

Bernice Bobs her Hair

by Francis Scott Fitzgerald

(Adapted book. Upper-Intermediate level)

Chapter 1.

Saturday night was dance night. The bright, yellow light streaming from the windows of the little club house was visible half a mile away. People used to come and stand outside and look in through the windows and watch the dancing. On these Saturday nights the club house was like a little theatre. Chairs were arranged in a circle around the walls - this was the balcony. The balcony was full of mainly middle-aged ladies with sharp eyes and icy hearts. Their purpose was to criticize. Occasionally they showed admiration, but they never gave encouragement. It is well-known among ladies over thirty-five that when young people dance in the summertime, they dance with the very worst intentions in the world. These ladies know that if the dancing couples are not conscious of the stony eyes watching them from the balcony, some of them will start strange, modern dances in the corners; and the more popular, more dangerous, girls will sometimes be kissed in parked cars.

But this circle of critics is not close enough to the stage to see the actors' faces and hear the words that are spoken. They can only lift their eyebrows, make guesses and judge the events according to their own fixed ideas. They never really understand the changing, sometimes cruel world of the young. No, the only real audience, and the main actors too, are the young people that move to the African sound of Dyer's Dance Band.

There is a wide variety of ages and conditions in this crowd of young people - from sixteen-year-old Otis Ormonde, still a schoolboy, to G. Reece Stoddard, a Harvard law graduate; from little Madeleine Hogue, still feeling uncomfortable with her hair arranged on top of her head, to Bessie MacRae, the oldest of the girls and still not married. This

young crowd is not only the centre of the stage, but contains the only people who can really see what is going on.

With a bang the music stops. The couples smile, repeat 'la- de-da-da dum-dum', and then the sound of young feminine voices rises over the clapping.

A few young men were left standing alone in the middle of the dance-floor. They had been about to interrupt one of the dancing couples and ask the man for permission to dance with his girl, a permission that could not be refused. But before they could cut in, the music stopped. Disappointed, they wandered back to the walls.

Warren MacIntyre, a student at Yale, was one of those disappointed young men. He felt in his dinner-coat pocket for a cigarette and walked outside. Couples were seated at tables and the air was filled with laughter. He nodded here and there at those he knew. It was not a large city and everyone knew everyone else. There, for example, were Jim Strain and Ethel Demorest. They had been talking of getting married for three years. Everyone knew that as soon as Jim managed to keep a job for more than two months, she would marry him. But how bored they both looked. And Ethel sometimes wore a puzzled expression, as if she wondered how she had ever got into this situation.

Warren was nineteen and pitied those of his friends who had not gone East to college. But, like most boys, he spoke proudly about the girls of his city when he was away from it. There was Genevieve Ormonde, for example, a regular guest at dances, house-parties and football games at Princeton, Yale, Williams and Cornell. There was black-eyed Roberta Dillon, famous among her generation. And, of course, there was Marjorie Harvey with her pretty face and quick tongue.

Warren had grown up across the street from Marjorie and had been 'crazy about her' for a long time. Sometimes she seemed grateful for his attention. But she told him that she had given him a fair trial, and she had found that she did not love him. The proof was this: When she was away from him, she forgot him and went out with other boys. For Warren this was discouraging, especially because Marjorie had been

away a lot on little trips all summer. And then throughout the month of August she had been visited by her cousin Bernice from Eau Claire, and it seemed impossible to see her alone. It was always necessary to find someone who would take care of Bernice. This was becoming more and more difficult.

Compared to Marjorie, Cousin Bernice was a disappointment. She was pretty, with long dark hair, but she was not a success at parties. Every Saturday night Warren danced a long dance with her in order to please Marjorie, but she always bored him.

'Warren' - a soft voice interrupted his thoughts. He turned and saw Marjorie beside him. She laid a hand on his shoulder and a warm feeling came over him.

'Warren,' she whispered, 'do something for me - dance with Bernice. She's been stuck with little Otis Ormonde for almost an hour.'

