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"After she does her fall shopping."

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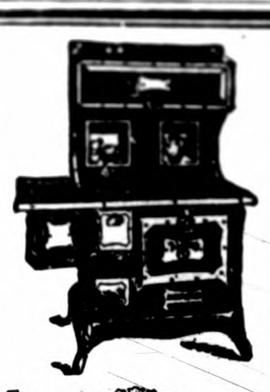

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The Custard Cup

By
Florence Bingham Livingston

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CHAPTER XV.—Continued.

—17—

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 int'rusted 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 goubled the fire till the top of the stove was hot. Gradually she forgot her rebuff in watching the corn in the popper.

"Fil Caesar," she remarked, casting a reflective eye on the small, eager dog, who was gazing at her with pleading hope, "you may's well get out. I don't sensibly b'lieve you'll get a bit of this here corn—'less you dribble the old maids with Bonnie Geraldine. Crink, take this popper and Fil get the dishes. What say let's—I'll bet Penzie'd like to have us use them little glass dishes that come with the oxygena. It's getta be money's small, 'cause land knows there won't be fellas get many kernels."

She passed the popper to Crink and dragged a stool in front of the spice 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 spread 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! Quick! Quick! Oh!"

Fil 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 dabs at the stove with spoons and shovel, 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, ev'rybody," 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 deadened 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—cheeeze!"

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

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

Mrs. Penfield shook her head dizzily. "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."

CHAPTER XVI

—

Lettie the Inventor.

The young Penfields were in council. Christmas was only a week off, and it was no longer to be ignored. They had been craftily watching for signs of mystery, but the testimony of all three was flat and without hope.

"I hain't never had a Christmas," contributed Thad.

"I hain't, neither," countered Lettie shortly, "and I'm twice as old as you—mebbe more. We hain't none of us had a Christmas."

"Yes, I had one," admitted Crink, proud of the fact and yet regretful to detract from the record of woe. "I was with Penzie last year, and we had a pretty good time, but there wasn't no tree. Seems as if," he added, with a sidelong glance at Lettie, "seems as if now there's three of us, we'd oughter have a tree." He had the greatest faith in Lettie, having seen her put through more than one scheme that gave little promise of success.

And immediately she caught the inevitable connection between three children and the spreading branches of a fir. She shook her black curls violently. "We gotta," she declared.

"Yes, we gotta," echoed Crink, with strengthened hope.

"Boys, we're gonta," continued Lettie vehemently.

"Yes, we're gonta," chirruped Crink.

"We're gonta," piped Thad joyously.

"What's the big plan, children?" inquired Mrs. Penfield, coming in with a delicate blouse, freshly ironed, which she adjusted on a newspaper hanger tied to a line across the corner.

"Christmas!" exploded Lettie.

"Oh!" Mrs. Penfield rested her weight wearily on one foot and gave

"We Want a Tree, and Presents, and —and Ev'rything."

the children a look of troubled reflection.

"We want a tree and presents and—ev'rything," explained Crink.

"Oh, my dears!" The words were heavy with distress. Then Mrs. Penfield pulled herself together and became expansively optimistic. "I'll tell you what I thought. I been planning that we'd have a fine day, and I'm going to make us a grand bread pudding. Uncle Jerry brought us a whole sack of stale bread last night; he got it to a bakery cheap, and I'm tickled to death. I'm going to try out a lot of it in the oven, and it'll keep for weeks. We'll have bread pudding and codfish scallop and—"

"It would make stuffing," put in Crink eagerly.

"In some families it would, Crink, but we don't have nothing to stuff—except ourselves. But 'bout Christmas—I thought we'd play games and tell stories and teach Filibuster a new trick and pop some corn. You see, we'd have an awful busy day, just chuck full of pleasure."

Thad scrambled to his feet and approached her with reiteration. "We want a tree, Penzie. All of us wants one."

