

The Custard Cup

Florence Bingham Livingston

CHAPTER X

The Back-Yard Code.

One of the hardest things that Lettie was ever called upon to do was to apologize to Mr. Wopple. In her chastened mood she submitted to this item of penance, but the mere physical doing of it came near being beyond her. The words, half out of her mouth, seemed to turn and slip back down her throat. Difficulty was made the more difficult by Mr. Wopple's supercilious satisfaction in the humiliation of his small antagonist.

"Darn it all!" burst out Lettie in exasperation. "Stop smiling till I get through doing it, can't you?"

"Serve you right to snicker a little," he cackled. "Mebbe it'll learn you better next time."

"Shut up!" stormed Lettie. "I you don't shut—" She stopped. She had recalled something that made it impossible to go on. "Excuse me," she muttered, "I got an engagement."

Black curls flying, she dashed into the kitchen, whence presently issued muffled sounds as of a tom-tom in the distance. When Lettie reappeared, she was holding her right arm as though it ached, and her lips were drawn into a firm line that fairly pressed out her color.

"Now, Mr. Wopple," she said, squeezing out the words as if she hated every one of them, "I ap—apologize"—she breathed more freely—"for ev'rything I done and said this afternoon. Will you please to overlook it?"

This formula, which was the frank result of collaboration, had been persistently rehearsed before a limited audience; otherwise it would probably never have withstood Lettie's heavy distaste for its general sentiment.

Nor was Mr. Wopple's acceptance characterized by that gracious magnanimity which would have eased the tension of the interview; rather, it was prickly as with little hooks, from which hung various taunts and comments and admonitions not calculated to increase meekness. Lettie felt her temperature rising swiftly. Something must be done. Her legs being at the moment far fresher than her right arm, she discarded the thought of the gong and took to her heels, clipping through The Custard Cup to the freer air of the street. And let no one think it is always a coward that runs; flight is frequently only the more active form of courage.

Somewhat later Mrs. Penfield came out into the yard, with the purpose of interviewing her neighbor. "Mr. Wopple," she called, in the tone one uses to find out whether a person is sleeping or not.

Mr. Wopple was not. He appeared in his back door, his small eyes peering cautiously to take in the lay of the land.

Mrs. Penfield, standing scrupulously within the boundaries of her own yard, crooked her forefinger in brief authority. "I want to talk to you."

He came slowly down the steps. He was slightly stiff from rheumatism. Lettie's treatment had not contributed to limberness of joints or muscles.

Mrs. Penfield went straight to the point. "What's your idea 'bout Lettie?"

Mr. Wopple was relieved. He had feared criticism; to be approached for advice was therefore doubly acceptable.

"Well, my idee is," he said in a high, thin voice, "my idee is that she belongs in a reform school."

"Um! On what grounds?" Mrs. Penfield's voice was low and pleasant. "On the grounds of bein' a nuisance."

She smiled. "It's your idea, then, to put all human nuisances into reform schools?"

Mr. Wopple glanced at her sharply, and a dull red crept up under his sallow skin—gratuitously, because Mrs. Penfield's question had been wholly impersonal.

"That's my idee with young 'uns," he confirmed.

"With young ones? What would

you do with the old ones?" Her lips curved in amusement. "It don't matter," he retorted. "We're talkin' 'bout Lettie, ain't we?" "We started with her," agreed Mrs. Penfield, still smiling, "but your making a distinction that way set me thinking. Sounds like the younger a feller is and the more he needs help, the more you'd be for branding him as liad and shoving him out of somebody's home care. Way I look at it is:



"I Want to Talk to You."

the main reason we older folks are hanging on to existence is to look for the younger ones and try to help 'em go ahead of anything we've done. I figger that's the only way to keep the world moving ahead.

Mr. Wopple's lips snapped like a turtle's. "I can tell you one thing straight, Mrs. Penfield. If you want to shove the world along, you can get right in and shove. Me, I don't pretend to be one of these here new-fangled social workers that thinks children is the first consideration. I do my part, and I ain't goin' to do no more."

"Your part?" queried Mrs. Penfield sweetly. "What is that?"

"Why, I don't ask nothin' from nobody. I work hard, and I earn ev'ry-thing I get."

