

# MISS LULU BETT



by  
**Zona Gale**  
Illustrations by  
**Irwin Myers**

## SYNOPSIS

**APRIL**—General factotum in the house of her sister Ina, wife of Herbert Deacon, in the small town of Warbleton Lulu Bett leads a dull, cramped existence, with which she is constantly at enmity, though apparently satisfied with her lot. She has natural thoughts and aspirations which neither her sister nor her brother-in-law seem to comprehend. To Mr. Deacon comes Bobby Larkin, recently graduated high-school youth, secretly enamored of Deacon's elder daughter, Diana, an applicant for a "job" around the Deacon house. He is engaged, his occupation to be to keep the lawn in trim. The family is excited over the news of an approaching visit from Deacon's brother Ninian, whom he had not seen for many years. Deacon jokes with Lulu, with subtle meaning, concerning the coming meeting.

**MAY**—Chiefly because of the ripple in her placid, colorless existence which the arrival of Ninian will bring, Lulu is interested and speculative, meanwhile watching with something like envy the boy-and-girl love-making of Bobby and Diana. Unexpectedly, Ninian arrives, in the absence of Herbert, at his business, and of Ina, resting. Thus he becomes acquainted with Lulu first and in a measure understands her position in the house. To Lulu, Ninian is a much-traveled man of the world and even the slight interest which he takes in her is appreciated, because it is something new in her life.

Above that shroud-like plaited lace, the veins of Lulu's throat showed dark as she swallowed, cleared her throat, swallowed again.

"Don't you let Dwight scare you," she besought Ninian.

"Scare me!" cried Ninian. "Why, I think it's a good job done, if you ask me."

Lulu's eyes flew to his face. As he laughed, he was looking at her, and now he nodded and shut and opened his eyes several times very fast. Their points of light flickered. With a pang of wonder which pierced her and left her shaken, Lulu looked. His eyes continued to meet her own. It was exactly like looking at his photograph. Dwight had recovered his authentic air.

"Oh, well," he said, "we can inquire at our leisure. If it is necessary, I should say we can have it set aside quietly up here in the city—no one'll be the wiser."

"Set aside nothing!" said Ninian. "I'd like to see it stand."

"Are you serious, Nin?"

"Sure I'm serious."

Ina jerked gently at her sister's arm.

"Lulu! You hear him? What you going to say to that?"

Lulu shook her head. "He isn't in earnest," she said.

"I am in earnest—hope to die," Ninian declared. He was on two legs of his chair and was slightly tilting, so that the effect of his earnestness was imparted. But he was obviously in earnest.

They were looking at Lulu again. And now she looked at Ninian, and there was something terrible in that look which tried to ask him, alone, about this thing.

Dwight exploded. "There was a fellow I know there in the theater," he cried. "I'll get him on the line. He could tell me if there's any way—"

and was off.

Ina inexplicably began touching away tears. "Oh," she said, "what will mamma say?"

Lulu hardly heard her. Mrs. Bett was inculpably distant.

"You sure?" Lulu said low to Ninian.

For the first time, something in her exceeding isolation really touched him.

"Say," he said, "you come on with me. We'll have it done over again somewhere, if you say so."

"Oh," said Lulu, "if I thought—"

He leaned and patted her hand.

"Good girl," he said.

They sat silent, Ninian padding on the cloth with the flat of his plump hands.

Dwight returned. "It's a go all right," he said. He sat down, laughed weakly, rubbed at his face. "You two are tied as tight as the church could tie you."

"Good enough," said Ninian. "Eh, Lulu?"

"It's—it's all right, I guess," Lulu said.

"Well, I'll be dished," said Dwight. "Sister!" said Ina.

Ninian meditated, his lips set tight and high. It is impossible to trace the processes of this man. Perhaps they were all compact of the devil-may-care attitude engendered in any persistent traveler. Perhaps the incomparable cookery of Lulu played its part.

"I was going to make a trip south this month," he said, "on my way home from here. Suppose we get married again by somebody or other, and start right off. You'd like that, wouldn't you—going south."

