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J. D. Beresford
Collected Works



Series Thirteen

The Collected Works of

J. D. BERESFORD

(1873-1947)



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The Delphi Classics Catalogue

J. D. Benford

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The Collected Works of
J. D. BERESFORD



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Collected Works of J. D. Beresford



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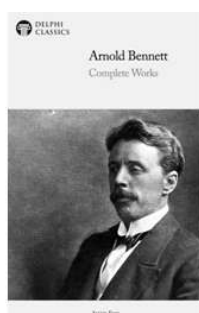
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The Jacob Stahl Trilogy



Castor, a village now in Cambridgeshire, near Peterborough — J. D. Beresford's birthplace



St. Kyneburgha, Castor — Beresford's father, John James Beresford (1821-1897), was a clergyman in Castor.

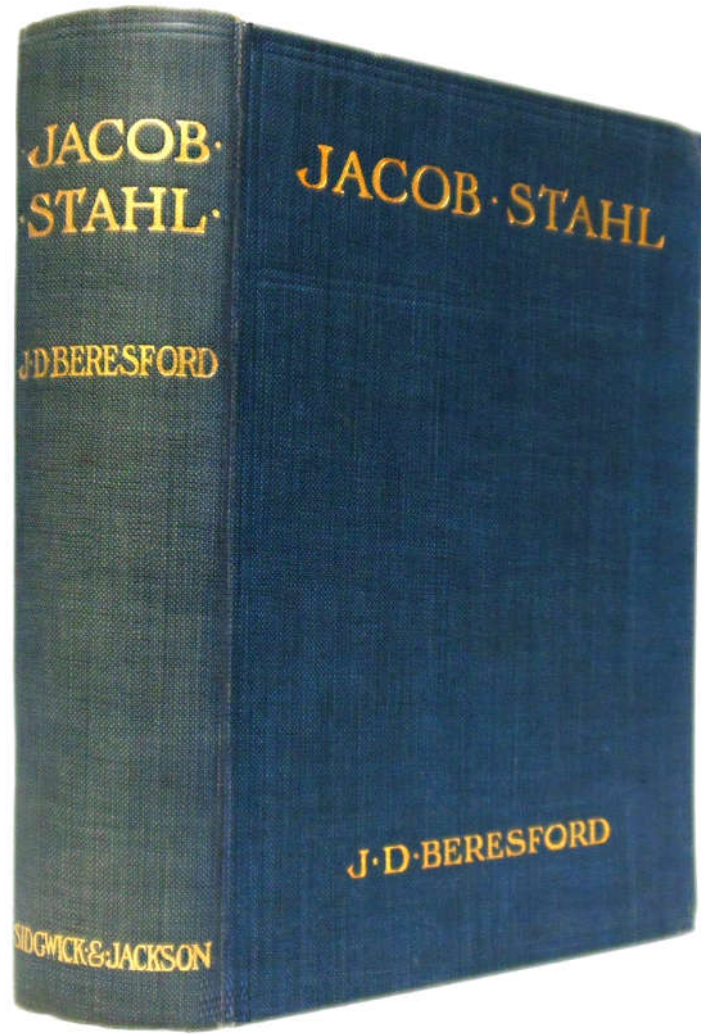
The Early History of Jacob Stahl (1911)



J. D. Beresford initially trained as an architect, but he then changed his mind to become a professional writer, first working as a dramatist and journalist, before essaying his first novel at the age of thirty-eight. *The Early History of Jacob Stahl* was published in March 1911 in the UK and in May that same year in the USA. It tells the story of the eponymous Jacob, who is the son of a German-Jewish commercial traveller and his simple Irish wife; due to a series of accidents baby Jacob is sent flying from his pram crashing into the gutter where he injures his spine. For the first fifteen years of his life he is not allowed to put his feet on the ground; whilst his brother Eric is solid and serious, young Jacob is “an untidy heterogeneous collection of qualities with nothing to bind them together”. When his mother dies, he is adopted by his Aunt Hester and by the age of seventeen he has overcome much of his handicap to walk with a stick. When his father dies, he inherits much more money than his brother. He goes to work for an architect and soon falls in love... The novel is inspired by the author’s own experiences of suffering from infantile paralysis, which had left him partially disabled.

