

The Custard Cup

Florence Bingham Livingston

CHAPTER XV

Lettie Attempts Hospitality.

"Oh, I found the most wonderful bargain," announced Mrs. Penfield, as she put down her old suitcase on the kitchen table and unbuckled the straps. "Look here, Uncle Jerry. It's bean splits."

"They look it!" laughed the big man, as he inspected the beans, which were halved or otherwise disintegrated.

"Yes, it was easy to name 'em," she agreed. "Point is, they don't cost but half as much as the whole ones, and where's the difference in nourishment? The whole bean's there, only not in one place. And I know a way to cook 'em into beans so't the children don't taste it, and I put in a nice dash of Indian meal, and land, they don't need nothing more to a sitting. They get as nourished as they can stand. You know a lot of folks are overfed."

"Round here?" inquired Uncle Jerry, with lazy ambiguity.

She faced him with a flush on her cheeks. "Uncle Jerry, you don't mean that the reason you don't—don't take meals with us oftener is—is—"

"Good Lord, no, Car'line," he exploded in amazement. "Ain't anything would suit me better'n to eat with you all the time, but the work I'm trying out is—it means irregular hours. That's all honest. Why, you don't s'pose I'd be such a blame-fool as to criticize— All is, it kind o' gets me to think what a family you came out of and the bringing up—"

She lifted her hand quickly in a gesture that brushed the past out of existence. "Don't you know that's why I can live this way and be happy doing it? I've come to see that the more possessions you can eliminate, the better you can breathe and the more time you got for other folks—and that's the main concern, ain't it?"

"I'll be running along," said Uncle Jerry, with a whimsical smile. "Time I get back you'll have yourself argued out of food and furniture, I expect."

"No, I won't," she laughed. "I'll make a stand for a certain amount of both, but I'm going to remember that enough is all I want. There's Perennial Prue," she added softly, as she caught a glimpse through the open front door. "Too bad you're going off. You might—"

"Well, now, I—I don't have to go straight away," admitted Uncle Jerry slowly.

Mrs. Penfield gave him a sly glance, but made no comment. It was beginning to dawn upon her that Uncle Jerry admired Prudence Hapgood—that he regarded her as a superior being, worlds removed from the sort of existence which he had known. Before her he was sometimes shy, always awkward, always self-conscious—he, the nonchalant, self-possessed Jerry Winston—and yet he stayed by! Mrs. Penfield wondered.

Certainly Prudence was different from anyone else in The Custard Cup. She was like a quiet little rowboat that had strayed from its moorings and had floated into a group of variegated craft. Always gentle and friendly, she yet had the slightly aloof manner of one whose thoughts are turned often inward. So far from being modified by her surroundings, she had brought her own world into them and kept it intact. Her carefully preserved silk gown; the fine old lace around the neck and edging the sleeves; her sweetly sad pose; the calm expression of her eyes—these set her apart from her neighbors, intangibly but undeniably.

She had brought a bit of crocheting; Mrs. Penfield got out her sewing; Jerry Winston nervously proffered some reminiscences of the Oregon woods—in the interests of pillow tops; Lettie was quietly cutting pictures out of an old Weatherstone magazine. Conditions were ideal for a congenial confab—when like a bolt out of the blue, word came that Mrs.

Epslow's baby had been taken ill. Would Mrs. Penfield come at once? Of course she would.

"You entertain Miss Hapgood," she reminded her household, with a parting wave of her hand. "I'll come back as soon's I can."

No one knew upon whom the mantle of hospitality had fallen. Uncle Jerry became more communicative about trees and out-of-doors, strangely easier now that his niece was gone. Lettie, however, understood that the honors were hers. When Penzie was away, surely she was the next hostess in line. She put aside her pictures and directed her mental energy to the question of hospitality.

"Talking ain't much good," she said to herself, watching Uncle Jerry, who was expatiating on the value of Oregon pine. "We'd oughter feed her. Folks don't think they've had a good time to your house 'less they've et." This decision was cemented by the fact that Miss Hapgood had treated Crink and Lettie to cake a few days before. "I gotta feed her some'n. I just gotta." She sprang to her feet and stole into the kitchen.