"Yes," said Lulu only.

"It's July," said Ina, with her sense of fitness, but no one heard.

It was arranged that their trunks should follow them—Ina

that, though she was scandalized that they were not first to return to Warbleton for the blessing of Mrs. Bett.

"Mamma won't mind," said Lulu. "Mamma can't stand a fuss any more."

They left the table. The men and women still sitting at the other tables saw nothing unusual about these four, indifferently dressed, indifferently conditioned. The hotel orchestra, playing ragtime in deafening concord, made Lulu's wedding march.

It was still early next day—a hot Sunday—when Ina and Dwight reached home. Mrs. Bett was standing on the porch.

"Where's Lulu?" asked Mrs. Bett. They told.

Mrs. Bett took it in, a bit at a time. Her pale eyes searched their faces, she shook her head, heard it again, grasped it. Her first question was:

"Who's going to do your work?"

Ina had thought of that, and this was manifest.

"Oh," she said, "you and I'll have to manage."

Mrs. Bett meditated, frowning.

"I left the bacon for her to cook for your breakfasts," she said. "I can't cook bacon fit to eat. Neither can you."

"We've had our breakfasts," Ina escaped from this dilemma.

"Had it up in the city, on expense?"

"Well, we didn't have much."

In Mrs. Bett's eyes tears gathered, but they were not for Lulu.

"I should think," she said, "I should think Lulu might have had a little more gratitude to her than this."

On their way to church Ina and Dwight encountered Di, who had left the house some time earlier, stepping sedately to church in company with Bobby Larkin. Di was in white, and her face was the face of an angel, so young, so questioning, so utterly devoid of her sophistication.

"That child," said Ina, "must not see so much of that Larkin boy. She's just a little, little girl."

"Of course she mustn't," said Dwight sharply, "and if I was her mother—"

"Oh, stop that!" said Ina, sotto voce, at the church steps.

To every one with whom they spoke in the aisle after church, Ina announced their news: Had they heard? Lulu married Dwight's brother Ninian in the city yesterday. Oh, sudden, yes! And romantic . . . spoken with that upward inflection to which Ina was a prey.

**August.**

Mrs. Bett had been having a "tan-trim" brought on by nothing definable. Abruptly as she and Ina were getting supper, Mrs. Bett had fallen silent, had in fact refused to reply when addressed. When all was ready and Dwight was entering, hair wetly brushed, she had withdrawn from the room and closed her bedroom door until it echoed.

"She's got one again," said Ina, grieving. "Dwight, you go."

He went, showing no sign of annoyance, and stood outside his mother-in-law's door and knocked.

No answer.

"Mother, come and have some supper."

No answer.

"Looks to me like your muffins was just about the best ever."

No answer.

No answer.

"Come on—I had something funny to tell you and Ina."

He retreated, knowing nothing of the admirable control exercised by this woman for her own passionate satisfaction in sending him away unsatisfied. He showed nothing but anxious concern, touched with regret, at his failure. Ina, too, returned from that door discomfited. Dwight made a gallant effort to retrieve the fallen fortunes of their evening meal, and turned upon Di, who had just entered, and with exceeding facetiousness inquired how Bobby was.

Di looked hunted. She could never tell whether her parents were going to tease her about Bobby, or rebuke her for being seen with him. It depended on mood, and this mood Di had not the experience to gauge. She now groped for some neutral fact, and mentioned that he was going to take her and Jenny for ice cream that night.

Ina's irritation found just expression in her office of motherhood.

"I won't have you downtown in the evening," she said.

"But you let me go last night."

"All the better reason why you should not go tonight."

"I tell you," cried Dwight. "Why not all talk down? Why not all have ice cream . . ." He was all gentleness and propitiation, the reconciling element in his home.

"Me, too?" Monona's ardent hope her terrible fear were in her eyebrows, her parted lips.

"You, too, certainly." Dwight could not do enough for every one.

