

THE HARSH TREATMENT OF CICERO TRUBY

(Written for THE OUTLOOK.)

The Deweys were too old to bear transplanting. Their roots had clung so long to the sterile New England hillside which had been their home that they could not bear the wrench of removal. When it seemed as if they could not carry on their feeble and ineffectual existence any longer in the bleak northern climate, they came south and settled at Pixley. But the change was a fatal mistake, they began to wither and fade away, and now both were buried out of sight in what had been alien soil to them.

They had lived only a year in Pixley—had just built an odd little box of a house and got nicely settled down in it when they were summoned to a more spacious dwelling. Though they were pious folk and often sang "Earth is a desert drear; Heaven is my home," they did not pass away without poignant regret for the earthly abiding place.

"It is so handy," sighed Mrs. Dewey. "It does seem to me as if even a heavenly mansion wouldn't be as convenient and easy to do work in unless I had *him* to make the cubbuds an' dressers, an' put 'em right where they'd be handiest. But then I s'pose there won't be any work to do there, so 'twont make any difference," she ended wearily.

The pronoun stood for Mr. Dewey, and his wife always used this term in speaking of him. He had been a sailor in his youth—long enough to impart a slight salty flavor to his whole after life, and his admiration of ships and all that belongs to them had never faltered. It had been the delight of his heart to fit up the interior of the new house with lockers such as he was accustomed to on shipboard, and other wonderful places for stowing away things. The kitchen was just long enough to contain the stove and a small table, with space between in which a very thin and practiced person could move to and fro without much danger of abrasion. Around the sides of this room were the lockers, small and great, a big one for wood, a smaller one for kindlings, and one still smaller, tin-lined, for matches. There was a broad, shallow one for dishtowels, and a deep, narrow one for cooking knives and forks. These were as near the stove as they could be placed, while convenient to the cooking table were many others, for flour, meal, sugar, coffee, and what not.

Only one window let the daylight into this absurd cuddy, and unfortunately that did not look toward the garden, where "he" potted about with rake and hoe, or toward the village street, along which he was accustomed to go several times each day, on little errands. Mrs. Dewey could not endure to be alone in her snug kitchen through the long morning, without a glimpse of "his" broad back, as he bent over his work, or trudged away to Pixley's one store. For overcoming this difficulty a happy expedient occurred to her mind and after being made clear to his slower masculine intellect, was duly wrought out. A hole was cut in the wall, and into it was fitted a piece of window-glass about the size of a pair of spectacles. Out through it the little gray eyes of Mrs. Dewey gazed upon the squat figure of her lord and the longing of her heart was satisfied.

But, though Mr. Dewey occupied so

much of the landscape that it presented few other objects of interest to her, he did not by any means fill the field of her mental vision. She had aesthetic tastes which found expression in various ways. One was an attempt to raise plants which always proved abortive. She filled the house and littered the piazza with flower pots and tin cans which never had anything more cheerful than earth in them, or at best, a sickly stalk or two, eaten up by bugs, and in the agonies of dissolution. The seeds she planted would never grow, and the slips she carefully tended and even watered with tears could not be induced to put forth roots. If by any chance a full-grown plant came into her possession, it never showed any signs of blossoming. But at last she came out conquerer. Since the stubborn things wouldn't bear blossoms of their own, they should be fitted with others just as good. And so a day came in which these uncouth, sapless creatures found themselves arrayed in a glory which outblazoned nature's most reckless color-splashing. Buds and flowers, made of blue, green, red and yellow flannel, of marvellous design and quaint workmanship, she tied with patient trembling fingers to the barren stems. Then, having carefully arranged this gorgeous display upon a window shelf in the sunny south room, she called in Mr. Dewey, to try the effect on him.

"Suz-a-most, 'Liza Jane! What in nater ails them plants? They've had all sort o' bugs an' mildews and pizen things on em afore, but I never saw any thing eke tew this. Shouldn't wonder if they'd been trying so dretful hard to grow, that it turned them all red an' blue an' yaller in the face."

