

The Custard Cup

by
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roughly awake again. The moon was full; the sky was intensely blue except where gulls of white cloud were laid across it; the back yard was filled with soft radiance that transformed the ugly clothes-poles into slender shafts of light.

"What a beautiful world it is!" she said to herself. "And we all go so fast that we don't have time to look at it the way it is. I wonder why we get fretted up over a lot of pesky details that we forget all about in a week, when the universe is calm and happy. Looks like we ain't in harmony with it. I wish I had time—No, I don't. What I wish is that I can stay awake and sew an overcoat."

Resolutely she went back to her chair and fitted sections of the coat together.

Footsteps sounded on the board walk. There was a quick knock. The door opened.

"Oh, I knew something would happen. I just knew it would. And it has. Oh—oh!"

Mrs. Penfield sprang to her feet. The voice was familiar, but she would hardly have recognized, without this evidence, the figure that confronted her.

"Lorene!" she gasped.

"Look at me!" cried the girl. Her tragic tone emphasized her ludicrous appearance. Her face and hands were covered with fine soot, in flecks, in streaks; her fair hair was curiously darkened, as if a thin black veil had been drawn over it; her light blue house dress looked greasy and soiled.

"Why, my dear, I can see you've had a little accident," said Mrs. Penfield briskly, "but 'twon't take long to get you washed up again. I'll help you. Oil heater, I s'pose."

The girl nodded. "My—Mrs. Percy lighted it and put it in my room. I was going to pack. She said I'd take cold if the room wasn't warmed. And—and when I went in a few minutes later, I couldn't see. The air was full of black soot—everywhere—clouds of it. Oh, dear; oh, dear, what can I do?"

"Why, Lorene, I'll help. We—"

"Mrs. Penzie," shrieked the girl, wringing her hands in distress, "you don't understand. Everything is ruined."

"Ev'rything?"

"Yes, ev'rything. All my clothes! I had them all laid out, ready to pack—on the bed, the chairs. The clothes-dresser was open. They're all black, sticky, sp-oiled!" She threw herself on the wash bench and broke into wild sobbing. "Why, by the time I'd been in there two minutes—look at me!"

"Oh, my dear," begged Mrs. Penfield, "don't cry. We've got to think of something."

"We can't," wailed the girl. "There isn't anything to be begin on. They were all there—ev'rything I own in the world, ev'rything I've been saving for all these mo-mo-nths." She lifted her head and looked at Mrs. Penfield with streaming eyes. "Yes, I suppose they can be cleaned, but there isn't time before tomorrow. There isn't ti-ti-time." Her voice broke. "Dick has his leave of absence and the tickets and all the de-details arranged. We can't put it off and—and we can't—I can't be m-m-married like this, can I?" She threw out her arms in a gesture of helplessness.

Mrs. Penfield could not restrain a smile as she gazed at the forlorn bride-elect, huddled on the wash-bench, too abject to realize her own appearance at the moment or to care about it compared with the greater calamity at home.

"What can I do, Mrs. Penzie? I can't ask Dick to take me like this."

"No, dear, you aren't going to," Mrs. Penfield put her hands on the girl's shoulders and gave her a gentle shake that was half reproof and half caress. "Grab your nerve, Lorene, and we'll work a way out of this. So long as there ain't nothing more vital in the path than soot and cinders, I predict you're going to be married tomorrow noon, as scheduled—and all fresh and dainty, too. You left your windows open, didn't you?"

"Oh, yes, but—"

"Then the air must be clear by this time. I'll turn out the lamp, and we'll go right over and see how things look."

Things looked exactly as Lorene had represented. The swirling soot had settled—and very thoroughly, too. The care and forethought with which Lorene had gathered together all her possessions to be packed as swiftly as possible, had greatly heightened the disaster. Part of her outfit had been assembled for her trip; the rest was to have been sent to her new home. Two trunks stood open; the trays, half packed, had been lifted out and had suffered complete eclipses. Not even the bureau drawers were closed as usual.

Mrs. Penfield went briskly around the room, collecting washable articles in a big clothes-bag. From the clothes-dresser Lorene brought out the form on which hung the beautiful suit in which she was to have been married. An hour before, it had been a delicate brown, with a narrow white vest. But even its cover had been taken off and folded. As Lorene looked at the sorry garment, her eyes filled again, her shoulders shook.

"Don't you care!" said Mrs. Penfield cheerfully. "We'll send it to the cleaner's the first thing in the morning, and like as not they'll cut their twenty-four-hour service to twelve. Then I'll send it to you by express. Now what do you think you'd better wear tomorrow? This white georgette is lovely, but you sure couldn't travel in it. My idea would be this." She lifted a gown of gray-blue silk figured in a misty pattern.

