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"Black Coffee For Two"
A Thanksgiving Tale
by Mary Graham Bonner

HOSE letters can wait until Friday, Miss Johnson. Tomorrow we're closed, you know. "Very well, sir," said Miss Johnson. "You don't seem to be especially pleased," continued Mr. Brown. "Most of the girls welcome a holiday. They can sleep and then go out dancing with some fine young man. Ain't you got a young man, Miss Johnson? Perhaps you've not been long enough in the city. Well, well, take your time. There's a lot of these youngsters who can make love all right, all right, but when it comes to furnishing the home—they'd have a hard time doing it on the installment plan. The salaries of young men ain't so big these days."

Wondered if it could be possible that Mr. Brown had invited her to spend the holiday with him. But the idea vanished and just at that moment he was called to the telephone. The other girls had gone to the cloakroom and Miss Johnson entered as they were preparing for the outside world. "What are you going to do tomorrow, Johnny?" asked Miss Marks. It was the name the girls had given her. "I don't know just yet," she answered. "Bill and I are going to a Thanksgiving ball," remarked Miss Angela Carter. "And I've got a swell new dress mother's making me."

WONDERED IF MR. BROWN HAD INVITED HER TO SPEND THE HOLIDAY WITH HIM.



"Most Girls Welcome a Holiday."

"Oh, all right, I just wondered. Say, young man, don't look so glum. Get a pretty girl and go off for the day tomorrow. You need cheering up. It's what I need, too. And I'll have it, believe me. I've got a little peach for dinner. Quite a sport for an old boy, eh?" "Quite," said Mr. Courtney, quietly. "I don't care much for girls, that is, most girls." "Hum," granted Mr. Brown as the younger man left his office. "Falling in love, eh? She'll soon tire of him, whoever she may be, if he doesn't get a smile on his face once in a while." "Has Miss Johnson left?" Mr. Courtney was asking of one of the stenographers who was hurrying off. "Yes, left five minutes ago," was the answer. "You haven't got her home address?" he asked. "No, but I guess Mr. Brown has it. He keeps the addresses of the whole staff, you know." And she was gone. Miss Johnson boarded with friends her mother had met during her one city trip—a week's excursion which had taken in the Hippodrome and the Flatiron building as wonders never to be forgotten. Usually she took her dinner downtown at a cheap table d'hote, for Mrs. Palmer, her mother's friend, did not care much for cooking—and besides it had been arranged that way—room and breakfast, five dollars a week. But tonight she would go straight home without dinner. Perhaps they would be making preparations for the great day. She bought an evening paper, two bananas and a sweetened roll and started up the elevated stairs. She reached home and opened the door with her latchkey. From every indication every one was out. She called for Mrs. Palmer but no reply came.



WONDERED IF MR. BROWN HAD INVITED HER TO SPEND THE HOLIDAY WITH HIM.

gathering, no turkey, no pumpkin pie and elder. No children to be allowed on that day to eat all they wanted. Maybe it was a day of national grieving, but it was a family day anyway and it was Thanksgiving day. She tried to sleep. She didn't want to think of the morrow. But she did, and at the same time came the vision of Mr. Brown, his watery eyes leering at her, and his pudgy hands holding hers so she couldn't escape, and his lips—those fat lips—forcing—Oh no! She shivered and pulled the clothes around her tighter. Why had she said she would go? Perhaps he meant to be kind. But he had always been a little too kind, a little too considerate. It seemed now. Sometimes she had noticed a strange look on the part of Mr. Courtney, especially that afternoon. She felt Ned Courtney thought Mr. Brown dictated less and talked more than was necessary. And it bothered her. But she was not sure, and she didn't want to lose her job. It had been so hard—beginning with everything so new and different. Of all the men she had met in New York she cared most for Ned Courtney and his opinion. He had seemed sincere and every one in the office spoke so highly of him. She wondered what he'd think of this, and then she wondered why she wished she knew.

