

James Courage and 'Jezebel': An unpublished story

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James Francis Courage¹ (1903-63) is a largely neglected New Zealand-born expatriate writer who achieved some commercial and critical success in New Zealand, the U.K. and the U.S. with novels and short stories published in the last third of his life. While Courage lived and published mostly in England, he corresponded with a number of New Zealand writers of the time, including Frank Sargeson and Charles Brasch, and set most of his fiction in early-twentieth-century Canterbury. Five out of his eight published novels, for instance, were set there.

Living in England, Courage worked in and managed Wilson's Bookshop in Hampstead for some ten years till 1950-51 when, prompted in part by psychiatric problems, he devoted himself full-time to writing. During 1952, especially, he worked on a number of short stories and in September submitted a sequence to Michael Sadlier at Constables, who were then publishing his novels, for publication in a single volume. Although his proposal was rejected, a number of his stories were published individually in magazines such as Gentry, London Magazine and Landfall. It was not until 1973, 10 years after Courage's death, that Charles Brasch collected 15 of his stories into a single volume, Such Separate Creatures (Christchurch: Caxton Press, 1973).

One of the stories written in 1952 was 'Jezebel'. Two versions are extant in the Hocken Library: a manuscript dated 9/4/52, which has the title 'No Time for Jezebel' and a revised, undated typescript, which is now published for the first time.² It is of interest to those with a knowledge of Courage's work for a number of reasons, especially for its connection to his most successful novel, The Young Have Secrets. (Ironically, Constables also rejected this novel when Courage submitted it. It was taken up by Jonathan Cape, was a Book Society Choice for December 1954, and ran to several printings.)

The novel is set in Sumner, Christchurch, where Courage boarded as a boy when attending Mr. Clement Wiggins' Dunelm Preparatory School in Christchurch. His manuscripts record that he began working on the second version of the novel on 21/3/52 and completed it on 27/5/53.³ Clearly 'Jezebel', written when he was working on this novel, has connections with it in its evocation of the Sumner setting: the tram journey, the estuary, Cave Rock and the romance of the seafront.

The story is also of interest in its use of a female narrator, which I have not encountered elsewhere in [Courage's](#) fiction, and in her flirtatious sexuality. Bridget Bridges, with her petunia lipstick, silky blouse, sheer stockings and urge for "a good time" is a Jezebel in spirit, if still "a fairly innocent kid" at the time of which she writes. In the novel, too, [Courage](#) explores feminine sexuality and romantic machination with the three Garnett sisters in a complicated pursuit of the same man, Geoffrey Macauley.

The narrative voice in '[Jezebel](#)' is plain and colloquial and Bridget seems to be of a lower social class than the rural gentry who were often [Courage's](#) focus. "We hadn't much money at home," she tells us. [Courage](#) wrote to [Sargeson](#) in 1949, in admiration of his writing, "At last - somebody who speaks for New Zealanders in their own tone of voice."⁴ In another letter, written in 1954, he says, "you've got many a point I can't aspire to - a sort of native authenticity I can't (damn) reach and a natural writing voice (my own, because I take such pains, always seems to me artificial in tone)."⁵ '[Jezebel](#)', perhaps, represents an attempt at a more colloquial voice than he adopts in many of his other published stories.

A close inspection of changes made from manuscript to typescript seems to support this focus on the colloquial. In the second paragraph, for instance, Jezebel changes from "a fairly innocent girl" to "a fairly innocent kid" while grandmother "lit up" rather than "brought out her ideas" about Jezebel. There are a good number of other such movements to a more direct and vernacular voice from the draft, perhaps under the influence of [Sargeson](#). Another shift from draft to typescript is in a more favourable construction of Jezebel's character. Her age moves from 16 to 17, she has known Donald for a fortnight rather than a week, and the sentence about her family being without "much money" is added. In the draft we read, "a year or two later... I got into trouble with a man" but in the typescript this becomes, "a long time later... a man got me into trouble", putting the responsibility more squarely on the male.