She stood for some time, thinking. Without looking, she knew there were no treats available in the cupboard; neither was it permissible to take self-help liberties between meals. She would have to begin at the beginning.

Crink was on the back steps, whitening pieces of wood which would some time, with a slight infusion of imagination, be put together as a steamboat. Lettie approached him with utmost ingratitude.

"Got any money, Crink?" she inquired gently.

"Well—or—why you wanter know?" He looked up in shrewd caution. The fact was that he had money; and although individuals have had more, none ever felt greater responsibility.

Since he had been paid in cash by Mr. Drake, Mrs. Penfield had presented him with an old purse and had allowed him to carry in it a sum never exceeding twenty cents, usually in as small change as provided by the United States treasury. The very loooset of this loose change he could spend without supervision up to and including ten cents a week; larger investments were subject to decision in conference. Crink's pride had reached dangerous proportions. He was even glad that the purse was old; it looked more as though his financial experience reached gratefully into the past. Moreover, by keeping the inside pocket of the purse stuffed with chips from the kitchen woodpile, he was able to give the impression of abundant resources beyond the amount which he chose to spend at the moment.

"Let me have some money, Crink," Lettie begged. "I need it awful, and I know you're 'most a rich man."

He was flattered, but not wholly overcome. "What do you want it for?" She told him. "And we've gotta be hospitable, Crink. Penzie said to be, and it's a good chance to make her happy."

After considerable persuasion, Crink's will became enfeebled, and he handed over two cents, to match the two which Lettie had already admitted she possessed.

"Glory be!" triumphed Lettie. "Crink, you're all to the good. Now



"Glory Be!" Triumphed Lettie.

you just run down to the store and get four cents' worth of their best popping corn, and I'll—"

Crink took up his knife again. "Aw! Nothing doing, Lettie. What do you take me for?" he scoffed. "Me, buying four cents' worth of stuff to Mr. Drake's! I couldn't hold up my head. No man ever passes out less'n a nickel."

"All right, smarty. Put up another penny, and you'll have the nickel that's eating you."

"Can't. Them two cents are the end for the week."

"It's the end of the week, too," flared Lettie. "Fork over a penny on next week. It'll do your soul good. This whole thing's going to please Penzie better'n anything."

Crink demurred. Lettie insisted. Crink capitulated.

"Now you're talking, Crink. And hurry—hurry—hurry!"

She was consumed with impatience. She was afraid that the guest might depart before the refreshments would be ready. She stuck her head through the door into the living-room.

"Now take guinea pigs, for in-

stance," Uncle Jerry was saying, with an easy gesture. "Guinea pigs would be a pretty healthy lot if the medical schools would let 'em alone. The whole point is—"

"How're you getting on?" inquired Lettie brightly.

This remark was intended to be encouraging, but it had a rather paralyzing effect upon conversation, which had been in full swing. Miss Hapgood dipped her hook into her work with unusual jerkiness. Uncle Jerry glared—glared as if he didn't appreciate hospitality at all.

"Run 'long, Lettie," he said briefly. "I got a story to finish."

Feeling cuffed, Lettie went back into the kitchen. But at least there was no danger of immediate departure, since a story was in progress. She got out the popper, a large dish, the salt. Crink did not come. She grew more and more impatient. Presently she softly opened the door into the living-room again and peeked in with great caution.

Miss Hapgood wasn't crocheting now. Her work had fallen in her lap. She was looking at Uncle Jerry with an expression of absorbed interest, and there was a lovely shell pink in her cheeks. Lettie had never seen her look like that. Uncle Jerry was talking, but Lettie paid no attention. She was thinking about Miss Hapgood.

She edged into the room. "Are you having a good time?" she began conversationally.

Perennial Prue jumped, fairly clutched at her work. Uncle Jerry frowned heavily.

Lettie, clinging to the role of hostess, smiled genially. "You look awful intrusted in each other. I guess you—"

"Lettie, didn't I tell you—"

It was Uncle Jerry's voice—a severe voice, too, but Lettie scarcely listened. She stepped in front of Prudence.