Mr. Dewey pulled his spectacles down from their perch on the top of his head, adjusted them carefully over his twinkling eyes and pretended to study the condition of the plants with deep solicitude.

Mrs. Dewey gave him a brisk little push.

"Stop your foolin', John, an' tell me what you think of 'em, honest Injun, now."

He dropped his bantering tone at once, and spoke with sincere admiration.

"Think? Why, I think they're bewtiful. Sartinly they dew beat all creation."

There was not the slightest intention of irony in his final comment, and Mrs. Dewey accepted it in perfect good faith. They liked to joke each other on all possible subjects, but an appeal to "honest Injun" never failed to produce seriousness.

"Yes, I think they are real pretty, an' so much less trouble than if they was real blossoms. I won't have to be all the time sprinklin' and fumigatin' and buggin' of 'em. They won't fade neither, 'cept, perhaps that blue, but I've got plenty of the cloth, so 'twont be no great harm if it does."

Mrs. Dewey stood for a moment in silent rapture, gazing at her handiwork, and then sank wearily into a chair.

"I declare, John, I'm awful tired. Wonder what's the matter with me. 'Tyin' on them flowers is every mortal thing I've done this morning, 'cept washin up breakfast things, an' there ain't no sense feelin' used up this time o' day."

"P'raps it's the climate," suggested Mr. Dewey, as he thoughtfully rubbed his chin. "Most everybody here acts tired,—white folks, niggers, mules, an' all."

"Why, John Wesley Dewey, I am surprised to hear you speak of 'niggers.' Didn't you say when you came down here that you were going to set an example by treatin' these colored folks with respect, bein' always kind to 'em, an' makin' 'em think they are somebody?"

"Wal," replied Mr. Dewey, "I shouldn't wonder if my tongue did sorter slip that time. Fact is, that dratted Cicero Truby—'scuse me, I mean *Mr.* Cicero Truby—has been actin' so lately I feel 'zaf I'd like ter lick the whole gang of em."

"Why, what's Cicero done now?"

"Done? Wal, what ain't that scald-wag done?" said Mr. Dewey in an aggravated tone. "First place he told me a whole lot of reedikerious lies 'bout the wonderful things he useter dew when he was a slave—'cordin' to his tell, he come out of every diffikilty jest a leetle ahead of his old marster—an' when I mentioned 'em to the other Northern folks that has been here longer'n we have, they sorter snickered, and didn't seem to make no account o' sech yarns nohow."

"Well, well, dear," said Mrs. Dewey soothingly, "I wouldn't mind a little thing like that. Lots of smarter people 'n we are git taken in. These folks here have been through the mill for all they try to make you think they're so cunnin'."

"Oh, I don't mind one thing. It's that an' all the rest of them together that makes me sick. After we've been an' fixed him up with biled shirts an' stanin' dickies, an' let him get in debt to us, an' beg, borror an' steal vittles from us to his heart's content, what does that ongrateful critter do, but go 'round the town, tellin' a mess o' lies about me, makin' me out wuss than an African Feejee."

"The Feejees ain't Africans, John, as you very well know," interposed Mrs. Dewey, "but never mind that. What has Cicero Truby been telling 'bout you?"

"He says I knocked him down with a club, an' drew a pistol on him, an' threatened his life, if he ever come near the house agin."

In spite of his indignation at the slander, Mr. Dewey could not wholly repress a feeling of satisfaction that he should be thought capable of such prowess. At home no such reports had ever been circulated about him. But these Southerners were more appreciative of manly qualities than the New England folks. Certainly there must be something bold and determined in his bearing that had impressed the people of Pixley. He threw back his shoulders and stood in what he supposed was a very alert and soldier-like attitude in front of his wife's chair.

"For the land sakes!" exclaimed Mrs. Dewey. "What could have possessed him to tell such a yarn? You, the mildest talkin' man that ever drew breath, to be accused of shootin' anybody with a club! I never heard o' such a thing in my born days. Can't you call a town meetin' or somethin' and tell these Pixley folks that you never cut up any such capers as that in your whole life, and if they want to know what the people in

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