The warm feeling disappeared.

'Why - sure,' he answered weakly.

Marjorie smiled - that smile that was thanks enough. 'You're an angel.'

With a sigh the angel looked round, but Bernice and Otis were not in sight. He wandered back inside and found Otis in front of the women's dressing-room in the centre of a group of young men. Otis was talking excitedly.

'She's gone in to fix her hair,' he said wildly. 'Then I'll have to dance another hour with her.'

There was general laughter.

'Why don't some of you cut in and take her away from me?' Otis complained.

'Don't worry, Otis,' said Warren, smiling. 'I've come to give you a rest.'

A girl may be beautiful or brilliant, but if men do not cut in on her frequently at dances, she is in a difficult position. Young people in this jazz-loving generation are naturally restless. The idea of dancing more than one dance with the same girl is hateful to them. And if a young man

is forced to dance a whole evening with a girl, she can be sure he will never ask her to dance again.

Warren danced the next full dance with Bernice, then he led her to a table outside. There was a moment's silence while she busily rearranged her dress.

'It's hotter here than in Eau Claire,' she said.

Warren yawned.

'Are you going to be here much longer?' he asked.

'Another week,' she answered.

Warren moved uncomfortably on his chair. Then suddenly he decided to try a different line of conversation. He turned and looked at her eyes.

'You've got an awfully kissable mouth,' he began quietly.

This was a remark he had used before at college parties. Bernice jumped and her face became red. No one had ever made a remark like that to her before.

'How dare you!' - The words had leapt out before she realized it, and she bit her lip. Although it was too late, she decided to be amused and gave Warren a smile.

Warren was annoyed. Girls didn't usually take that remark seriously. He changed the topic.

'Jim Strain and Ethel Demorest are here as usual,' he commented.

This was more like the sort of conversation Bernice was used to, but she felt a slight regret as the subject changed. Men did not talk to her about kissable mouths, but she knew that they talked like that to other girls.

'Oh, yes,' she said. 'I hear they've been going out together like this for years without a penny. Isn't it silly?'

Warren's disgust increased. Jim Strain was a close friend of his brother's. And anyway it was stupid to laugh at people because they didn't have any money. But Bernice had not intended to laugh at them, she was simply nervous.

Chapter 2.

When Marjorie and Bernice reached home at half past midnight, they said good night at the top of the stairs. Although they were cousins, they were not close friends. In fact, Marjorie had no close female friends - she considered girls stupid. Bernice, on the other hand, had hoped that she and Marjorie would share their secrets. She had looked forward to long talks full of girlish laughter and tears. For her these were an important part of all feminine conversation. However, she found Marjorie rather cold. For Bernice it was as difficult to talk to Marjorie as it was to talk to men. Marjorie never laughed in a girlish way, she was never frightened and rarely embarrassed; in fact, she had few of the qualities that Bernice considered truly feminine.

While Bernice was busy cleaning her teeth this night, she wondered for the hundredth time why she never had any attention when she was away from home. Her parents were rich and gave her every social advantage, but she never imagined that could be a reason. She did not realize that she would have danced the whole evening with one man if Marjorie had not used her powers of persuasion. But she knew that even in Eau Claire other girls with fewer social advantages and less physical attractiveness had more success than she did. She thought this must be because they did not have the same principles as she had. But it had never worried her. Her mother told her that girls like that cheapened themselves, and that men really respected girls like Bernice.

She turned out the light in her bathroom and decided to go in and chat for a while with her Aunt Josephine. She went down the hall towards her aunt's room. Hearing voices inside, she stopped near the partly opened door. Then she heard her own name. She did not intend to listen, but the conversation going on inside her aunt's room captured her attention.

'She's absolutely hopeless!' It was Marjorie's voice. 'Oh, I know what you're going to say! So many people have told you how pretty and sweet she is, and how she can cook! What of it? She doesn't enjoy herself. Men don't like her.'

'Bernice doesn't need cheap popularity.'

Mrs Harvey sounded annoyed.