"Miss Hapgood," she said confidentially, "ain't it a funny thing, the way your cheeks get all colored up when you talk to Uncle Jerry? Penzie's don't. Sometimes she talks to him a long time, and she don't ever—"

"Oh," gasped Prudence in pitiable confusion. "It's only because—because he was telling about—" Her delicate hands fluttered in distress.

"Shaw! Don't get so nervous," advised Lettie briskly. "Ain't nothing to make you nervous. Just make yourself to home."

She was very sure of the correctness of this phrase. It being much thought of in The Custard Cup, and she was therefore hugely astonished when she felt a firm hand on her shoulder, a hand with compelling force that switched her about and marched her toward the kitchen.

"To think of you, talking to a lady that way!" spluttered Uncle Jerry. "You'd better stay in the kitchen till you learn manners."

"My landy goodness!" gasped Lettie, nursing her thin shoulder and gazing wrathfully at the closed door into the living-room. "I'd like to know what made him so cross. And me being extra pleasant, too! Well, by jiminy!" she snapped. "I'll bet I can feed a lady if he don't think I can talk to one."

Crink came in with the corn, and Lettie prodded the fire till the top of the stove was hot. Gradually she forgot her rebuff in watching the corn in the popper.

"Fll Caesar," she remarked, casting a reflective eye on the small, eager dog, who was gazing at her with vibrating hope, "you may's well get out. I don't scarcely b'lieve you'll get a bit of this here corn—less you divide the old maids with Bonnie Geraldine. Crink, take this popper and I'll bet Penzie'd like to have us use them little glass dishes that come with the cowpans. It's gotta be some'n small, 'cause land knows there won't no feller get many kernels."

She passed the popper to Crink and dragged a stool in front of the apple-box cupboard beside the stove. The glass dishes, being very choice, were in one of the upper boxes, behind the spices. Lettie began moving the spice boxes to another shelf.

"Oh—oh!" she shrieked. "I dropped one. Pick it up, quick! Oh! Quick!" But neither child could be quicker than the spice box had been. It had fallen on the stove. When it struck, the cover flew off. A liberal quantity of cayenne pepper sprend over the hot stove, and instantly a spiral of black smoke arose, like diabolic incense. An acrid odor filled the kitchen; a stinging permeation assailed nostrils and throats.

"Oh, ain't that the darndest— Oh! Murder! Help! Help! Come! Come along! Quick! Oh!"

Fll Caesar coughed madly, leaped into the air; then dashed into the open. Crink dropped the popper, spilling the precious corn over the stove and floor. Coughing and sneezing, he and Lettie made frantic dashes at the stove with spoons and shovels, trying to remove the pepper, but their efforts only spread it more thoroughly. With every breath they drew in biting fire.

Uncle Jerry and Prudence, frightened by the uproar, burst into the kitchen, and with lightning response to the all-pervading stimulus, joined in the general sneezing. At the same moment Mrs. Penfield came flying through the house and swooped down upon her distracted family with energetic command.

"Get out of the house, everybody," she cried.

Jerry Winston sprang forward and transferred the hot griddles to the end of the stove. Mrs. Penfield snatched a towel, wet it under the faucet, and held it to her nose while she despatched the fire and opened the windows.

The tortured family and the tortured guest fled to the back yard, fighting the red-hot misery that clung in their throats, breathing in great breaths of the cool air that soothed and inflamed at the same time.

"O Penzie," wailed Lettie, dancing about in agony, "I—honest to goodness, I was—was trying to entertain—Miss Hap—" She sneezed.

"It's—it's all right," choked the guest. "I was never more—more—cheeze!"

Uncle Jerry coughed violently. "It's a blooming—schweeze!"

"Honest, Penzie," protested Lettie, with streaming eyes, "I was trying to—please you. It—it was an accident."

Mrs. Penfield shook her head sadly. "I never saw anything like the way you're always around if there's an accident ready to happen. I wish I knew how to keep you out of the way of 'em."

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