"Land!" laughed Mrs. Penfield. "That ain't so much! Ain't any cow in the country that don't do more. Why, there wouldn't no cow have any respect for herself if she didn't more'n earn her own living; and so long's you're a human being and belong to society, you got to do more. You got to do your part toward that society. That's what I'm asking you to do toward Lettie. You got a social responsibility toward her."

Mr. Wopple twitched his head impatiently. "Tain't a subject that's specially intrustin' to me, and—"

"Wait a minute," suggested Mrs. Penfield good-naturedly. "We been kind o' skimming the edges, but we're near the meat of the matter now. I've made Lettie give you an apology, although goodness knows I think she's as much entitled to receive one as to give it. But that's all right, 'cause the feller that apologizes is the one that gets the benefit. Now I'll tell you what I'm going to do."

Mr. Wopple's eyes shifted nervously. He was like a little fussy dog that barks and threatens when he is the only one in sight, but subsides cringing if a powerful dog challenges. When it came to a contest of wills, Mr. Wopple could measure himself with remarkable but silent accuracy.

"First thing," she continued, "I'll have Lettie replace that window. Then I'm going to put up some wire netting 'tween the two yards. That'll keep Fil on his side. Next, I'll see that Lettie never trespasses or interferes with you. If she ever does, you let me know, 'bout taking mob law into your own hands. Understand?"

"Well," returned Mr. Wopple slowly, "yes, of course, if you'd ruther meddle—"

"I had," interrupted Mrs. Penfield briskly. "It'll suit me fine to be given a chance on any such occasion. I can think of pleasanter jobs, but I ain't stopping at nothing that'll help Lettie. You see, Mr. Wopple, the chief reason you and I are having this conversation is 'cause we got different ideas about human rights. You think children ain't any good unless their families would make fine reading in a cyclopeda, and I b'lieve the Lord never'd let 'em be born so promiscuous as constantly happens if the main thing wasn't what becomes of 'em after they get here. 'Course they inherit a lot, but you can bend it or shape it in any direction you like."

"Ain't no use in your looking down on Lettie 'cause you don't know where she come from. Chances are her family tree's got as many live branches on it as yours has. There ain't much difference in families when you come right down to it—no more'n there is in individuals. The main difference in folks is in the amount they'll confess."

"Now, what all this comes to is: Lettie's going to have her chance. I've elected to give her breathing space and what help I can, and I'm trusting the Lord to right the human nature in her that's got a bit twisted. But there's one thing you got to keep in mind. That is, there ain't nothing I won't do to help that child grow into the fine woman she's capable of making. She ain't going to be in-

posed, and she ain't going to be put-tered; but she's going to have her chance."

Her right hand, resting on an old post between the yards, clenched suddenly till the knuckles pressed the blood from the skin; her fine eyes glowed with unusual fire; but her even color and the mild curve of her lips showed how superbly she had herself in control.

Mr. Wopple was paralyzed—not by the words, but by the fact that they had been spoken by this woman whom he had known for many months without suspecting the dynamic will power



"She's Going to Have Her Chance."

hidden beneath her good nature. Once before he had caught a glimpse of it, to be sure—when she had risen to the defense of Thad—but that glimpse had been mild compared with the tense determination in her present attitude.

Before his astonished eyes her expression changed as swiftly and completely as the picture on the screen when a new slide is inserted in the lantern. Her fingers uncurled; her body relaxed; the fire in her eyes blended into a warm glow; her lips curved back from her white teeth in a smile that was unexpectedly youthful.

"Guess you can see this is a serious matter with me, Mr. Wopple. And you're dead right thinking I ain't got any man to lean on. Uncle Jerry ain't 'round 'nough to be counted on steady, and as long's you'd noticed yourself that I need a man's help, I thought mebbe you'd be that man."

Mr. Wopple coughed. "Why—er—o' course—"

"That's the idea," she encouraged. "You could do it so easy, you know, living so near and knowing Lettie already—and ev'rything. You could kind o' praise her when she's doing well, and make a little suggestion now and then that'd start her in the right direction."

Apparently Mr. Wopple's shoulders grew half an inch broader.

"She's sure too much for you, Mrs. Penfield," he admitted, "and as long's you stand up for her through thick and thin, blamed if it don't make me mad. But now't you've come down from your high horse, I don't mind helpin' out what I can."

"Oh, thank you," she acknowledged with feeling.