Monona clasped her hands. "Good! goody! Last time you wouldn't let me go."

"That's why papa's going to take you this time," Ina said.

These ethical balances having been nicely struck, Ina proposed another:

"But," she said, "but you must eat more supper or you can't go."

"I don't want any more." Monona's look was honest and piteous.

"Makes no difference. You must eat or you'll get sick."

"No!"

"Very well, then. No ice cream soda for such a little girl."

Monona began to cry quietly. But she passed her plate. She ate, chewing high, and slowly.

"See? She can eat it if she will eat," Ina said to Dwight. "The only trouble is, she will not take the time."

"She don't put her mind on her meals," Dwight Herbert diagnosed it.

"Oh, bigger bites than that!" he encouraged his little daughter.

Di's mind had been proceeding along its own paths.

"Are you going to take Jenny and Bobby too?" she inquired.

"Certainly. The whole party."

"Bobby'll want to pay for Jenny and I."

"Me, darling," said Ina patiently, puntiliciously—and less puntiliciously added: "Nonsense. This is going to be papa's little party."

"But we had the engagement with Bobby. It was an engagement."

"Well," said Ina, "I think we'll just set that aside—that important engagement. I think we will."

"Papa! Bobby'll want to be the one to pay for Jenny and I—"

"Di!" Ina's voice dominated all. "Will you be more careful of your grammar or shall I speak to you again?"

"Well, I'd rather use bad grammar than—than—than—" she looked resentfully at her mother, her father. Their moral defection was evident to her, but it was indefinable. They told her that she ought to be ashamed when papa wanted to give them all a treat. She sat silent, frowning, put-upon.

"Look, mamma!" cried Monona, swallowing a third of an egg at one impulse. Ina saw only the empty plate.

"Mamma's nice little girl!" cried she, shining upon her child.

The rules of the ordinary sports of the playground, scrupulously applied, would have clarified the ethical atmosphere of this little family. But there was no one to apply them.

When Di and Monona had been excused, Dwight asked:

"Nothing new from the bride and groom?"

"No. And, Dwight, it's been a week since the last."

"See—where are they then?"

He knew perfectly well that they were in Savannah, Georgia, but Ina played his game, told him, and retold bits that the letter had said.

"I don't understand," she added, "why they should go straight to Oregon without coming here first."

Dwight hazarded that Nin probably had to get back, and shone pleasantly in the reflected importance of a brother filled with affairs.

"I don't know what to make of Lulu's letters," Ina proceeded. "They're so—so—"

"You haven't had but two, have you?"

"That's all—well, of course it's only been a month. But both letters have been so—"

Ina was never really articulate. Whatever corner of her brain had the blood in it at the moment seemed to be operative, and she let the matter go at that.

"I don't think it's fair to mamma—going off that way. Leaving her own mother. Why, she may never see mamma again—" Ina's breath caught. Into her face came something of the lovely tenderness with which she sometimes looked at Monona and Di. She sprang up. She had forgotten to put some supper to warm for mamma. The lovely light was still against her face as she hustled about against the time of mamma's recovery from her tantrim. Dwight's face was like this when he spoke of his foster-mother. In both these beings there was something which functioned as pure love.

Mamma had recovered and was eating cold scrambled eggs on the corner of the kitchen table when the ice cream soda party was ready to set out. Dwight threw her a casual "Better come, too, Mollie Bett," but she shook her head. She wished to go, wished it with violence, but she contrived to give to her arbitrary refusal a quality of contempt. When Jenny arrived with Bobby, she had brought a sheaf of gladioli for Mrs. Bett, and took them to her in the kitchen, and as she laid the flowers beside her, the young girl stopped and kissed her.

"Too little darling!" cried Mrs. Bett, and clung to her, her lifted eyes lit by something intense and living. But when the ice cream party had set off at last, Mrs. Bett left her supper, gathered up the flowers, and crossed the lawn to the old cripplé, Grandma Gates.

"Ina sha'n't have 'em," the old woman thought.