'Popularity is everything when you're eighteen,' said Marjorie. 'I've done my best. I've been polite, and I've persuaded men to dance with her, but they don't like to be bored.'

'People have no manners these days.'

Mrs Harvey could not understand modern situations. When she was a girl, young ladies who belonged to nice families always enjoyed themselves.

'Well,' said Marjorie, 'I can't be there to support her all the time. These days every girl has to take care of herself. I've even tried to give her a few hints about clothes and things, and she's been angry every time. She knows she's not getting much attention, but she probably thinks she's a better person than me because of it. All unpopular girls think that way.'

'I know Bernice is not very lively,' interrupted Mrs Harvey, 'but you ought to be able to do something for her.'

Marjorie sighed.

'Not very lively! I've never heard her say anything to a boy except that it's hot, or that the dance-floor is crowded, or that she's going to school in New York next year. Sometimes she asks them what kind of car they have and tells them the kind she has. Thrilling!'

There was a short silence, and then Mrs Harvey repeated:

'But I know that other girls who are not so sweet or attractive get boyfriends. Martha Carey, for example, is fat and loud; and Roberta Dillon is so thin this year, but they both-'

'But mother,' interrupted Marjorie impatiently, 'Martha is cheerful and awfully amusing, and Roberta's a marvellous dancer. She's always been popular.'

Mrs Harvey yawned.

'I think it's that crazy Indian blood in Bernice,' continued Marjorie. 'Indian women all just sat around and never said anything.'

'Go to bed, you silly child,' laughed Mrs Harvey. 'When I told you that story about her mother's family, I didn't think you were going to

remember it. And I think most of your ideas are perfectly idiotic,' she finished sleepily.

There was another silence while Marjorie wondered whether to continue. Deciding that it was pointless, she said good night. When she came out into the hall, it was quite empty.

Chapter 3.

While Marjorie was breakfasting late next day, Bernice came into the room with a rather stiff good morning. She sat down opposite and stared across at Marjorie.

'What's the matter?' enquired Marjorie, rather puzzled.

Bernice paused before she said anything.

'I heard what you said about me to your mother last night.'

Marjorie was alarmed, but her voice was calm when she spoke.

'Where were you?'

'In the hall. I didn't intend to listen - at first.'

Marjorie looked at her sharply, then dropped her eyes and became very interested in her breakfast.

'I suppose I'd better go back to Eau Claire - if I'm too much trouble for you.' Bernice's voice was shaking as she continued: 'I've tried to be nice, and - and now I've been insulted. I was never so unkind to a visitor.'

Marjorie was silent.

'But I see you don't want me here. Your friends don't like me.' Bernice paused, and then she remembered something Marjorie had said. 'Of course I was angry last week when you hinted that my dress was not suitable. Don't you think I know how to dress myself?'

'No,' said Marjorie quietly.

'What?'

'I didn't say anything,' said Marjorie. 'I said that it was better to wear the same dress for three parties in a row if it suits you than to wear three different, but unsuitable ones.'

'Do you think that was a very nice thing to say?'

'I wasn't trying to be nice.' Then, after a pause: 'When do you want to go?'

Bernice was shocked.

'Oh!' It was a little half-cry.

Marjorie looked up.

'Didn't you say you were going?'

'Yes, but-'

'Oh, you just wanted to see how I would react!'

They stared at each other across the breakfast table for a moment.

Then Bernice burst into tears. Marjorie's eyes showed boredom.

'You're my cousin,' cried Bernice. 'I'm v-v-visiting you. I was supposed to stay a month, and if I go home my mother will know and she'll wah- wonder-'

Marjorie waited until the tears quietened.

'I'll give you some money,' she said coldly, 'and you can spend this last week where you want. There's a very nice hotel-'

Bernice stood up suddenly and ran from the room.

An hour later, while Marjorie was in the library writing a letter, Bernice reappeared, very red-eyed and consciously calm. She did not look at Marjorie, but took a book and sat down, as if to read. Marjorie continued writing. When the clock showed midday, Bernice closed her book noisily.