"S all right," he disclaimed, with a magnanimous wave of his hand. "We're neighbors. All is, I didn't quite understand what a hole you was in."

"But I knew you would," put in Mrs. Penfield gratefully. "If I could only explain it to you right. I can't tell you how much I appreciate it."

With a sunny smile she went back to her own steps. For several minutes she had had an eye on Dick Chase, who had come around the house and was patiently waiting for the colloquy to be over.

"Mrs. Penzie," he began directly. "I'm in the devil of a fix."

"Are you?" Her tone was sympathetic, but there was in it no tincture of surprise. She was accustomed to crises. Life in The Custard Cup produced them in abundance.

"Come right on in," she invited cordially, "and we'll talk it over."

"No, I can't sit down. I'm supposed to be on my job, but I dropped in for a minute, because Lorene wouldn't be around. I didn't want her to hear of it." Dick Chase paused, as if hardly knowing where to begin on the perplexity that had brought him to Number 47. Mrs. Penfield waited in silence.

Presently the young man's gravity was broken by a whimsical smile. "Say, Mrs. Penzie, you're willing I should marry Lorene, aren't you?"

"My dear boy," she smiled back, "you've got my consent and my blessing. I believe you'll make Lorene happy; and if you don't, I'll be 'bout the first feller on your trail."

"You bet I'm going to try to save you that trouble," he said, with returning seriousness. "But the question is, Will I ever get Lorene?"

"My goodness, you don't mean you've quarreled?"

"Thunder, no. That might be stamper. There'd be a chance that we might get out here under the proper tree and make it up. No, it's Mrs. Percy."

"But, surely," she expostulated, "surely you aren't taking a nervous

swish swish so seriously. Don't she in income of her own?"

"Yes, but it's small. Unless she earns something herself, she can't live the way she's been living. Lorene has desisted herself to give her stepmother comfort and laziness—some idea of obligation to her father's memory, I suppose. And so—"

"Good land, Mrs. Percy'll get used to it. It may be a wrench at first, but—"

"Mrs. Penzie, you don't understand. The point is that she's getting Lorene. Working on her sympathy and conscience. Why, at this very minute we're further from being married than we were two months ago—confound it!"

"Tell me about it."

He laughed. "It is a reasonable request. I was rather figuring that you'd take one word and make ten out of it. Well, you know, Mrs. Percy's thought up various silly schemes to make it unpleasant. And now it's her right side. She says she's partially lost the use of it." He broke off, staring gloomily at the wall. Mrs. Penfield watched him, but said nothing.

"You can see what that means," he continued. "Constant care, and she can't afford a nurse or companion. Only a stony-hearted girl would leave her; only a brute would ask the stony-hearted girl to do it, either. Tears; upbidding; general chaos!"

"I didn't know about her—her helplessness," began Mrs. Penfield gently. "Know about it!" He turned and confronted her in swift indignation. "Nobody knew about it till two days ago. She claims she hasn't been feeling well for a long time, but she's endured in silence. We've been trying to have her consult a doctor, but she won't listen to it—says we've no right to annoy an afflicted woman when she can do her own diagnosing."

"But you think there's no doubt—"

insinuated Mrs. Penfield slowly. "I think there's no doubt but that she's making the whole thing up," exploded the young man. "What I thought is to look you over from the standpoint of an outsider and tell us how to act."

She smiled. "I can't tell you on the minute, but I'll see if I can think out anything. I'll go over tomorrow, and mebbe I'll get a line on it. You come around sometime soon, and I'll report."

He held out his hand. "Thank you. You're my mother, Mrs. Penzie, but I'll bet you didn't know it. I never had one that I could remember—till now."

Before she could speak, he was gone.

The next day Mrs. Penfield crowded her work as much as possible, that there might be time in the afternoon for a call on Mrs. Percy.

"Lettie," she called into the back yard, "won't you please pick me 'bout three of these pretty caterpillars off'n the willow tree? Put 'em in this here envelope, and be careful you don't squeeze 'em."

A little later Mrs. Penfield set forth, gingerly concealing under her worn jacket the envelope which contained the three scraps of furry life. She stopped first at Mrs. Sanders'.

"Don't you want to run in to Mrs. Percy's with me?" she inquired. "I understand she ain't well, and seems as if we'd oughter be a mite neighborly."