So she thought on. Morning came. Her eyes were heavy. Sleep had come only in snatches. She dressed hastily and then laughed at herself for hurrying. She wrote home and tried to make her letter cheerful. "Lydia! Lydia Johnson!" came Mrs. Palmer's voice from downstairs. "A gentleman to speak to you on the phone." Miss Johnson went down the stairs without hurrying. She had never acquired the habit of running to the telephone as if it were on fire and must be put out by lifting the receiver. "Hello," she said. "Oh, good-morning, Miss Johnson," came the voice from the other end. "I hope I didn't get you up out of bed. No? You're not a late sleeper even on a holiday? Well, I always knew you were smart. Just thought I'd call you up to tell you we'll have that turkey tonight at six you know. I'll be around in plenty of time. Look your sweetest!" "Oh, thank you, Mr. Brown. Yes, I'll be ready a little before six."



STARTED UP THE STAIRS.

Lydia returned to her room, passing by the inquisitive eyes of Mrs. Palmer without answer. Later she breakfasted, or rather lunched, with the Palmer family. She played the piano a little, and then, before returning to her room, decided she would satisfy Mrs. Palmer's curiosity. "I'm going to dinner with Mr. Brown of the firm," she said. "He's a father of children—not young and worthless." She laughed a little. "That's good," said Mrs. Palmer. "But what's he doing taking you out today? Where's his kids?" "Away to see a sick grandmother," said Lydia, and as she said it she felt that Mrs. Palmer nodded her head a little too understandingly. Lydia flushed slightly. "Now, listen, dearie," said Mrs. Palmer, "to a word of motherly advice. Get all that's comin' to you. They think more of you when you make 'em spend—and if he's old enough to be a father—and take you out—his likely got enough of the wherewithal. Say you like white furs. Tell him in a real baby tone you did wish you could have a silver mesh bag. While I promised your mother I'd look after you, the city's ways aren't the country's ways—leastwise, not so I'd know it. And I want to see you get on." She was thinking secretly of a new rug she might like herself. "Just work the old boy for all he's worth, but take my advice, and never fall in love. They're done with you then, and you lose interest in others."

Lydia had sat partly listening and partly dreaming of the Thanksgiving at home—the long table, her father's jokes, the children's ceaseless chatter, her mother hot and tired but beaming. She arose. "I'll be careful," she said as she bit her lip. "I won't fall in love. Don't worry, Mrs. Palmer, I'm not so young as you might think." She went to her room and closed her door with a bang. Then softly opened it. An hour went by and then another. Still another passed and Lydia was growing impatient. Her hat and gloves and coat were ready. She sat there, nervous and shaking. At last she heard Mrs. Palmer's shrill voice: "Lydia, Lydia."

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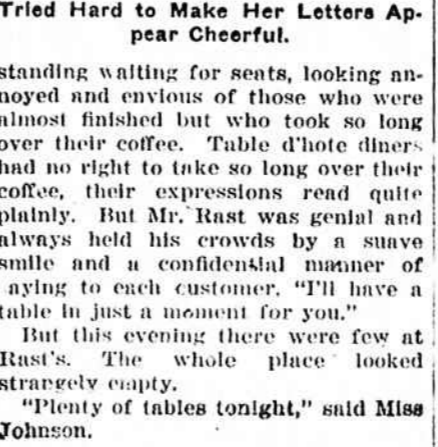
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Lydia closed the door softly and then opened it noisily. "Yes," she called back. "I'm just going over to see the pictures for an hour. I'll be back in time to fuss you up a bit for tonight. Don't worry. I'll only be gone an hour." "All right, thank you, Mrs. Palmer," she called. She waited five minutes, then ten and at last put on her things. Quietly she stole down the stairs. She opened the door, looked up and down the street and then hurriedly walked along. "I guess," she said slowly to herself, "I'll go downtown." And she went up the stairs to the elevated. "I suppose I'll have to eat," she thought grimly. Usually Rast's table d'hote was crowded. There people were always



TRIED HARD TO MAKE HER LETTERS APPEAR CHEERFUL.