Lorene shook her head. "It isn't wash silk."

"I can wash it," affirmed Mrs. Penfield stoutly. "I can tell by the feel-ing of it."

The door opened a crack. The heavy face of Mrs. Percy appeared, followed by the lady herself as she perceived that the air was now free of its sooty burden.

"Ain't it a mess!" she cried, in fastidious disgust. "Good heavens, Lorene, I don't see what you were thinking of not to keep an eye out. You knew I'd lighted the heater. You've certainly dished your own plans now—and you did it yourself, too. You can't say that I—"

"It's a beautiful evening, ain't it, Mrs. Percy?" greeted Mrs. Penfield

generally. "Did you notice the moon? It's 'bout the grandest we ever get."

Mrs. Percy's neck stiffened. She tossed her head in offended dignity. "I guess you don't need me if you're feeling so pert," she snapped. The door closed with decisive vehemence.

"I was wondering about a coat," remarked Mrs. Penfield quietly, as if her thoughts had never strayed from this subject. "If I only—if I had—but maybe you could—"

"I can borrow a coat. And oh, I wonder— Yes, see! My hat was in its box and it's all right." Lorene held up a small brown traveling hat.

"That's fine. My, but you're a lucky girl, Lorene. Now you take part of these things and we'll go back and get to work."

But scarcely had they reached Number 47 when Mrs. Penfield reversed her orders. "Ain't no need for you to stay, Lorene. Washing is a simple thing for me, you know, and I'll enjoy doing something toward the occasion. Besides, we might disturb the children if you stayed. You run along. You've got a lot of trinkets to scrub up and your hair to wash. I'll put these white things a-soak and squeeze 'em out. They can be ironed later."

Lorene hesitated. "I hate to have you, but—if I set the alarm and come over real early, you'll leave the ironing for me, won't you? And it wouldn't disturb you?"

"Dear child, you can't disturb me. Come over as early as you like."

Lorene kissed her gratefully and went.

Mrs. Penfield started up the fire and strung the kitchen with many lines of heavy twine. Contrary to her careless protestations, the task ahead of her was by no means simple. Diversity was its keynote. Some of the things required hot water, some cold, some lukewarm; some demanded soap, some could not survive it. Lace had to be ripped out and cleansed separately. The blue silk was put through water that had been made milky by one of Mrs. Penfield's washing bags, devices of her own for the laundering of delicate colored fabrics. The two tubs were supplemented by pans and basins. Rinsing, bluing, starching, all took time. Even the drying was a matter for constant supervision, constant rearrangement, owing to the uneven heat in the room.

When it came to the ironing, Mrs. Penfield found the electric too far from the prescribed position of her board; but by putting the lamp on top of the cupboard, she was able to get sufficient light to go on with her work.

Day was breaking when Lorene came around the house. Seeing the light, she went in softly; then stopped short in amazement. The kitchen was hung with dainty garments, smoothly ironed, each on a hanger formed by a rolled newspaper and suspended by a string. Her eyes fell on three elaborate white blouses that she had not realized Mrs. Penfield had taken. The white georgette gown was like new, every one of its many plaits pressed crisp and flat; the lace that outlined the square neck was fresh and futed. The blue silk showed no slightest trace of the evening's experience.

Mrs. Penfield was sitting on the edge of a stool, her body crumpled forward, her cheek resting on the ironing-board, her holder in her out-flung hand. She was asleep.

"And I let her do it," breathed the girl in contrition.

Mrs. Penfield roused, in the midst of her weariness sensing the presence of another person. There were tired shadows under her eyes, but she smiled brightly.

"I guess I'm all through, Lorene. I was just reading a minute."

Lorene sprang forward and threw her arms around Mrs. Penfield's neck. She kissed the tired cheeks.

Mrs. Penfield held her close. Fleeting pictures jerked through her brain—of her own life, starting in promise like Lorene's, breaking in despair as she hoped Lorene's never would.

"Dear little girl, may you be happy—always," she whispered.

CHAPTER XIV

Not a Friend to Uncle Jerry.

"What's the idea, Carl?" inquired Uncle Jerry, coming into the kitchen. "Crink says you won't tell 'em how to make a hen-coop or hen-house, or whatever it is, and he's Lettice are getting their brains all snarled up, trying to study it out."

"'Twon't hurt 'em a mite," declared Mrs. Penfield serenely, as she poured cold water over the starch and crushed out the lumps against the bottom of the big pan. "What I aim to do, Uncle Jerry, is to teach them children to think. How are they ever going to get along when they grow up if they haven't learned to work out their own problems?"