'I suppose I'd better get my train ticket.'

'Just wait till I finish this letter,' said Marjorie without looking round. 'I want to mail it today.'

Her pen scratched busily for another minute. Then she turned and sat back in her chair. Again Bernice had to speak first.

'Do you want me to go home?'

'Well,' said Marjorie, considering, 'I suppose if you're not having a good time, you'd better go.'

'Don't you think you could show more common kindness?'

'Oh, please don't talk like an old woman!' cried Marjorie impatiently. 'You seem to have got all your ideas from the sort of books

that your mother read when she was a girl, books about perfect little women with empty heads.'

'They were good enough for our mothers.'

Marjorie laughed.

'Our mothers are all right, but they know very little about their daughters' problems.'

Bernice sat stiffly upright.

'Please don't talk about my mother.'

Marjorie laughed.

'I don't think I mentioned her.'

Bernice felt she had to get back to the topic.

'Do you think you've been fair with me?'

'I've done my best. You're a difficult one.'

Bernice's eyes reddened.

'I think you're hard and selfish, and you haven't a feminine quality in you.'

'Oh, no,' cried Marjorie in desperation. 'You little fool. Girls like you are responsible for all the boring, colourless marriages. Those silly weaknesses that people call "feminine qualities". What a pity when a man with imagination marries a girl and finds that, despite her pretty face and pretty clothes, she's just a helpless, complaining cowardly creature.'

Bernice's mouth had fallen half open.

'The womanly woman,' continued Marjorie. 'She spends her life criticizing girls like me who really do have a good time.'

Bernice's mouth opened wider as Marjorie's voice rose.

'If a girl is ugly, she has some excuse for complaining. But you're starting life without any disadvantages. If you expect me to cry with you, you'll be disappointed. Go or stay, just as you like.' And picking up her letters she left the room.

Bernice did not appear at lunch, saying she had a headache. She and Marjorie were supposed to go out together with a couple of boys that afternoon, but the headache continued and Marjorie went out alone.

When she returned late in the afternoon, she found Bernice with a strangely fixed expression waiting for her in her bedroom.

'I've decided,' said Bernice, 'that maybe you're right about things. If you'll tell me why your friends aren't interested in me, I'll see if I can do what you want me to.'

Marjorie was at the mirror combing her hair.

'Are you serious?'

'Yes.'

'Without questions? Will you do exactly what I say?'

'Well, I-'

'Will you do exactly as I say?'

'If they're sensible things.'

'They're not. Sensible things won't help you.'

'Are you going to make suggestions - to recommend-'

'Yes, everything. If I tell you to do something, you'll have to do it.'

Write home and tell your mother you're going to stay for another two weeks.'

'If you'll tell me-'

'All right - I'll just give you a few examples now. First, you have no natural confidence. Why not? Because you're never sure about your personal appearance. When a girl knows that she looks right, she can forget that part of her. That's success. The more parts of you can afford to forget, the more success you have.'

'Don't I look all right?'

'No - for example, you never take care of your eyebrows. They'd be beautiful if you took care of them. You're going to brush them so that they'll grow straight.'

Bernice lifted the brows in question.

'Do you mean to say that men notice eyebrows?'

'Yes - subconsciously. And when you go home, you ought to have your teeth straightened a little.'

'But I thought,' interrupted Bernice, 'that you hated little feminine things like that.'

'I hate silly feminine minds,' answered Marjorie. 'But a girl has to be feminine in person. If she looks like a million dollars, she can talk about Russia, football or the financial market, and people will listen.'

'What else?'

'Oh, I'm just beginning! There's your dancing.'

'Don't I dance all right?'

'No, you don't - you push a man while you're dancing, yes, you do - ever so slightly. I noticed it when we were dancing together yesterday.'

'Go on.' Bernice could hardly speak.