And then it was quite beautiful to watch her with Grandma Gates, whom she tended and petted, to those complainings she listened, and to whom she tried to tell the small events of her day. When her neighbor had gone, Grandma Gates said that it was as good as a dose of medicine to have her come in.

Mrs. Bett sat on the porch restored and pleasant when the family returned. Di and Bobby had walked to the house with Jenny.

"Look here," said Dwight Herbert, "who is it sits home and has ice cream put in her lap like a queen?"

"Vanilly or chocolate?" Mrs. Bett demanded.

"Chocolate, mamma!" Ina cried, with the breeze in her voice.

"Vanilly sets better," Mrs. Bett said.

They sat with her on the porch while she ate. Ina rocked on a creaking board. Dwight swung a leg over the railing. Monona sat pulling her skirt over her feet, and humming all on one note. There was no moon, but the warm dusk had a quality of transparency as if it were lit in all its particles.

The gate opened, and some one came up the walk. They looked, and it was Lulu.

"Well, if it ain't Miss Lulu Bett!"

Dwight cried involuntarily, and Ina cried out something.

"How did you know?" Lulu asked.

"Know! Know what?"

"That it ain't Lulu Deacon. Hello, mamma."

She passed the others and kissed her mother.

"Say," said Mrs. Bett placidly. "And I just ate up the last spoonful of cream."

"Ain't Lulu Deacon?" Ina's voice rose and sweeted richly. "What you talking?"

"Didn't he write to you?" Lulu asked.

"Not a word," Dwight answered this. "All we've had had from you—the last from Savannah, Georgia."

"Savannah, Georgia," said Lulu, and laughed.

They could see that she was dressed well, in dark red cloth, with a little tilting hat and a drooping veil. She did not seem in any wise upset, nor save for that nervous laughter, did she show her excitement.

"Well, but he's here with you, isn't he?" Dwight demanded. "Isn't he here? Where is he?"

"Must be 'most to Oregon by this time," Lulu said.

"Oregon?"

"You see," said Lulu, "he had another wife."

"Why, he had not!" exclaimed Dwight absurdly.

"Yes. He hasn't seen her for fifteen years and he thinks she's dead. But he isn't sure."

"Nonsense," said Dwight. "Why, of course she's dead if he thinks so."

"I had to be sure," said Lulu.

At first dumb before this, Ina now cried out: "Monona! Go upstairs to bed at once."

"It's only quarter to," said Monona, with assurance.

"Do as mamma tells you."

"But—"

"Monona!"

She went, kissing them all good-night and taking her time about it. Everything was suspended while she kissed them and departed, walking slowly backward.

"Married!" said Mrs. Bett with tardy apprehension. "Lulu, was your husband married?"

"Yes," Lulu said, "my husband was married, mother."

"Mercy," said Ina. "Think of anything like that in our family."

"Well, go on—go on!" Dwight cried. "Tell us about it."

Lulu spoke in a monotone, with her old manner of hesitation:

"We were going to Oregon. First down to New Orleans and then out to California and the coast." On this she paused and sighed. "Well, then at Savannah, Georgia, he said he thought I better know, first. So he told me."

"Yes—well, what did he say?" Dwight demanded irritably.

"Cora Waters," said Lulu. "Cora Waters. She married him down in San Diego, eighteen years ago. She went to South America with him."

"Well, he never let us know of it, if she did," said Dwight.

"No. She married him just before he went. Then in South America, after two years, she ran away again. That's all he knows."

"That's a pretty story," said Dwight contentiously.

"He says if she'd been alive, she'd been after him for a divorce. And she never has been, so he thinks she must be dead. The trouble is," Lulu said again, "he wasn't sure. And I had to be sure."

"Well, but mercy," said Ina, "couldn't he find out now?"

"It might take a long time," said Lulu simply, "and I didn't want to stay and not know."

"Well, then, why didn't he say so here?" Ina's indignation mounted.

"He would have. But you know how sudden everything was. He said he thought about telling us right there in the restaurant, but of course that'd been hard—wouldn't it? And then he felt so sure she was dead."

