

ANALYSIS

"The Children's Game" (1958)

Jean Stafford

(1915-1979)

"A widow is the character chosen by Stafford to display the ability of a mature woman to act decisively to dispel a sense of being a victim. Abby Reynolds, in 'The Children's Game' (1958), is a New Yorker in her early forties. She has spent the year following her husband's death in Europe, moving from place to place. She finally realizes that she has become one of the 'forlorn, brave orphans'--lonesome American women--that she and her husband had seen and sorrowed for on their earlier trips abroad. She belongs to 'that group who have spent their lives leaning on someone--or being leaned on by--a father, a mother, a husband, and who, when the casket is close or the divorce decree in final, find that they are waifs.' They are humiliated in their loneliness and flee from the pity of their relatives and friends. In making her own trip, Abby has followed a pattern set by other women of her family, including her mother, who died in Rome.

Abby, however, finds that she is made of sterner fiber. She admits to herself that she hate what she is doing and resolves to return immediately to New York and her previous life. In the two weeks that intervene before her return passage, she agrees to meet an old friend, Hugh Nicholson, at a house party in England. Spending time with Hugh, Abby discovers that the enervation she had experienced was caused by 'the removal from her life of John's energy' and that she requires the complement of such an energy; 'she was not the sort of woman who could live alone satisfactorily.' She is a woman who needs a husband.

Stafford set the final development of Abby's resolve against the grotesque casino town of Knokke-le-Zoute in Belgium. The casino and its occupants are described in the imagery of sickness. The international collection of roulette players appear 'chronically ill'; they all resemble 'the invalid concentrating on the rides of his pain.' The 'air of apprehension and constraint' in the casino is appropriate to a hospital ward. The building is seedy and there is a 'contagion in the atmosphere.' The town itself is 'monstrous,' with 'houses that looked like buses threatening to run them down and houses that looked like faces with bulbous noses and brutish eyes.' Trees are cut into shapes of inanimate objects. The hotels take on a horrible animation with 'kidney-shaped balconies...crenellations that looked like vertebrae and machioliations that looked like teeth.'

Brought to Knokke-le-Zoute and the casino by Hugh, with whom she believes herself in love, Abby discovers that the grotesquerie about her reflects the sickness at the core of Hugh, a compulsive gambler, whose addiction has destroyed his first marriage. Hugh has brought her here to reveal this truth about himself. After playing an evening of roulette at Hugh's request, she understands the pull of the game to the gambler and with only a shade of remorse, 'because she was fortunate and he was not,' she leaves him with hardly a backward glance. Her brief interlude has been an 'aberration,' like the quixotic change of the roulette wheel. She belongs among her own kind: 'in alien corn, it was imprudent to run risks'."

Mary Ellen Williams Walsh
Jean Stafford
(Twayne 1985) 71-72

"In addition to having to cope with Liebling's poor health [third husband], Stafford was further depressed when she learned that her story 'The Children's Game' had been rejected by the *New Yorker*, though she had twice tried to revise it to meet their objections. 'I can't possibly tell you how sorry I am to sent you this 'no' and how badly we feel if we misled you into all this extra work for nothing,' White wrote to her apologetically. White said she suspected that one of the reasons the story's male protagonist was not developed fully enough was that Stafford had been constrained by having a real person in mind when she described this character. Perhaps White was reluctant to publish the story because she recognized several of Liebling's traits in Stafford's Hugh Nicholson... She was further depressed when [other] magazines and the

Atlantic Monthly rejected the story as well. Under the title 'The Reluctant Gambler,' the story finally appeared the following fall in the *Saturday Evening Post*....

In 'The Children's Game' she describes a woman in her forties who is introduced to gambling by a man she thinks she wants to marry. Having reached the conclusion that she is 'not the sort of woman who could live alone satisfactorily,' Stafford's protagonist is trying to decide whether she wants to marry the friend she has accompanied to Belgium. Hugh Nicholson, 'associated various times and in various ways with films,' superficially resembles not Liebling but Alan Campbell, who was a film writer. However, like Liebling, he is estranged from his wife; like Liebling, he enjoys horse racing; and like Liebling's, Hugh's amiability sometimes gives way to periods of remoteness when he seems 'suddenly to disappear, although his flesh remained, in the middle of a conversation, in the middle of a dance.'

With Hugh, who deliberately chooses to frequent the grubbiest places, Abby shares adventures similar to those Stafford shared with Liebling.... But ultimately Abby comes to believe that Hugh is a masochist, and as she observes him at the roulette table, she sense that he despises himself for being a compulsive gambler. The story concludes with Abby telling herself, 'Happy as the interlude had been...it had been an aberration and...she belonged where she had originated'."

Charlotte Margolis Goodman
Jean Stafford: The Savage Heart
(U Texas 1990) 257, 263-64

"Jean turned to another European locale--the gambling casinos of a coastal Belgian town--as the setting for her story 'The Children's Game.' An account of the recently widowed Abby Reynolds, who is living in Europe and meets an old friend, Hugh Nicholson, in Paris, the story treats a familiar Stafford figure--the widow or divorcee who finds herself adrift in an alien environment. Though it went through several drafts under the direction of *New Yorker* editor Katherine White, the story never appeared in its pages.

Originally titled 'The Reluctant Gambler' when it appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post*, 'The Children's Game,' though not one of Stafford's strongest stories, is nevertheless a penetrating and firm study of an addiction--one not so far removed from Stafford's own to alcohol. Abby Reynolds, typical of Stafford's innocents abroad, moves from innocence to experience as she realizes that the charming man who has been squiring her across Europe is as afflicted as any patient in a hospital ward. The objective third-person narrator, in fact, compares the gambler's concentration to the invalid's--'concentrating on the tides of his pain, a look necessarily unsociable.' Abby is reluctant to admit that what she sees among these pathetic, gray faces is far removed from the image of gambling she has derived from movies; the rich chandeliers are in fact 'morose and fungoid lamps,' the plush red carpet thin and a 'lugubrious puce [with] a vapid pattern of flaxen parallelograms.'

All of these unsavory details foreshadow her ultimate disillusionment when she discovers that Hugh is a part of this shadowy, lurid world and in thrall to it with an intensity he allows her to witness in order to prove any permanent relationship between them impossible. In the dingy, depressing Belgian casino, Abby is at first an outsider witnessing what is described almost as a secret ritual. She suffers the insolent stares of the gamblers, realizing that they resent her presence just as the gravely ill look longingly at the faces of the well. Finally, when she looks at Hugh's rapt absorption in the roulette game, she realizes she is uneasy, even jealous, though she is not sure of what. When Hugh describes his obsession to her, it becomes clear: 'Eventually the only need you have in the world is the need to win. You don't need food or drink or sleep or sex--gamblers don't sleep with their wives...they sleep with numbers.'

Abby's revelation occurs at the end of the story when Hugh gently persuades her to try the roulette wheel. Initially inattentive and curious about the other gamblers, Abby gradually learns the rudiments of the game and begins winning heavily. The life and energy Stafford earlier refers to as missing from Abby's life since her husband's death return as a flushed and triumphant Abby, totally absorbed in the game, realizes with numbing clarity that 'the wheel [had become] her quixotic lover, now scornfully rejecting her and now lavishly rewarding her.' Reality gradually asserts itself as the croupiers yawn, the tables empty, the noise lessens. In the final scene Abby leaves the site of this 'children's game' and the man who now appears as insubstantial as 'phantom ships' on the North Sea."

Mary Ann Wilson
Jean Stafford: A Study of the Short Fiction
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Michael Hollister (2020)