Critics were divided over this first novel. Some praised it; “He takes no sides; he shows no prejudice in favour of his hero or against his hero’s enemies; he does not preach or moralise...all he does is to describe extremely well, just tell and illustrate without a try at argument, the semblance of a plea. And the result’s a rarely fine book, one remarkably impressive.” Whilst others, such as *The Boston Evening Transcript*, weren’t so keen, saying “While it is a novel of promise, it is nothing more. The first chapter fills us with false hopes...for a character intended to be sympathetic, Jacob Stahl lacks an astonishing amount of sympathy.” A week later, a writer in *The London Daily Chronicle* complained: “Mr Beresford’s novel is very long, it is distinctly interesting and yet over and over again while reading it we caught ourselves asking ourselves what exactly was the matter with it?... The conclusion we have come to is that what is the matter with it is a curious lack of humour. If only it had humour it would be a remarkable book.”

Beresford went on to continue his biography of Jacob Stahl in two further novels, ‘A Candidate for Truth’, which was published in 1912 and ‘The Invisible Event’, appeared in 1915.



The first edition

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Beresford as a young man

TO
BEATRICE

BOOK ONE. HESTER

CHAPTER I. TEMPERAMENT AND FORTUITIES

1.



THE FIRST LINK in the chain was obviously forged by temperament. Either Mrs. Stahl or Nancy Freeman, who filled many offices in the Stahl household, none of them satisfactorily, neglected to replace the lid of the flour-tub. Similar and greater acts of neglect had been committed in the past, and no penalty exacted, but on this occasion a fortuitous mouse intruded into the flour-tub and made history. Of this mouse nothing more is known. Doubtless it was a well-meaning creature enough. Indeed, we only know that it was a mouse at all, from circumstantial evidence. It came and went, left a musky trace of its passage, and vanished.

Mrs. Stahl had an Irish temperament, chiefly evidenced in a habit of procrastination and a reposeful trust in miracles. The procrastinating habit may have been responsible for the absence of a lid from the flour-tub, certainly it was responsible for the presence of Nancy Freeman. Mrs. Stahl had thought, and said, that she must “really look out for another girl,” and it is possible that she would have braced herself to the effort had it not been for that other factor in her temperament — her sweet faith in the impossible. However inefficient Nancy proved herself, Mrs. Stahl always hoped that she would do better to-morrow or next week. Mrs. Stahl maintained her happiness by such illusions as these. She had an imagination and directed it in her service; she pictured a reformed Nancy, and the picture became real to her. She told herself stories of a perfected Nancy, and believed them. “Why don’t you sack the girl?” Hermann Stahl would ask when he came home for the week-end, and found disorder. “Oh, she’s been so much better lately,” would be the reply, and Mrs. Stahl believed that Nancy really had been better.

Not but what Nancy was a willing girl enough, but she was empty-headed and more than a little vain. For her vanity she had some justification. She was admired by several ambitious young Camberwell tradesmen, beginning life behind the counter or on the seat of a delivery cart. Also, she was admired and flattered by the penny postman, a widower of some standing and a man possessed of much curious information. On Sunday afternoons Nancy wore a chignon and hoops; she was before her time as a servant type, one of the pioneers of the “better-dressed-than-mistress” order. With so many affairs on hand it is easy to understand that Nancy had little time for her duties in the Stahl household.

It was on a windy morning early in October that Mrs. Stahl crossed the trail of the historical mouse. She made the discovery at a time when she should have made her pastry, but she, nevertheless, wasted a few more precious minutes in waiting for a miracle. She sniffed the flour-tub wistfully, and added ocular to olfactory evidence, but though the evidence was presented time after time in a precisely similar manner, she returned to her examination on each occasion with a reinspired hope that she might have been mistaken. At last, in despair, she summoned Nancy.