"Why did he tell you at all, then?" demanded Ina, whose processes were simple.

"Yes. Well! Why indeed?" Dwight Herbert brought out these words with a curious emphasis.

"I thought that, just at first," Lulu said, "but only just at first. Of course that wouldn't have been right. And then, you see, he gave me my choice."

"Gave you your choice?" Dwight echoed.

"Yes. About going on and taking the chances. He gave me my choice when he told me, there in Savannah, Georgia."

"What made him conclude, by then, that you ought to be told?" Dwight asked.

"Why, he'd got to thinking about it," she answered.

A silence fell. Lulu sat looking out toward the street.

"The only thing," she said, "as long as it happened, I kind of wish he hadn't told me till we got out to Oregon."

"Lulu!" said Ina. Ina began to cry. "You poor thing!" she said.

Her tears were a signal to Mrs. Bett, who had been striving to understand all. Now she too wept, tossing up her hands and rocking her body. Her saucer and spoon clattered on her knee.

"He felt bad, too," Lulu said.

"He!" said Dwight. "He must have."

"It's you," Ina sobbed. "It's you, my sister!"

"Well," said Lulu, "but I never thought of it making you both feel bad, or I wouldn't have come home. I knew," she added, "it'd make Dwight feel bad. I mean, it was his brother—"

"Thank goodness," Ina broke in, "nobody need know about it."

Lulu regarded her, without change.

"Oh, yes," she said in her monotone. "People will have to know."

"I do not see the necessity," Dwight's voice was on edge. Then too he said "do not," always with Dwight betokening the finalities.

"Why, what would they think?" Lulu asked, troubled.

"What difference does it make what they think?"

"Why," said Lulu slowly, "I shouldn't like—you see they might—why, Dwight, I think we'll have to tell them."

"You do! You think the disgrace of bigamy in this family is something the whole town will have to know about?"

Lulu looked at him with parted lips.

"Say," she said, "I never thought about it being that."

Dwight laughed. "What do you think it was? And whose disgrace is it, pray?"

Ninian's," said Lulu.

"Ninian's! Well, he's gone. But you're here. And I'm here. Folks'll feel sorry for you. But the disgrace—that'd reflect on me. See?"

"But if we don't tell, what'll they think then?"

"Must be 'most to Oregon by this time," Lulu said.

"Oregon?"

"You see," said Lulu, "he had another wife."

"Why, he had not!" exclaimed Dwight absurdly.

"Yes. He hasn't seen her for fifteen years and he thinks she's dead. But he isn't sure."

"Nonsense," said Dwight. "Why, of course she's dead if he thinks so."

"I had to be sure," said Lulu.

At first dumb before this, Ina now cried out: "Monona! Go upstairs to bed at once."

"It's only quarter to," said Monona, with assurance.

"Do as mamma tells you."

"But—"

"Monona!"

She went, kissing them all good-night and taking her time about it. Everything was suspended while she kissed them and departed, walking slowly backward.

"Married!" said Mrs. Bett with tardy apprehension. "Lulu, was your husband married?"

"Yes," Lulu said, "my husband was married, mother."

"Mercy," said Ina. "Think of anything like that in our family."

"Well, go on—go on!" Dwight cried. "Tell us about it."

Lulu spoke in a monotone, with her old manner of hesitation:

"We were going to Oregon. First down to New Orleans and then out to California and the coast." On this she paused and sighed. "Well, then at Savannah, Georgia, he said he thought I better know, first. So he told me."

"Yes—well, what did he say?" Dwight demanded irritably.

"Cora Waters," said Lulu. "Cora Waters. She married him down in San Diego, eighteen years ago. She went to South America with him."

"Well, he never let us know of it, if she did," said Dwight.

"No. She married him just before he went. Then in South America, after two years, she ran away again. That's all he knows."

"That's a pretty story," said Dwight contentiously.

"He says if she'd been alive, she'd been after him for a divorce