'Well, you've got to learn to be nice to men who are not successful with girls. You look as if you've been insulted whenever you have to dance with one of the less popular boys. A girl can't afford to be unkind to them. They're the big part of any crowd. You can practise your conversation very well with young boys who are too shy to talk. And boys who can't dance are the best dancing practice.'

Bernice gave a deep sigh, but Marjorie had not finished.

'If you go to a dance and really amuse three unpopular boys who dance with you, you've done something. They'll come back next time. Gradually the attractive boys will see that you're cut in on frequently. They'll realize there's no danger of getting stuck with you - then they'll dance with you.'

'Yes,' agreed Bernice weakly. 'I think I begin to see.'

'And finally,' concluded Marjorie, 'don't worry about the rest. The rest will just come. You'll wake up some morning knowing you've got it, and men will know it too.'

Bernice stood up.

'It's been awfully kind of you - but nobody's ever talked to me like this before, and I feel confused.'

Marjorie made no answer, but stared at herself in the mirror.

'It's good of you to help me,' continued Bernice.

Still Marjorie made no answer, and Bernice thought perhaps she seemed too grateful.

'I know you don't like fine feelings,' she said quietly.

Marjorie turned to her quickly.

'Oh, I wasn't thinking about that. I was wondering whether we should bob your hair.'

Bernice fell back onto the bed with a little scream.

Chapter 4.

On the following Wednesday evening there was a dinner-dance at the club. Bernice was slightly disappointed when she found she was sitting next to Charley Paulson. But she remembered Marjorie's instructions and turned to him.

'Do you think I ought to bob my hair, Mr Charley Paulson?'

Charley looked up in surprise.

'Why?'

'Because I'm considering it. It's such a sure and easy way of attracting attention.'

Charley smiled pleasantly. He could not know that Bernice had been practising this. He replied that he didn't know much about bobbed hair.

'I want to be a rebel, you see,' said Bernice, and she informed him that short hair was an important first step. She added that she wanted to ask his advice because he was so critical about girls.

Charley was pleased.

'So I've decided/ Bernice continued, raising her voice slightly, 'that early next week I'm going down to the barber-shop at the Sevier Hotel. I'll sit in the first chair and get my hair bobbed.'

She hesitated, noticing that the people near her had paused in their conversation and were listening. But after a second she finished her speech. 'Of course, you'll have to pay for tickets if you want to come and watch. If you all come down and encourage me, I'll make sure you get good seats.'

There was general laughter, and G. Reece Stoddard turned to her quickly and said in a low voice: 'I'll take a seat in the first row straight away.'

She smiled at him as if he had said something particularly brilliant.

'Do you believe in bobbed hair?' asked G. Reece in the same low voice.

'I think it's shameful,' said Bernice slowly. 'But, of course, you've either got to amuse people or feed them or shock them.' Bernice had learnt this line from Marjorie, who had borrowed it from Oscar Wilde. The men laughed, and the girls gave a series of quick silent looks. Then Bernice turned again to Charley.

'I want to ask you your opinion of several people. I imagine that you're a wonderful judge of character.'

Charley was thrilled.

Two hours later, Warren MacIntyre was standing by himself at the side of the dance-floor. Marjorie had disappeared and he was trying to guess where to and who with. He was watching the dancers without paying much attention. But then he began to notice something unusual. Bernice, Marjorie's cousin, had been cut in on several times in the past five minutes. A moment ago she had been dancing with a visiting boy. Now she was dancing with G. Reece Stoddard himself. And there was Charley Paulson, coming across the floor towards her with an enthusiastic determination in his eye.

The next time Bernice danced near him, Warren looked at her carefully. Yes, she was pretty, definitely pretty, and tonight her face was lively and excited. She looked as if she was enjoying herself. He liked the way she had arranged her hair, and that was a very attractive dress. But what a pity she was so dull!

His thoughts went back to Marjorie. He was sure that her disappearance this evening would be like other disappearances. When she reappeared, he would demand to know where she had been, and she would refuse to tell him. What a pity she was so sure of him! She was confident that no other girl in town interested him.