Nancy was “doing” the front bedroom, her chief instrument a duster which required frequent flourishings out of the front window. After each flourish Nancy rested and watched the passers-by. It was an interesting occupation, and she was resentful, almost indignant, when she heard the summons of her mistress. “Drat yer,

what's it now?" was her comment, spoken to an imaginary audience, and she lingered regretfully at the window until she heard the sound of footsteps coming upstairs.

"I want ye just to come downstairs a minut," said Mrs. Stahl, coaxingly.

"Yesm," replied Nancy. "I was just shaking out the duster. Did you call befor'm?" Nancy's conception of a respectful form of address was the addition of an occasional "m" to her words.

"Now just smell that!" said Mrs. Stahl, when the pair arrived in the kitchen, and she pushed the flour-tub towards Nancy and waited eagerly for the verdict. After all, she might have been mistaken. Nancy sniffed.

"Well I never!" she said, and her glance at the cupboard under the dresser, and the instinctive twitch she gave to her petticoats, raised the alarm of "Mouse!" as clearly as any spoken words.

"What d'ye think's been at it?" asked Mrs. Stahl, searching for a last gleam of hope.

"Why, micem!"

Mrs. Stahl sighed. "I was afraid so," she said. "Now ye'll just have to run round to Beeton's like a good girl, and fetch me some more flour."

"Yesm!" responded Nancy with alacrity. There was a passable, embryo grocer at Beeton's, and the trip presented itself as preferable even to the flourishing of a duster from the front bedroom window.

"And it's a fine morning," added Mrs. Stahl glancing out of the window, and discounting the force of the equinoctial gale that was ravishing the plane-trees. "Ye'd better take baby."

The baby was Jacob Stahl, aged seven months and two days.

2.

Nancy put a shawl over her head, and pinned up the bib of her apron. On week-days her potentialities as a pioneer were not in evidence. The perambulator was wheeled out, and little Master Jacob was laid therein. Little brother Eric, aged three, should have joined the pilgrimage on foot, but he was very much occupied with a large picture-book; he was studying the letters of the alphabet, and objected to being disturbed. As usual, it was Mrs. Stahl who gave way. Eric already exhibited signs of precocity, a desire for book-learning, and a persistent habit of getting his own way were his most noticeable traits, seen at the age of three.

The perambulator deserves recognition. It was three-wheeled and heavy. Its tyres were of iron and its construction primitive, but in one respect it corresponded exactly to the finest product of twentieth-century mechanism. It conformed to the law of modern four-wheeled perambulators, that law which still obtains among present examples. It never ran in a straight line. Nancy was flurried by the wind, — it faced her on the outward journey, — and the necessity for the constant elevation and redirection of the front wheel, irritated her. Nowadays, perambulators are such butterfly, such delicately balanced contrivances, that little weight on the handles is required in order to tilt those self-willed front wheels off the ground, in fact, it is not unusual to see a logical nurse neglect the front wheels altogether, slant the whole contrivance to an angle at which equilibrium can be maintained without difficulty, and sail gaily along regardless of any risk from baby's unusual inclination, so perilously suggestive of a "rush of blood to the head." But it would have needed the exercise of considerable strength so to have tilted Jacob's perambulator; moreover, Nancy required a free hand to prevent the forcible abduction of her shawl. The wind

was in one of its most rakish moods that morning. Little wonder that Nancy lost her temper at the necessity of loosing her grip on the shawl, and thus risking its elopement with Æolus, in order to reset that obstinately divagating front wheel, on the straight path.

Nevertheless the journey to Beeton's was accomplished successfully, a brief flirtation was conducted, and the flour obtained and placed in the foot of the perambulator beyond the reach of Jacob's tiny legs.

