

The Custard Cup

By
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UNCLE JERRY

SYNOPSIS.—Living in a barn, converted into a dwelling, Mrs. Penfield is manager of an apartment building known as "The Custard Cup," originally "Cluster Court." Her income is derived from laundry work, her chief patron being a Mrs. Horatius Weatherstone, whom she has never seen. Living with her are "Crink" and "Thad," homeless small boys whom she has adopted. They call her "Penzie." Thad tells Penzie a strange man was inquiring for her under her maiden name. A tenant, Mrs. Gussie Bosley, induces Penzie to take charge of a package, which she does with some misgivings. Searching a refuse dump for things which might be of value, Crink, veteran at the game, encounters a small girl, Lettie, who proves a foeman worthy of his steel. He takes her to Penzie, and Lettie gets an invitation to join the family.

CHAPTER III.—Continued.

Mrs. Penfield covered her ironing board with an old sheet and propped it in a corner. Turning, she stood a moment in deep thought, her brown eyes on the prickly piece of childhood on the wash bench, her mental vision absorbed in problems of arithmetic.

The question confronting Mrs. Penfield was complicated only by the limitation of food for the family. The ugly accretions of speech and behavior disturbed her very little, because she believed that underneath them there is always a bit of life that is sweet and true; one has only to pry off the handicaps and give it a chance.

"I was only thinking," she said briskly, "that it might be a mercy if Little'd stay. I got 'most a box full of clo'es that Mrs. Weatherstone sent down that's betwixt and between, too small for me and too girl for Thad. I expect they'd fit Little fine."

That young lady shot a wise glance out of bright black eyes. The eyes were young, but the expression was centuries old, full of gathered shrewdness and mockery. "My clo'es hain't never stumped anybody yet," she observed scornfully. "It's virtuous cuts the ice, anyway."

"And I'll get her a sleeping-box down to the grocery," added Crink eagerly, more and more captivated every minute by the sterling pepleness of the newcomer.

"Sure. We'll have it worked out in no time. 'Bout all the real diffrance an extra one makes is that you're happier to have another one in the family. Now, Crink, you set the table—and be spry, 'cause I'm going to dish right now. You'll find an extra spoon in the egg box. Little won't need no knife and fork. This here supper's simple to eat!"

With the cover of the sauceman in her hand, Mrs. Penfield made a dash for the outside door. "Thad!" she called, in a practiced neighborhood yell. "Thad! Tha-a-ad! My land," she continued, dishing up stew with a worn agate ladle. "I 'most forgot to call that blessed baby. He's been watching Mrs. Catterbox' garden. She promised him a penny to keep the chickens out two hours while she went uptown. He's been in 'bout seven times to know if he sure could spend it himself, the dear!"

These intimate revelations were cut short by the entrance of the new capitalist. One glance at the occupant of the wash bench reduced his high enthusiasm to a round, double stare, framed in amber eyelashes.

"Thad," said Mrs. Penfield formally, "look what we got while you were gone." With the agate ladle she pointed toward Lettie with the air of an entomologist who indicates a particularly fantastic bug. "This here's Lettie. And Lettie, this here's Thad." Having thus separated their personalities with the convenient ladle, she reached for another bowl.

The setting of the table had not been a difficult thing for Crink to learn. On a cloth composed of four flour sacks, united by hand, were four plates, four bowls, four tumblers of water, four spoons, and, in front of Mrs. Penfield, a plate of cornbread, a small piece of butter, and knife. "Now, boys," signaled Mrs. Penfield. "And mind you, go slow and mean what you say. You know God can't hear nothing unless you mean it."

Then the mixed chorus said slowly: "Lord, we thank Thee 'cause we got big appetites and good things to eat. Amen."

Lettie forgot her hunger momentarily and opened her black eyes wide. "That beats me," she commented. "Do you always talk that way 'fore you begin? What in tarnation do you do it for?"

"So we won't forget for a minute how thankful we are," returned Mrs. Penfield mildly. "Now sail right in, Lettie."