Warren sighed. It seemed impossible to win Marjorie's affection. He looked up. Bernice was again dancing with the visiting boy. Half unconsciously, Warren started to move in her direction. He hesitated,

then told himself that he only wanted to be kind to the poor girl. He walked towards her - and immediately knocked into G. Reece Stoddard.

'Pardon me,' said Warren.

But G. Reece had not stopped to apologize. He had again cut in on Bernice.

* * *

That night at one o'clock, before saying good night, Marjorie took a last look at Bernice's shining eyes.

'So it worked?'

'Oh, Marjorie, yes!' cried Bernice.

'I saw you were having a good time.'

'I was!'

'Well, we'll arrange something new tomorrow. Good night.'

'Good night.'

As Bernice was brushing her hair, she thought back over the evening's events. She had followed instructions exactly. Even when Charley Paulson had cut in for the eighth time, she had pretended to be delighted. She had not talked about the weather or Eau Claire or cars or her school. But a few minutes before she fell asleep a rebellious thought came into her mind. Of course Marjorie had helped. But it was she, Bernice, who had done it. Her voice had said the words, her lips had smiled, her feet had danced. Marjorie, nice girl - proud, though - nice evening - nice boys - like Warren - Warren - what's his name - Warren.

She fell asleep.

Chapter 5.

For Bernice the next week was a week of discovery. Knowing that people really enjoyed looking at her and listening to her, she began to feel more self-confident. Of course there were mistakes at first, but many more successes. Little Otis Ormonde followed her around like a pet dog, and G. Reece Stoddard made several afternoon visits.

Perhaps the best-known and most successful line in Bernice's conversation was the one about the bobbing of her hair.

'Oh, Bernice, when are you going to get your hair bobbed?'

'The day after tomorrow maybe,' she replied laughing. 'Will you come and see me? Because I'm relying on you, you know.'

'Will we? You know! But you'd better hurry up.'

Bernice laughed. She had no intention of doing anything to her hair.

'Soon. You'd be surprised.'

But probably her most important success was the attention she received from Warren MacIntyre. His grey car was parked in front of the Harveys' house daily. Soon everyone knew that Marjorie's most loyal admirer was now showing more interest in Marjorie's guest. How long would Marjorie put up with it? That was the question of the moment. Warren called Bernice on the phone twice a day, sent her notes, and they were frequently seen together in his car. When anybody joked to Marjorie about it, she only laughed. She said she was glad that Warren had at last found someone who valued him.

One afternoon, three days before the end of her visit, Bernice was waiting in the hall for Warren. They were going to a party and Bernice was in a happy mood. Marjorie was also going to a party, and when she appeared, Bernice was unprepared for an argument. Marjorie did her work in three sentences.

'You'd better forget Warren,' she said coldly.

'What?' Bernice was amazed.

'You'd better stop making a fool of yourself over Warren MacIntyre. He's not interested in you.'

For a moment they both stared at each other. Then the two cars arrived and they both hurried out.

All through the party Bernice tried to master a growing sense of fear. She had offended Marjorie. With the most innocent intentions in the world she had stolen what belonged to Marjorie. She felt suddenly and horribly guilty. Later in the evening, when they were sitting in a circle, the storm gradually broke. Little Otis Ormonde started it without realizing.

'When are you going back to school, Otis,' someone had asked.

'Me? On the day Bernice gets her hair bobbed.'

'Then your education's over,' said Marjorie quickly. 'She's only pretending. She's not going to do it. Hadn't you realized?'

'Is that true?' demanded Otis, turning to Bernice.

Bernice's ears burned as she tried to think up a suitable reply. But her imagination failed her.

'You shouldn't believe everything people tell you, you know, Otis,' said Marjorie pleasantly.

'Well,' said Otis, 'maybe you're right, but Bernice-'

'Was that really all a joke?' interrupted Roberta curiously.

Bernice hesitated. She knew that she was expected to say something clever, but she felt her cousin's cold stare, and she froze.