A final point of interest is the use of the grandmother as mentor of the young Bridget. Though she appears only briefly as a framing figure at the start and end of the story, she provides the story with its title and focus and a degree of ironic humour. In many of [Courage's](#) other stories and novels he has a more fully drawn and sympathetic grandmother figure, based on his own close relationship with his maternal grandmother, [Ida Peache](#).

[Courage](#) was a dedicated writer who struggled on the other side of the world with a range of personal and literary problems. He wrote once to [Sargeson](#), "I suppose we all have our crosses - you no less than I - but I often curse the day I

ever decided to write a word.”⁶ Still, he persisted till his death, and along with ‘[Jezebel](#)’, his fiction rewards our continued attention.

JEZEBEL

“Oh, how I’d love to have been Jezebel,” said my grandmother one night, in one of her laughing moods. I think it was a long time since she’d looked into the Bible, but whenever she felt suddenly younger she’d remember bits of it, or fancy she did. “Oh, how I wish I’d been Jezebel!” she cried, smiling at me over the supper-table in the kitchen. “She may have been eaten by wild dogs in the end, but she had a good time first. You take my word for it, Bridget, Jezebel had a real good time first.”

I was just past my seventeenth birthday and was living for a year with my grandmother in town. It wasn’t until a long time later that a man got me into trouble. In fact, I was a fairly innocent kid at this time when my grandmother suddenly lit up about Jezebel. I was surprised. I went to bed thinking of Jezebel. Because, you see, the next afternoon was a holiday and I’d promised to meet Donald at the tram-stop up the road and go out with him. So I lay thinking of Jezebel and a good time before I went to sleep.

Donald was just a boy who worked in a chemist’s shop in Christchurch. I’d met him on the tram when I was on my way to the classes at the Art School. I’d come down from the country to attend these classes because my family thought I could draw and so might become a teacher. We hadn’t much money at home in Rangiora. Anyway, there I was, staying with my grandmother in town. I’d known Donald, to speak to, for about a fortnight when my grandmother mentioned Jezebel that night over supper. I didn’t know much about Jezebel, except that she’d painted her face, but I thought she must have known all about good times.

“Where are we going?” I asked Donald at the tram-stop next day. I’d put petunia lipstick on my mouth before coming out. “Somewhere nice?”

“What about Sumner? We can have a look at the sea.”

“But Sumner’s miles away,” I said.

“Won’t take long.”

“All right.” But I knew it took over forty minutes in the tram. I purposely hadn’t brought a coat as I had on my silk blouse, and the sun seemed warm.

“If I had my motor-bike we’d get there in no time,” said Donald. We pushed ourselves into the Sumner tram at Cathedral Square and sat at the back, in seats I’d chosen.

“When are you getting this motor-bike?”

‘Oh, I’m saving up.’ He was wearing an old sports coat, a filthy pair of gym-shoes and no hat. He had a strip of pink tape on his glasses. ‘I’ve got my eye on a three-speed Alderson,’ he told me.

‘Why do you always cut yourself shaving?’ I asked, looking at his face.

‘It’s these damn spots on the chin.’ He went red. ‘I’m taking sulphur, but it’s foul muck. We sell it at the shop.’

He glared at the conductor, paid our fares and sat back beside me. Presently he got more cheerful.

‘Well, how are you, Bridget?’ he asked, quite cockily.

‘Who said you could call me Bridget?’ I hated my names, both of them. Bridget Bridges was too much, somehow.

‘Well, I’ve got to call you something, haven’t I?’

‘All right.’ I giggled. ‘Ever hear of Jezebel as a girl’s name?’

He was looking out of the window at some motor-bike that went honking past us. ‘Gosh, see that?’ he cried. ‘New year model, with a big tank.’ He breathed hard, excited.

I leant back, closing my eyes and hoping he’d put an arm around me. But just then the tram reached Heathcote and began to run along the estuary. Donald talked about sailing.

‘How’s your mother?’ I asked him at last, breaking in.

‘Same old bag. How’s your grandmother?’

‘All right, I suppose.’ I laughed. ‘But it’s nice to get out for a good time, sometimes.’