"Oh, I hadn't heard," cried Mrs. Sanders, with instant solicitude. "Yes, sure I'll go."

The two ladies and the three caterpillars proceeded on their way.

When they had rung, they could hear Mrs. Percy coming along the nar-



Mrs. Percy's Eyslids Drooped Mournfully.

row hall with a jerky, shuffling sound. She opened the door with her left hand.

"Good afternoon," she greeted them laconically. "Come in."

She ushered her guests into the tiny living-room and laboriously removed a litter of magazines from one chair, a piece of sewing from another. An awkward toss with her left hand sent a white crocheted shawl from a third chair to a small table. The three ladies were thus enabled to be seated.

"How are you feeling today?" inquired Mrs. Penfield briskly.

Mrs. Percy shook her head. "I've got my warring," she replied languidly.

"Warning!" echoed Mrs. Penfield. "Good land, what do you mean?"

Mrs. Percy's eyelids drooped mournfully. "I mean the fore-runner of the—the end."

"Oh, nonsense, I don't believe it," cheered Mrs. Penfield. "What's wrong?"

"You couldn't have been using your eyes," returned her hostess, in an aggrieved tone. "Maybe it doesn't show in my face—yet, but it's strange if you didn't notice the way I walked. My right foot drags. I can't scarcely use my right arm at all."

"How long have you had it?"

"Three days. It came on sudden—

one morning."

"I s'pose you've seen a doctor," suggested Mrs. Penfield.

Mrs. Percy sighed heavily. "No need. He couldn't tell me more'n I know. I've just got to wait—and grow steadily more helpless. The hardest part of it is Lorene's leaving. I shall be alone, and I can't do for myself now. Troubles always come together. I've been set against Lorene's marrying from the first. She might wait a while before she plunges; probably she'd marry better if she did."

Mrs. Penfield appeared to be pondering the situation. "I thought you felt that way, Mrs. Percy, but that's a slight trouble compared with your sickness, ain't it?"

"Yes, of course, but—"

"I'll just bet," exclaimed Mrs. Penfield with conviction, "that if you could use both your arms and legs all right, you'd feel that was the main thing. What Lorene done would be so small a point you wouldn't scarcely care which way it went, would you?"

Mrs. Percy opened her mouth; closed it again.

Mrs. Penfield's brown eyes grew wide in a state of innocent surprise.

"Why, land, you don't mean to tell me—for goodness sakes, Mrs. Percy, if your body was all right again, wouldn't you be so thankful that you'd be more'n willing Lorene should leave you for a life of her own?"

A slight flush colored her hostess' heavy cheeks. "Why, yes, of course," she acknowledged stiffly. "I should feel very different in that case."

Mrs. Penfield nodded condolingly. "Yes, I guess you would. Health's the main thing. Little troubles don't seem so bigger'n specks when a big trouble comes 'long to measure 'em by."

Mrs. Percy grabbed this statement with vehemence. "I don't know much about little troubles, myself. I've had big ones, one right after another. I haven't never been reconciled to Mr. Percy's going. Doesn't seem right for a man to die because he was brave, and he was shot while making an arrest. It was reckless, the chance he took. It wouldn't seem so hard if he'd just been sick and died of it."

"Oh, you'd have felt it just as much," began Mrs. Sanders. "Yes," echoed Mrs. Penfield; "and as 'tis, you've got something to be proud of. I've always thought I'd rather mourn for a man that was brave than cook for a man that's a coward."

Mrs. Percy, repudiating this consolation, tossed her head in some offense. "I didn't mean it would have been easy in any event. The thing, after all, that makes me miserable is my broken life. When you've had ten years of married happiness, you don't get reconciled to giving it up."

Mrs. Penfield gazed at her dreamily. "No, not reconciled! Being resigned to ev'rything is a pretty good sign of moral prostration. But there's one thing you got to remember: if you had ten years of happy married life, you had exactly ten years more than a lot of women have, and you'd oughter be thankful for it, 'long with your mourning."

Mrs. Percy's lips came together with a snap. An uncomfortable silence spread over the room, pressing conversation out of existence. Mrs. Penfield, fearing that she had been too outspoken, sprang up briskly, with the thought of breaking the tension.