'I don't know.'

'Nonsense!' said Marjorie. 'Admit it!'

Bernice saw that Warren's eyes were fixed on her questioningly.

'Oh, I don't know,' she repeated steadily. Her cheeks were red.

'Nonsense!' remarked Marjorie again.

'Come on, Bernice,' said Otis. 'Tell her she's wrong.'

Bernice looked round again - it seemed impossible to escape Warren's eyes.

'I like bobbed hair,' she said in a hurry, 'and I intend to bob mine.'

'When?' demanded Marjorie.

'Any time.'

'Why not now?' suggested Roberta.

Otis jumped to his feet.

'Great!' he cried. 'We'll have a summer bobbing party. Sevier Hotel barber-shop, I think you said.'

Immediately everyone was standing up. Bernice's heart knocked violently.

'What?' she began.

Marjorie's voice rose above the general noise, very clear and hard.

'Don't worry - she won't do it.'

'Come on, Bernice!' cried Otis, starting towards the door.

Four eyes - Warren's and Marjorie's - stared at her, demanding whether she dared. For another second she hesitated wildly.

'All right,' she said suddenly, 'I think I will.'

The journey into town beside Warren, followed by the others in Roberta's car, took a few minutes, but it seemed an hour. Bernice felt like a criminal on the way to the electric chair. She wanted to cry out that it was all a mistake. But nothing could help her now.

Warren was silent, and when they came to the hotel, he nodded to Bernice, who was the first to get out of the car. A laughing crowd emptied out of Roberta's car into the street and into the shop.

Bernice stood outside and looked at the sign - Sevier barber-shop. The first barber, dressed in a white coat, stood waiting by the first chair, smoking a cigarette. He must have known she was coming; he must have been waiting all week. Would they tie a scarf round her eyes?

'All right, Bernice,' said Warren quickly.

With her chin in the air she crossed the pavement, pushed open the door and went up to the first barber without even looking at the noisy crowd sitting on the waiting seats.

'I want you to bob my hair.'

The first barber's mouth slid half open. His cigarette dropped to the floor.

'Huh?'

'My hair - bob it!'

Without further delay, Bernice sat in the chair. A man in the chair next to her turned and stared, his face covered in shaving cream. One barber lost his concentration and spoiled little Willy Schuneman's monthly haircut. Mr O'Reilly in the last chair swore as a razor cut into his cheek.

Outside people stopped and stared; half a dozen small boys pressed their faces against the window.

But Bernice saw nothing, heard nothing. She was only conscious of the fact that this man in the white coat had removed first one comb then another. She felt his fingers pulling at hairpins. And she knew that this hair, this wonderful hair of hers, was going. She would never again

feel its weight as it hung down her back. For a second she was close to tears. Then she saw Marjorie's mouth curling in a smile, as if to say:

'Give up and get down from that chair! You tried to cheat me and I put you to the test. You see you haven't got a chance.'

And Bernice gripped the sides of the chair. Her eyes narrowed and her face took on a curious fixed expression that Marjorie remembered long afterwards.

Twenty minutes later the barber turned the chair to face the mirror. Bernice was afraid to look at the damage that had been done. Her hair was not curly, and now it lay lifeless and flat, either side of her suddenly pale face. It was ugly - she had known it would be ugly. Her face's chief beauty had been a classical simplicity. Now that was gone and she was - well, ordinary, like a librarian who had left her glasses at home.

As she climbed down from the chair she tried to smile and failed. She saw two of the girls look at one another quickly. She noticed Marjorie's mouth curved in a smile. And she saw that Warren's eyes were suddenly very cold.

There was a painful silence, then she spoke.

'You see, I've done it.'

'Yes, you've - done it,' admitted Warren.

'Do you like it?'

There was a slow 'Sure' from two or three voices, followed by another pause. Then Marjorie turned to Warren.

'Would you drive me to the cleaners?' she asked. 'I've got to fetch a dress there before supper. Roberta's driving straight home and she can take the others.'

