabbed his caller's shoulders in a crab-like pinch. Words hissed through his clenched teeth. These were the words: "I'd like to make you into mincemeat. You hike out of here and keep your mouth shut. Ja understand? Now, scoot!"

It was trying to Sir Galahad to have his high mission so misunderstood. He started home a little wearily, trying to forget Frank's baleful attitude and remember only those who had praised him. Of such is the kingdom of optimists.

The entire Mason family was ensconced on the front porch. They greeted him rather effusively. Everyone seemed in a softened mood toward him. The truth was, the brave way in which he faced the results of his ill-advised joke appealed to them all.

He sat down in the hammock by Katherine, who put her arm around him. It made him hot and uncomfortable but he stood it. Marcia threw him a smile and Eleanor gave him a stick of gum. He preferred the latter. Smiles are fleeting, but gum, with proper hoarding, lasts a week. Mother spoke to him cheerfully. Even Tillie neglected to look for dirt on his shoes. Father, his feet on the porch railing, gave a long rambling speech about veracity, a sort of truth-crushed-to-earth-Abraham-Lincoln monologue.

The family went to bed with that light-hearted feeling which comes after a painful domestic crisis has been passed. It was apparent to all, that Junior, in spite of the poor taste of his joke, had vindicated himself.

And the evening and the morning were the third day.

The members of the family straggled into breakfast one by one. Mother sighed as she saw them. She knew that the ideal way was for all the chairs to be pushed back from the table simultaneously. But she could remember just once when it had happened—the Sunday morning the Bishop had been there.

Junior was the last to arrive. Several drops of water, creeping lingeringly down the side of his face, proclaimed to all who were inclined to be pessimistic that he had washed. He sat down with great gusto.

"Well, I hope old lady Thompson feels better now. Ya, I sure hope she does." He chuckled, spreading eleven cents' worth of butter on a griddle cake. "The old lady was purty excited, she was. 'N' so was Blonchie, till I fixed it all up fine about her 'n' Frankie. Ya, I fixed 'em. But don't you fergit it, no matter what I said last night, just the same, I seen 'em."

There was silence in the Mason dining-room. Everyone looked at Mother. Mother looked across at Father, sitting there in all his financial capableness and his domestic inability. Father looked helplessly back. Mother knew that she was expected, as usual, to take the steering wheel, but she felt like a skipper on an uncharted sea.

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A son of hers had spied upon his neighbors, gossiped, and then lied about the truth. Was the falsehood of last evening a double-dyed sin? Or was it the spirit of knighthood—that gallant thing that has been handed down through the ages—the traditional honor with which a gentleman protects a lady's name? Mother gave it up. For the life of her, she did not quite know.

Junior, conscious of the impressive silence, decided that he was making a hit. And as it was not often given to him to create that kind of stir in this particular circle, he waxed visibly in pleases importance and genially reiterated, "Ya, no matter what I said, you can put this in your pipe—I seen 'em."

"Saw them," corrected Katherine mechanically, from pure force of habit.

"Saw 'm," repeated Junior, also from force of habit, and again a pregnant silence descended upon the breakfast table.

It was broken by Father. The assembled Masons looked at him expectantly as he cleared his throat, preliminary to speech. It was a desperate situation that could rouse Father to grip the domestic steering wheel. In Mother's expression, relief struggled with anxiety as to just what he was going to do. If he was going to thrash Junior — She half opened her lips, as Father gave another preliminary cough. Then he spoke.

"Looks a little like rain," he said. "Hope we don't have a wetting before the haying's over."