"A fine child," remarked the passable young grocer, as he arranged the parcel.

"M — yes!" replied Nancy casually, and then to show her interest she added: "Nice eyes, he's got."

"Not the only one," said the young grocer with marked intention, and Nancy bridled and answered that she didn't want any of his impertinence, and so sailed off in the direction of home with a following wind.

She appeared to be set for a fine passage. The shawl now clung tightly to her, and if the outline of her form was very clearly exposed to any who might follow her, Nancy was not apparently handicapped by the circumstance.

The penny postman was a fortuity. He turned into the wake of Nancy's passage from a side street, and Nancy glimpsed him out of the tail of her eye. Forgetful of the wind, she turned half round to make sure.

It is at this point that all the trivialities, outcomes of other trivialities, suddenly coincide. As Nancy turned, there came one of those insidious gusts of wind that are to the last degree exasperating. One of those bursts that take you by the shoulders and shake you, that wriggle and push and struggle, that seem desperately anxious to escape from nowhere and find you opposing them, that are rough and ill-tempered, and desperately vicious, self-assertive, arrogant, and overbearing; that throw dirt and leaves in your face, push you out of their way with an unbelievable rudeness, and then career down the street with a triumphant shout, taking with them any article that can be violently wrenched from your person.

Nancy threw up both hands to clutch her shawl.

The pavement was on a slight incline, the perambulator had a little way on it, and the whole force of the wind behind. It was a heavy perambulator, and it gathered momentum.

Nancy, affronted by the ill-mannered jostling of the wind, did not realize the situation, and no one can blame her; nor can any blame be attached to the penny postman, for he saw the danger and started to run, shouting, in pursuit of the perambulator. He might have caught it if the infernal affair had run straight or turned in towards the wall, but as though rejoicing in its unwonted freedom, it set a diagonal course for the roadway, sailed along gaily for some ten yards, reached the curb, lost its hold of earth with the off rear wheel, staggered, lurched, and upset.

The still shouting postman was first on the scene. Nancy, so soon as she caught sight of the runaway, covered her face in the shawl, the retention of which was to be so dearly paid for, and was subsequently led home, weeping. It was the postman who rescued a floury and ominously quiet baby from the gutter, and who placed him in the perambulator re-erected by the first contingent of the rapidly collecting crowd.

"Is 'e 'urt?"

"'Oo was with 'im?"

"Is it a boy or a gel?" were the questions suggested by the various characters and sexes of the crowd. The penny postman's face was very grave as he looked down at the uncannily silent child.

“I know where ’e lives. I’ll take ’im ’ome,” was all the answer vouchsafed to inquirers.

It was a startling and terrifying picture which met Mrs. Stahl on the doorstep. A solemn postman, a very white baby, and a miscellaneous assortment of wide-eyed onlookers — withal no Nancy.

“Been a little haccident,” said the postman. “I’ll fetch the doctor.”

3.

Dr. Pennyfather was a reassuring person but weak in diagnosis. After he had made a somewhat cursory examination of the tender little frame of baby Jacob, he beamed encouragingly on the anxious Mrs. Stahl. “No, nothing serious, I *think*” was his verdict, “but we must be careful of this bruise at the back of the head. Very careful. The sutures are hardly closed yet.” That bruise was the scare which drew Pennyfather off the track. He tended that bruise with solicitude. It was a marked thing, other bruises, notably one at the base of the spine, were overlooked.

Even after this reassurance, Mrs. Stahl’s fury of resentment against Nancy did not subside. Nancy was packed off within an hour, despite all protestations of sorrow and of innocence.

In passing out of the Stahls’ household, she passed, also, out of the history of Jacob. In after years she was a name to him, a name round which a legend of carelessness and neglect had been woven. To Jacob the name of Nancy Freeman stood later for all that was flippant, idle, and self-seeking in woman. Yet Nancy made an excellent wife and mother, and reared five healthy children. It was the young grocer she married, not the penny postman.

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End of Sample