Uncle Jerry turned toward the sink to wash his hands. "They'll be smarter when they grow up."

"Not if they don't have some mental exercise along the way," retorted Mrs. Penfield mildly. "I figger that a lot of parents practically embalm their children's brains by doing all the thinking for the family. That's one mistake I don't intend to make."

Uncle Jerry reached for the soap. "It's all the same to me," he grinned. "Bonnie Geraldine's the one that's got the kick."

"Nonsense! I'll risk Bonnie Geraldine. Crink knows as much about boards and nails as I do, and if he and Lettice can't study up some kind of shelter for one hen, I'll be 'shamed of 'em. It may take 'em a few days, but they'll be days well put in."

She set the pan on the stove and poured in boiling water, stirring briskly as she talked.

Uncle Jerry wiped his hands thoughtfully. "I wasn't criticizing, Carl. Great Scott, if you've got the courage to take in kids that you might leave running loose in the world, you'd oughter have the privilege of managing 'em any way you darn please. All is, I wasn't going to hand out any hints if 'twas contrary to rules, so I was asking."

"You're a dear," acknowledged Mrs. Penfield, smiling. "I am dead set on this one point, 'cause I've been bored half to death by so many folks that couldn't think an original thought if it'd bring 'em a million dollars. I tell you what, Uncle Jerry, there's more folks'n there ought to be whose minds ain't nothing but cold-storage plants. 'Course you don't always know where the material came from—and sometimes you can trace it easy. I knew a woman once who never said any-thing 'cept what her minister'd handed out to her. She was a sort of charity case, but I'll bet she wasn't the only one in the congregation. Monday and Tuesday she was real int'rusting; Wednesday she was just so-so; Thursday she was on the decline; and by Friday she'd run down entirely. Friday and Saturday she was a pretty fair listener." Mrs. Penfield laughed.

"Blessed if I didn't always call on that woman long the first of the week sometime."

"You're mighty encouraging to a feller that's had a hit-or-miss life, Carl. I'd always wished somebody'd worked out a few things for me. Oh, by the way," he added, as he smoothed his hair before the small mirror that hung by the cupboard, "I ordered a sack of sweet potatoes this morning. They'll come sometime today. I got 'em turrible cheap, 'cause they're whales—too big for fancy trade. But I thought maybe you could use 'em."

"Oh, just grand," cried Mrs. Penfield. "I'd as soon have outside potatoes as any other kind, and they're what we need most. You be sure to come 'round to supper tonight, Uncle Jerry. We'll have sweet potatoes with salt on 'em, and a cauliflower that Crink brought yesterday. It'll be a grand spread."

"Yes," acknowledged Jerry Winston gravely, "I'll stake my life you'll make them youngsters b'lieve it's Thanksgiving, but—"

"Plenty to eat is always Thanksgiving," she interrupted placidly. "We're awful lucky to be well nourished all the time."

Jerry Winston said nothing. He took up his hat and whirled it absently round and round. The habitual twinkle had died out of his eyes, leaving them gloomy. During several moments of silence he watched Mrs. Penfield sprinkling clothes and rolling them into tight compass with a final slap from her palm to encourage capillarity.

Finally he roused and opened the kitchen door. "I wish I had a settled income," he muttered. He jammed on his hat and went out.

"Poor man, I wish he had!" thought Mrs. Penfield. "It's hard on him to cut loose and not get tied to something again. Land, I got to be careful not to feel hurt 'cause he can't talk it over with his own niece; but trying to force a feller's confidence is 'bout like prying a cocoon open with a knife. I ain't going to care; I'm going to expect—and I'm an awful good expecter. Besides, I got a heap of wonderful things to think about."

It was true that several high points had recently been reached by the Penfields. For one thing, Crink had been promoted in the grocery business, being paid now in a small amount of cold cash for his two-hour service in the late afternoon. He was also still on the inside ring in regard to bar-

gains in vegetables, groceries and meat bones, and continued to bring in supplies that represented a sharp saving to the family. Crink had visions of being able to support the household before many years, and already he was swinging in and out of The Custard Cup with an engaging air of haste and responsibility.

Lettice also had distinguished herself—by a week of flawless behavior. Whether it was because of greater effort or because of fewer alluring temptations, no one knew; neither was anyone so unfeeling as to inquire. The glory of the achievement threw the lower rungs of the ladder into kindly shadow. At last Lettice had been arrayed in the pink sweater and the white hat of Turkish beaver and had gone to church. And again no one sought diligently for the motive—lest it might be found. Many motives which result in creditable actions will undergo instant disintegration if they are exposed to the light, and no risk was run by any Penfield.