Warren stared absently out of the window. Then for a moment his eyes rested coldly on Bernice before they turned to Marjorie.

'I'd be glad to,' he said slowly.

Chapter 6.

Bernice did not fully realize the cruel trap that had been laid for her until she met her aunt just before dinner.

'Why, Bernice!'

'I've bobbed it, Aunt Josephine.'

'Why, child!'

'Do you like it?'

'Why, Bernice!'

'I suppose I've shocked you.'

'No, but what will Mrs Deyo think tomorrow night? Bernice, why didn't you wait until after the Deyo's dance?'

'It was sudden, Aunt Josephine. Anyway, why does it matter to Mrs Deyo particularly?'

'Why, child,' cried Mrs Harvey, 'she hates bobbed hair. She gave a talk at the last meeting of the Thursday Club about the "The Foolish Ideas of the Younger Generation" and she spent fifteen minutes speaking about bobbed hair. And the dance is for you and Marjorie!'

'I'm sorry.'

'Oh, Bernice, what'll your mother say? She'll think I let you do it.'

'I'm sorry.'

Bernice stayed in her room all evening. When she had undressed for the night, the door opened and Marjorie came in.

'Bernice,' she said, 'I'm awfully sorry about the Deyo dance. Honestly, I'd forgotten all about it.'

'It's all right,' said Bernice shortly. Standing in front of the mirror, she passed her comb slowly through her short hair.

'I'll take you into town tomorrow,' continued Marjorie, 'and the hairdresser will fix it so you'll look fine. I didn't imagine you'd do it. I'm really very sorry.'

'Oh, it's all right.'

Then Bernice watched as Marjorie shook her own hair over her shoulder and began to twist it into two long, blond braids, until she looked like a German princess. Bernice thought of the things people would say tomorrow. She could see their faces. Perhaps Mrs Deyo would hear the news and send round an icy little note asking her not to

come. And behind her back they would all laugh and know that Marjorie had made a fool of her. Her one chance of success had been spoiled by a jealous, selfish girl. She sat down suddenly in front of the mirror.

'I like it,' she said, biting her lip. 'I think it will suit me.'

Marjorie smiled.

'It looks all right. Don't worry.'

'I won't.'

'Good night, Bernice.'

But as the door closed, Bernice made a sudden decision. She leapt to her feet and dragged her travelling bag out from underneath the bed. It was rapidly filled with all that she would need for the journey. Then she turned to her trunk. In three-quarters of an hour it was packed. She sat down at her desk and wrote a short note to Mrs Harvey, explaining her reasons for going. She addressed it and laid it on her pillow. She looked quickly at her watch. The train left at one. She knew that if she walked to the Marlborough Hotel she could easily get a taxi.

Suddenly she took a sharp breath and an odd expression came into her eyes. It was like the fixed look she had had in the barber's chair - in some way a development of it. It was quite a new look for Bernice - and it meant something.

She went softly to the desk and picked something out of a drawer. Then she turned out all the lights and stood quietly until she could see in the darkness. Gently she pushed open the door to Marjorie's room. Marjorie was sleeping.

She was by the side of Marjorie's bed now, very purposeful and calm. She acted fast. Bending over, she took one of the braids of Marjorie's hair. She found the point nearest the head, then reached down with the scissors and cut it. She held her breath. Marjorie had moved in her sleep. Bernice cut off the other braid, paused for a moment and then ran silently back to her own room.

Downstairs she opened the big front door, closed it carefully behind her and set off in the moonlight. She felt strangely excited and happy. After she had been walking for a minute, she discovered that she was still holding the two blonde braids. She laughed unexpectedly and

had to shut her mouth hard. She was passing Warren's house now. Without thinking, she put down her bag and threw the braids like pieces of rope at the front door. They landed with a dull sound. She laughed again, loudly.

'Huh!' she shouted wildly. 'Scalp the selfish thing!'

Then, picking up her bag, she set off at a half-run down the moonlit street.

- THE END -

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