"You musn't imagine I'm unsympathetic, 'cause underneath I been studying on how we could help you. I can see one thing we'd better do—that is, look out that you don't take cold, entertaining us in a room that don't get any sun. Here, let me put this little shawl 'round your shoulders. You musn't take any chances, you know."

Without waiting for assent, she snatched the crocheted shawl from the table, and proffered it to her hostess. And Mrs. Percy, the spoiled, the waited-on, was instantly mollified. She accepted the service with murmured gratitude.

No sooner had Mrs. Penfield resumed her seat, however, than it was Mrs. Percy who did the springing. She came to her feet with a ponderous agility very different from her previous manner.

"Ugh! Ugh! The nasty thing!" she screamed. "Oh! Oh! Take it off! Oh! There's two of it! Take it—"

Mrs. Sanders plunged to the rescue. With a careless gesture, Mrs. Penfield swung in ahead of her. "I'll do it," she announced in a tone of resignation with which one takes the initiative in a perilous enterprise.

"Help me!" cried Mrs. Percy. "They stick. Take the shawl!"

With her left hand she was trying to disengage from the fuzzy shawl first one and then the other of two small caterpillars.

"Well, I declare to goodness!" exclaimed Mrs. Penfield safely, after hands were busy with the shawl, but in some way, not explained, it had become entangled in the buttons of

the green sweater, and it was not easily freed. Mrs. Percy's agitation steadily grew.

"They must have come in the window. I can't stand the nasty little things. Oh—oh, take it off. Tear it—anything! Oh—oh, good heavens, look, look!"

Her shaking finger pointed at Mrs. Penfield herself, and two curious things at once became evident. One was that Mrs. Percy was using her right hand; the other, that an active caterpillar was excursions on the front of Mrs. Penfield's dress.

"Well, did you ever!" interjected Mrs. Penfield.

But at this point Mrs. Percy decided that caterpillars were after her; and her nerves gave way. With a shriek, she wrenched and tore at the shawl, using both hands indiscriminately. Fairly beside herself, she stormed about the room, forgetful of feet that dragged, of legs that refused to be supple. She shivered and screamed and fought the air with nervous lashing of both arms. Her dark eyes shot mad glances in every direction, searching for more caterpillars.

"I know what 'tis," she howled. "It's a pest. We're going to be overrun. They'll come in the doors and windows. And I hate the crawling things. Oh, what shall we do? What shall we—"

Suddenly she stopped. Her arms dropped. She had become conscious of the interested, significant gaze of her guests—a gaze that reminded her of many things.

"Ugh!" she cried. "Ain't this awful! I'll suffer for it later!"

Mrs. Sanders clasped her hands fervently. "Oh, I'm so glad it happened. There ain't no more caterpillars here; I've looked. And they—they've brought you out of it."

Mrs. Percy gasped. "It was—it was only a superhuman—"

"No, Mrs. Percy," broke in Mrs. Penfield brightly. "I been watching how you did it, and it was just as natural as could be. You'll find it'll be permanent—mark my words. It's plain as can be that the whole trouble was nerves getting wound up, on account of worrying, mebbe; and they've unwound now. Any doctor'd tell you that you've limbered up to stay. Why, don't you b'lieve it? Well, then, I'll tell you what: we'll have a doctor in to tell you himself. We ain't going to have you fretting over something that don't really all you."

Mrs. Percy looked at her helplessly, with a smoldering fire in her black eyes. "Much you know about it. I expect it'll come back—"

"No, it won't," said Mrs. Penfield firmly. "If it does, we'll have the doctor, 'cause The Custard Cup ain't going to see you suffer 'bout helping you out. We're your friends."

"Oh—oh, yes, I—"

A bright look flashed across Mrs. Penfield's face. "Oh, won't Lorene be happy? I can't wait to tell her. And now there ain't nothing standing in her way. Doesn't it seem like a providence that you said you wouldn't object any more if—"

"I—I didn't say—" interposed Mrs. Percy hotly.

"Mrs. Sanders' eyes were very wide. "Oh, yes, you did, Mrs. Percy. I heard you."

Mrs. Penfield extended her hand with a genial smile. "I am so truly glad," she said in a low, deep voice, "so glad that it wasn't anything serious. Folks are likely to think the worst, but you musn't do it again. Come over and see us both real soon. It'll do you good to get out, and we'll both be awful glad to see you."

TO BE CONTINUED



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