It is not to be supposed that Lettice, having won her victory, was inclined to underrate its value. For weeks the pink-and-white outfit had been the pinnacle of her hopes and the bitterest element in her failures; but when it was hers by honest record, she carried off the situation with great non-chalance. Her black eyes glowed with deep fire; her face was irradiated; but her manner was set in the last notch of jauntness.

"Jiminy!" she had cried, upon her return from church. "These togs sure beat the world for class. I didn't see anybody dressed niftier, and I got the sweetest feelings inside me. Seems like there ain't nothing I couldn't do if I had the clo'es for it."

Mrs. Penfield smiled at this naive confession of unchanging femininity. "Now that you've begun, I hope you'll keep right on wearing that sweater ev'ry Sunday. It was easy, after all, wasn't it?"

"Oh, dead easy!" confirmed Lettice, with a careless gesture that repudiated weary weeks of abortive endeavor. "There ain't nothing to this behaving stunt 'cept not getting riled."

"Lettice," sighed Mrs. Penfield, "what you got to learn is to behave in spite of getting riled."

"O Lord!" cried the child, rolling her eyes in dismay. "I'd ruther dodge. And it works out just the same."

"You couldn't dodge all the time, Lettice; but if you want to try it for a spell, there ain't no objection. Now that you can wear your good clo'es, you got to go to Sunday school with Crink and Thad reg'lar. It'll be turrible good for you."

Of these more cheerful phases of two immediate problems—food supply and Lettice's training—Mrs. Penfield was thinking as she finished her sprinkling and starching and changed her dress. It was the first of December. She had been collecting the rents and had to make the deposit before the bank should close. Her list was complete except for the Bosleys. While she was debating whether she would call for their rent or let it go till they thought of it, as they surely would in a day or two, Gussie Bosley came in.

"Here's the rent," she said briefly. "I came near forgetting it again."

She was wearing a black satin gown, expensively simple. Around her



The Heavy Face of Mrs. Percy Appeared.



Around Her Neck Was a Long Chain of Wrought Gold.

neck was a long chain of wrought gold, set with jade. Mrs. Penfield threw her a second puzzled glance, finding it difficult to realize that this ultra young woman belonged in the exceedingly humble Custard Cup.

Gussie, catching the glance, preened herself slyly. "Do you like it?"

"Yes, it's very smart."

"Glad you think so. It's a simple little dress. I picked it up in San Francisco the other day."

"Well, if I found 'em lying around, I'd keep on picking," smiled Mrs. Penfield generally.

"It does for common, but what I'm dead gone on is this chain. Ain't it the sweetest thing you ever glimmered? A Chink friend of Frank's sent it to me."

"I don't wonder you're pleased. The Chinese are awful generous making gifts if they like folks, ain't they?"

A slight flush came superfluously into Mrs. Bosley's cheeks. "Ye—yes, ain't they?"

door. Mrs. Penfield excused herself. "It was the delivery man," she explained when she returned. "Uncle Jerry ordered a sack of sweet potatoes for me this morning. Didn't ask nor nothing! He is the most thoughtful man!"

A hard look came into Gussie Bosley's eyes. "Lucky you're so well satisfied," she snapped.

Mrs. Penfield looked at her in astonishment. It had not once occurred to her that Frank Bosley's wife might not be in sympathy with his friendship for Uncle Jerry. Evidently she and Gussie were in agreement about its undesirability, but Gussie's attitude suggested a personal criticism which was most unwelcome.

"I conclude you don't like him," she said vaguely.

Gussie shrugged. "I don't think anything about him unless I have to, but I shouldn't have said it if you hadn't dragged him into the talk. 'Tain't your fault, anyhow."

She turned to go. "Oh, Mrs. Penfield, do you s'pose the landlord would put an extra lock on the back door?"

"I don't s'pose he would. Ain't any back door got anything but the reg'lar lock and bolt. He couldn't put on an extra one 'thout getting asked for eleven more, likely."

"My heavens, this is a cheap hole. I'll be glad when we get out of it. Wouldn't have caught me staying here all this time if I'd had my way."

She flooned out of the door.

Mrs. Penfield stood as Gussie had left her, lost in thought. "I guess I'm stupid," she reflected. "I can't get a line on those Bosleys, except they don't agree. That seems to be free information for ev'rybody. But if this is the reception Uncle Jerry gets at their house, why doesn't he quit going?"

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