‘You girls have all the fun.’ He looked at me and I began to long again for that good time I hadn’t had, but for some reason he began chatting about his work at the chemist’s shop. I don’t think he’d even noticed my silk blouse, the ribbon I’d fixed round my hair, or my sheer stockings.

At Sumner we left the tram and walked along towards the old pier. Sand and dust were blowing across the promenade. There were lots of people about. A girl from the Arts class went past us, looking the other way. I could have killed her because I knew she’d seen us and had thought us common.

‘Gosh, the sea smells good.’ Donald puffed out his chest. ‘It gets the benzine right out of your clothes.’

‘Yes,’ I said, though it was only rotting seaweed I could smell and I hated that girl.

We went on to the pier. There was a chocolate machine, a weighing machine and a Tell-your-character machine. The chocolate machine was empty.

‘Aw, never mind,’ said Donald. ‘You’re not hungry, are you?’

‘Not a bit,’ I cried. ‘Let’s read our characters.’

The character-machine had a handle. We put in our money, whizzed the handle twice and two pieces of cardboard fell out. Donald's card said he was of a happy nature, though inclined to sulk and was close over money.

"Go on, that's not you at all," I laughed. He tore the card up and let the bits flutter away.

My own card said I was ambitious, fond of work in the house and loved children. To tease him, I wouldn't let Donald read it.

"Come on, let's have a look," he begged.

"No." I hid it behind me, hoping he'd try to grab it. "It's silly, really."

"Why's it silly?"

"Well, it is. You know more about me than the card does."

Just then a dog ran past our legs, along the pier. "A spaniel, a cocker," Donald cried. "Here, boy, come here!" He whistled, trying to catch the dog as it ran. "I'm all set on buying a cocker myself, one day," he told me. "You can train them to go into rabbit-holes if you start them as pups."

I dropped my character-card through a crack in the pier. "Come on," I said, "let's have a good time." I took Donald's arm and we strolled on along the pier.

"Funny thing about dogs," he said, "they can see only in black and white. Some chap's proved it in Russia." He kept his hands in his pockets.

"Would you like me if I was a dog?" I asked.

"I might."

"Even love me?"

His face went red again. "Now you're asking things," he said, looking down at his gym-shoes.

"Don't you want a girl?" I asked.

"I'll tell you this — I've never been out with one before to-day."

"Really."

"Honest. I've never wanted to, much. And I was saving up for the bike."

We stood at the end of the pier. The tide was out so we spat over the railings on to the sand.

"Let's climb up the Cave Rock," I suggested.

We left the pier. I skipped on ahead over the sand to the base of the big black rock standing up by itself, like a volcano, at the end of the beach. At the top were seats round a hut with a weather-mast. Donald and I sat down. My hair was blowing round my face, but Donald had the kind of hair that stayed flat. I was excited by the climb and the view of the bay and the far mountains. I could draw them, I thought.

"A penny for your thoughts," I said to Donald.

“Ships used to get sunk on the bar of the estuary down there.” He pointed with his shoe.

I began to sing, because I was privately proud of my voice and singing would be part of a good time.

“Ever hear records of Carmen Miranda?” Donald asked.

“Who’s she?”

“Some screecher in America. South America, I think. I’d like to go to Brazil.”

“What? Just for fun?”

“I saw some Brazilian stamps in a window in Victoria Street.”

“Would you take me to Brazil with you?”

“I don’t know,” said Donald. “It’s pretty hot there.”

I leant against him. “Do you like me?”

“Well, what do you think?”

I sighed. I was beginning to get very cold on top of the rock, in the wind from the sea. Donald had lit a cigarette and the smoke blew in my face.

“Sorry,” he said. He nipped off the burning end of his cigarette, took out the box and put the unsmoked bit back. He hadn’t offered me a cigarette because I’d told him I never smoked.

“Let’s go and find a tea-place,” I said. “Somewhere noisy. With music. Let’s have a good time.”

We walked back across the promenade and into the town, to a shop with a tea-pot and a bunch of red nasturtiums in the window. The place was so full that we had to wait, leaning against the wall. There was no music.