Lettie sailed—or rather she plowed. No engrossed letters of resolution ever held so deep a tribute as was accomplished by Lettie. When the meal was over, she hunched down on her stool in the relaxation of absolute content, and fixed her black eyes on Mrs. Penfield.

"I'll stay with you forever, if you want me to," she announced.

Mrs. Penfield acknowledged her triumph, but bore it with remarkable modesty.

CHAPTER IV

Uncle Jerry.

Many times Mrs. Penfield had speculated about the identity of the man who had been searching for her—who had even traced her to The Custard Cup and then failed to find her. Several days had passed since Thad's report, and she had heard nothing further; neither had she the slightest clue, except that it must have been someone out of her girlhood, out of the past from which she had supposed herself cut off by the severing of all close ties. That past was filled with painful memories.

It was not an unmixed joy to know that a previous acquaintance might be near and that at any moment she might be called upon to talk such of those years which were buried deep in her heart. The very sound of her maiden name had stirred lethargic recollections into renewed life, into the power of shooting like darts of agony through the commonplaces of daily routine.

Inevitably, since imagination is a more vivid artist than reality, she had exaggerated the possibilities of the encounter, anticipating them with a dread which she was far from feeling when that encounter actually occurred. She even answered the ring of the bell with the serene conviction that a neighbor was calling.

"Good morning," she called brightly, as she rolled aside the big door.

A man stood on the warped board that took the place of front steps. He was about fifty years old, rugged, weather-beaten, giving the impression of out-of-doors and hard work, incandescently combined.

He said nothing. Hat in hand, he regarded Mrs. Penfield with a smile of inexplicable significance, which somehow checked the rest of her usual greeting—the part about coming right in. Her brown eyes blinked in question.

"Am I supposed to know you?" she inquired at last.

"I was hoping you'd guess me," he returned, in a deep voice that filled the narrow alley.

Mrs. Penfield shook her head.

"Then I'll tell you," he said, in evident disappointment. "I'm your Uncle Jerry."

"My Uncle Jerry! I didn't know I had one."

He laughed. "Wasn't James Winston your father?"

"Yes." Her eyes widened.

"I'm your youngest brother, John Jerome Winston."

Mrs. Penfield extended her hands.

"Come right in. I didn't know I had a near relative in the world. I'm tickled to death."

Jerry Winston entered, walking slowly. As he sat down, he caught his hand against his side with a grimace of pain. "Trée fell on me," he explained presently. "Lumber camp in Oregon! It was my finish for that kind of life, but I was lucky to get off so easy."

They sat in silence for several moments, each absorbed in thoughts which the presence of the other had roused. It was the first time since his boyhood that Jerry Winston had been face to face with a member of his own family. He had cut himself off voluntarily, called by the free life of the western woods. Mrs. Penfield had never seen him before. During her childhood he had been mentioned only at rare intervals, and then with the reserve that hides all wanderers as behind a curtain of tacit criticism.

Jerry Winston cleared his throat. "It's mighty little I got to tell you 'bout myself," he began. "Lor, it makes me lonesome to think of the life I've had to give up. Seems like I can smell the woods in my dreams. I could smell 'em when I was a youngster, and finally I couldn't stand it any longer. That's why I ran away. But that wasn't why I didn't keep in touch," he added quickly. "No, sir, that was 'cause the family didn't forgive me for not staying home and going into the store, as they'd planned. So naturally I—" He finished the sentence with a wave of his hand.

"And now you're living near here?"

He hesitated. "Yes, a few blocks over," he replied vaguely. "I don't know whether I shall hang 'round or not. Depends!"

Her fine eyes grew deep with sympathy. "Do you mean you can't find anything to—do?"

"I'm trying out one or two things," he answered shortly.