standing waiting for seats, looking annoyed and envious of those who were almost finished but who took so long over their coffee. Table d'hote diners had no right to take so long over their coffee, their expressions read quite plainly. But Mr. Rast was genial and always held his crowds by a suave smile and a confidential manner of saying to each customer, "I'll have a table in just a moment for you." But this evening there were few at Rast's. The whole place looked strangely empty. "Plenty of tables tonight," said Miss Johnson. "Yes, miss," Mr. Rast smilingly admitted. "But if some folks knew what an extra menu I give for Thanksgiving they would not be eating home. Trouble isn't that, altogether, but here's the business section there ain't much going on today. Leave your choice of tables." And with a flourish Mr. Rast still retained his manner of personal interest and of a great desire to please. Lydia Johnson took her seat and looked at the menu. It was just about the same as usual, but Mr. Rast had been true to his boast. There on the top was an additional sheet of thin paper, reading in watery ink, "Special for Today." Below was "Thanksgiving

ing turkey and cranberry sauce. Squash pie, apple cider." Lydia ordered them, scarcely noticing that they were a little special in price, too. Olives and celery were put in front of her and a small dish of relish. She tasted some and as she put down her fork she saw Ned Courtney entering. As he caught sight of her his eyes brightened and his step became more buoyant. "May I sit here?" he asked, pointing to the vacant chair opposite her. "Yes, do," said Lydia quickly. "I'm all alone. I'm kind of homesick, anyway," she admitted, as her eyes shone a little mistily. "They make a regular fuss over Thanksgiving day at home. I'm from the country, you know. And I guess I'm still a bit of a youngster. It's my first Thanksgiving away from home." "And you're here, you poor child," said Mr. Courtney, who was possibly two years her senior. "Of all the God-forsaken places in the world, the city takes the lead on a holiday when you've no special pals—and when you've been used to the other kind. It's my first Thanksgiving day here." "Mother makes an awful fuss over the day," said Lydia. "And pop is just as bad. Always jokes we're not going to have turkey and we always do, of course." "Of course," agreed Mr. Courtney, "and pumpkin pie and elder. I see you've ordered the specials. Well, I guess I will too. Squash pie, eh? I suppose they haven't any pumpkin." They ate their dinner and each



"I SEE YOU'VE ORDERED THE SPECIALS."

talked of the times at home—other Thanksgivings. "Do you come here often?" asked Mr. Courtney. "Almost always," she answered. "I wasn't going to come tonight, and then I thought I would. I've never seen you here before." "No, it's my first appearance, though I guess I know all the other places like this. One of the boys told me about it at the office. Where did you think you'd go? I mean tonight, if you hadn't come here?"

"Mr. Brown asked me to have dinner with him. He said his wife and two kids were up with his mother-in-law, who's sick. She lives in the country and so he'd be all alone. I guess he meant it kindly, but somehow I just felt kind of queer about going." "Thank God you did," said Mr. Courtney with a sudden burst of religious fervor. "Wife and two kids and a mother-in-law—all to fool you with! Why he's not even married! I pity the poor creature who would ever marry him. He's asked all the girls in the office to go out with him. He threatens to fire 'em if they don't accept, but if they're any good at their work he figures on business first—and besides it would look queer to the partners." "I've seen him eyeing you," he continued. "And I've said to myself often, 'If he lays a hand on her I'll—' Tried to work on your homesickness! Ugh!" Miss Johnson had turned crimson. "I've always been home Thanksgiving before," she murmured again. She had talked a good deal to Ned Courtney in the shop and the girls had teased her about him. But he had never "asked her out." She felt miserably friendless. "Listen," she heard him say, "I've cared for you ever since you first stepped into Jones & Cushing's, and I'd like to see you step out. My father's ready any day to hand over the farm to me, and the farm life is the real life. Will you—will you—in a little while, marry me? Mr. Brown can fire us both. We'll never be at his mercy again on Thanksgiving day. We'll have a country Thanksgiving and we'll let the kids eat all they want—that is—later on." He grew uncomfortably red. He had been rushing a little too fast. Lydia looked at him first a full moment, then looked away. "I've always wished you cared for me," she said softly to the empty table opposite. "That's enough," said Mr. Courtney. "We'll make up for this, beginning with Christmas." "Anything else?" murmured the waiter for the third time. "Oh," said Mr. Courtney, "black coffee for two!"

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