I combed my hair. “Do I look all right?”

“Of course.”

“Pretty, ugly, or just middling?”

“What’s wrong with you, anyway? All these questions!”

When we sat down I lolled a little on my elbow and looked round under my lashes. The tea, when it came, was very strong, with a sort of after-taste of soda; the cakes were cousins to the Cave Rock. But I didn’t mind, really. We were getting nearer to a good time and I felt more like Jezebel every minute. Donald looked thoughtful.

“Everybody in New Zealand drinks fifty pounds of tea a year,” he told me. “Or a hundred. I forget which it is.”

“You know an awful lot of odd things.” I meant it.

“I don’t really.” He was a bit offended. Presently he gazed up at the fan in the ceiling. I could see he wanted to talk about electricity and Lake Coleridge or something.

“Have you ever been drunk?” I asked, lolling further.

“Well, I was kind of squiffy, once. It was beer, at Christmas.” He pushed his glasses closer behind his ears. “But my Dad was always tight, so that was a warning.”

“A warning of what?”

“Just a warning. It runs in families.” He blew his nose. “How are your Art classes going?”

“I’ve been painting a glass of milk. All white. It’s harder than you’d think.”

He nodded. “It must be.”

Presently he paid for the tea out of a little green purse his sister had given him. We went out into the road, to find that the sun had clouded over with a fine cold rain. Donald said we must go home. I was shivering as we waited under an awning for the tram.

“Just when we were beginning to have a good time,” I said, “it has to rain.”

“The weather-forecast said bright.”

“They must’ve been guessing.”

The tram was full of raincoats. We pushed until we found a seat at the back. My blouse clung to my neck, my legs were damp. Donald took off his coat, lifted it and dropped it round my shoulders. The coat had a mannish smell that I liked. I began to feel happy again. I snuggled close to Donald, looking at him sideways and feeling him near to me.

“You’re quite handsome really, Donald,” I told him.

He put an arm round me, to stop me shivering, holding himself tight against the seat.

“Do you mind being called Bridget?” he asked.

“No. I was only kidding about Jezebel.”

“Jezebel?” He’d forgotten. “That’s a darn silly name, anyway.”

“Oh, I don’t know.” I didn’t think it was.

He leant his head towards me so that his hair rubbed against my ear and cheek. We sat for a long while without speaking. I told myself I was having a good time at last, though I wasn’t sure of it and didn’t know what it was I wanted or how it happened. All the same, just sitting with Donald on a tram-ride, wet and shivering, didn’t seem to deserve my being eaten by wild dogs at the last.

“When I get my motor-bike I’ll ask you to come on the pillion,” Donald said, against my ear.

I nodded. “If my grandmother lets me.”

“I’ve got to save up a lot yet.”

“I suppose we can have a good time then,” I said.

“Haven’t you enjoyed it, to-day?”

“Oh, yes. But this is the nicest part, now.”

“What’s all that red smudge on your mouth?”

“Just red stuff. Lipstick. It’s been there all day.”

I was still shivering when we said goodbye at the tram-stop. Donald hadn’t even kissed me. I ran home. The next day I had such a cold that I had to stay away from the Arts class, and after that I had a cough and bronchitis. Donald didn’t even call to ask me why he hadn’t seen me again on the tram. My grandmother nursed me in bed for a fortnight. One day I asked her if she still wanted to be Jezebel.

“Oh, that creature,” my grandmother snorted. She was feeling old and her corns were hurting her feet. “That creature! I wonder she was ever allowed inside the Bible at all. I’ve no time for Jezebel.”

Endnotes

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- ² Dunedin, Hocken Library, MS 0999, [Courage](#) : 37 (manuscript); 34 (typescript).
- ³ Ibid. [Courage](#): 65
- ⁴ Wellington, Alexander Turnbull Library, MS papers 0432-152, [Sargeson](#). Letter from [Courage](#) dated August 28, 1949
- ⁵ Ibid. Letter from [Courage](#) dated September 14, 1954
- ⁶ Ibid. Letter from [Courage](#) dated May 9, 1954