This time the evasion was unmistakable. Mrs. Penfield was sorry she had pressed the matter. "I do hope you'll stay," she said. "It has been lonely. There ain't nobody left—nobody." He looked at her keenly, pityingly. "Say, Carline, that's tough," he put in awkwardly. "Looks like your old uncle might as much as dropped you a line, but I guess he wasn't realizing—What's that? Somebody coming?"

"Yes." She breathed more easily. A complaining tenant would be a relief from the tension of painful reminiscence.

"No, I can't come in, Mrs. Penfield." It was Gussie Bosley, in the smartest of hats, carrying the smartest of bags, drawing on the freshest of gloves as she talked. "I'm going downtown."

"You always are," commented Mrs. Penfield, laughing.

"Yeh, I gad a lot." Mrs. Bosley smiled good-naturedly. "I've left a card on my door, telling anybody that calls to come here."

"All right."

"And if anybody does come, will you please say I've gone to Sacramento and won't be back for a couple days?"

Mrs. Penfield's eyes grew wide. "Sure I will," she said slowly, "if you'll do your part."

"My part! What do you mean?"

"I mean if you'll go to Sacramento." "Ain't you smart!" snapped Mrs. Bosley. "I ain't asking you to do a crime. Ain't no harm in your saving me a little bother."

"Ain't no bother saved by doing a little harm, either," retorted Mrs. Penfield pleasantly. "I'm always glad to help out, but I can't go so far's that. I'm sorry."

"Very well," Gussie tossed her head angrily. "All I got to say is, you'll trip over something bigger, holding your head so stiff." She turned with a wrathful flourish and clicked off, her high heels pounding out echoes from the sides of the narrow alley.

"Some little lady!" commented Jerry Winston, with a laugh. "Hot and peppery like a Spanish sauce!" His face straightened; his merry eyes grew keen and cold. "You don't like Mrs. Bosley, do you?"

She stared at him. "How did you know who 'twas?"

He shrugged. "Oh, I've met her husband. Saw 'em together once."

"Where?"

"Downtown," he mimicked. "Not in Sacramento."



It Was Gussie Bosley in the Smartest of Hats.

She did not return his banter. Her brows twisted. "Of all the people in The Custard Cup—" she began absently.

"I'll bet you're worrying 'bout my tendencies," he laughed. "That's what it is to get near a relative. Why, bless your soul, that feller's harmless."

"Oh, yes, of course," she replied, recovering herself. "I ain't criticizing. I was only surprised."

Thad strolled in from the kitchen. "By George!" cried Jerry Winston. "So that little shaver belongs to you, does he? I didn't know you had any youngsters."

"I have two—three—by adoption."

"Queer you ain't sure of the number," he commented slyly.

"One of them is brand-new," she smiled. "I haven't had her but a day. Thad, dear, this is your Uncle Jerry. Ain't that nice?"

While they were getting acquainted, Mrs. Penfield went into the kitchen. "We'll have lunch pretty soon," she called back. "I've got some cornbread warming in the oven, and I'm making dried-beef gravy. I've been saving a jar of strawberries hoping we'd have company, and now I can open it for one of my very own family. Ain't it wonderful?"

Mrs. Penfield circled around by the front door. "It's time for Crink," she said, looking out into the driveway. "Good morning, Lorene. Ev'rything going smooth?"

Lorene Percy paused on her way past Number 47. She was a pretty girl with deep violet eyes, small features, and masses of sunny brown hair. She had an excellent business position, besides singing in a choir, and she was frankly a favorite with Mrs. Penfield.

"No, not everything," smiled the girl. "Dick Chase and I have been invited on a lovely trip to Mount Diablo, and he can't—he won't—go."

"Why, that's too bad, Lorene. I wish you could go."

"Say, Carline, that's tough," he put in awkwardly. "Looks like your old uncle might as much as dropped you a line, but I guess he wasn't realizing—What's that? Somebody coming?"

"Yes." She breathed more easily. A complaining tenant would be a relief from the tension of painful reminiscence.

"I can see Lettie's going to be a comfort, Carline. I'd stake my life she's got some go in her."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

Education is really the art of extracting the best use out of life.

ALL FOOLS' DAY

Part of Folklore of Almost Every Country.

While Some Mystery Enshrouds Its Origin, One Theory Has Been Definitely Abandoned.

Although it has largely degenerated into a nuisance, the observance of All Fools' Day is really one of the most interesting relics of old-time folklore. That is partly because of its antiquity, partly because of its widespread practice, but perhaps most of all because of the mystery which enshrouds its origin. Christmas, Easter, St. Valentine's Day and other festivals are with entire assurance traced to their sources, but antiquarians have puzzled and searched in vain, for an explanation of All Fools' Day.

The irreverent and ridiculous theory that it relates to the trial of Jesus Christ, though once widely held, may be dismissed. That it was associated with the ancient celebration of the new year, beginning on March 25 and ending on April 1, seems plausible. So, but for one thing, might it seem plausible that, as some have said, it arose when, in 1564, Charles IX of France ordered the reformed calendar adopted, changing New Year's day from March 25 to January 1; wherefore New Year's gifts were then given on January 1 instead of at the culmination of the old festival on April 1, and sham and mock gifts were given as a joke to those who wanted to stick to the old calendar. The fatal flaw in that theory is that in other countries, notably in India, April 1 was a feast of fools long before the change of calendar, and continued to be so observed in some where there was no change of calendar.

It is interesting to note that the methods of observance and the names applied to victims of jokes vary in different lands. In America and England the aim is to delude the victim with a false story or statement, or with a bogus gift, and the victim is called an April fool. In Scotland the legend of Christ's trial led to the day being observed by sending the victim from person to person and from town to town on an idle errand, and the victim is called a gowk or cuckoo. In France, for some obscure reason, the victim of a delusive story or sham gift is called an April fish. In India the method of trickery is similar to that in Scotland, and as it is there of older date than the Christian era, that fact would seem sufficiently to dispose of the legend connecting it with Christ's trial.

Pulling Mr. Spider's Leg.

The domestic spider has domestic difficulties. For example, his wife will not always let him eat in peace; she must pull his leg. And why? Merely because he has a fly and won't share it! Mr. William M. Savin, writing in Natural History, gives this rather amusing account of Mr. and Mrs. Spider at home.

One summer's day at nightfall I found a male domestic spider on the web of a female and placed a fly close to them. Both rushed for it, but as the male happened to be the nearer he swathed it and proceeded to devour it. The female seemed to be greatly annoyed and pulled at his hind legs for some 15 minutes while he fought her off as best he could without turning to face her, feasting as he fought. She then resigned and returned to her former position several inches from him.

When I placed another fly in the web the female promptly ran to it and swatted it. She again returned to her original position, dragging the fly behind her, but in doing so she took an indirect route and, passing the male, gave his hind legs several additional jabs apparently to apprise him of her good fortune in also securing prey—an act that might also be interpreted to be the woman's "last word"—Youth's Companion.

One Look and They Buy.

It is the firm belief of one department manager in a Detroit store that men and women differ radically in their manner of making purchases. "A man," says he, "is more of a window shopper. He sees something in the window that he wants and goes into the store and buys. If he is in need of something—shirt, suit, ties, etc.—he may go around for a week before he sees it in a window. Then he gets it. A woman is more likely to enter the store and 'shop around' as they call it. I should say that in knowing what they want, and actually selecting it, men are considerably more direct than the women."—Detroit News.

Remarkable!

A pension examiner in Washington was one day examining witnesses.

To one strapping son of Erin he put the question:

"Timothy McGowan, do you swear that you know the applicant, Dennis O'Brien, who has made application for an increase of pension?"

"You may well say that I do," rejoined Timothy. "Me an' him were both shot in the same leg at Antietam."

Has a Full Supply.

Hub—So you've been to a teacher of physical culture. Well, what did he tell you?

Wife—The first thing he told me was to keep my chin up.

Hub—Huh! I hadn't noticed any falling off in that line.—Boston Transcript.

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