"Bless your sweet heart!" Mrs. Penfield caught him into her arms and kissed him; then set him down again. "Now, children, I'll tell you how 'tis 'bout a tree. This year we got a heap of things to buy. Ain't one of you got a decent shoe, and Crink's got to have a new suit, or he can't hold up his head in school. Yes, I know you'd go without, but you got to remember that Christmas is only one day, and life is three hundred and sixty-five of 'em a year. Besides, we'll have the best time—"

Crink took a turn. "I think, Penzie, mebbe I could rustle a tree."

"My dear, it ain't the time; it's the things to go on it. And it takes a good while to save for extras."

With a sighing, Lettie stepped up to the front line. "Get away, Injuns!" she commanded, with a scornful wave of her arm. "This is where we get down to business. Now, Penzie, that thing have much bought it cost to get a tree and ev'rything—you know—the whole shooting match?"

Mrs. Penfield considered. "You mean a tree and trimmings and presents—"

"Yes, and presents for ev'rybody in The Custard Cup," supplemented Lettie. "Ev'rything swell—a big party!"

"Why, Lettie, if you was to do it on a big scale like that and have ev'rything grand, it'd take—I'm 'fraid it'd take a dollar."

Gravely Lettie reflected upon this huge block of solid finance, as yet unnegotiated. "If we'll raise a dollar," she stipulated slowly, "honest-to-goodness earn it, will you show us how to have a big blow-out Christmas—lots of presents and fixings—and strings of things all over the trees—and candles—and a big party?"

"I'll do that very thing, Lettie," promised Mrs. Penfield. "But—"

"It's as good as done," shouted Lettie. "Oh, Penzie, I love you harder all the time." She flew at Mrs. Penfield, strangled her for a moment with a thoroughness that was fortunately brief, and dashed through the big door into the driveway, to ventilate her exuberance in the open air.

Crink followed. "Say, Lettie," he inquired anxiously, "how you going to do it?"

She turned on him disdainfully.

"Landy patience, Crink, how do you s'pose I know?"

"Well," he returned, in deep disappointment, "you told her sure, just as if—"

"Golly, won't you never grow up, Crink? Don't you know you have to be sure of a thing first, and then you go ahead and do it afterward? I'm doing the sure part now, and pretty soon I'll think of a way of pulling it off. Trust me!"

Lettie's enterprise was complicated by the fact that she was still in the shadow of debt. She owed twenty cents on the replacing of Mr. Waggle's window. It had been a slow matter to accumulate the money to pay for her moment of impulsive chivalry, and never again would she be lacking in respect for a pane of glass. But now to raise a dollar—no, a dollar and twenty cents—in a week. In less time! There would be endless preparations to make, and the money would have to be in hand before the plans could begin. She could not allow herself more than three days. It was appalling. The window money had been raised by long, weary hours of solid labor: picking up wood, washing steps, running errands. The rewards had been in reverse ratio to the intensity of efforts and had ranged from one cent up to a dime per job. The latter had been the insurmountable limit.

It was painfully evident that these slow methods must be abandoned in favor of a gigantic financial coup. Lettie discouraged the society of Crink and Thad, and withdrew to her favorite retreat for the purpose of meditation. Throwing herself down in the shade of a weeping willow, she proceeded to translate her anthrax of sentiment into plans for concrete wherewithal.

"By jingoes!" she said to herself. "I gotta get that money in a lump. This ain't no dime-bank stunt. It's a race 'twixt me and Christmas, and I've going to get there first." Miss Penfield leaned over and pummeled the ground with her fist. "I'm gonta! D'you hear? I'm gonta!"

Having registered her determination, both verbally and physically, she felt considerably relieved. Lifting her eyes, she shook off her tenseness and surveyed the world in a wholly receptive mood. A boy was whistling around the corner. He came in sight, distributing handbills. Lettie watched him climb steps, slip a dodger under the door, run down again, climb other steps.

Her gaze ceased to follow the boy, became fixed, dreamy. Her body was motionless. "By George!" she murmured. "I'm getting an idea. I car 'most see it."

It developed that this particular idea was not to be captured in the space of ten seconds, but Lettie stayed by with incredible patience. Finally the mental visioning was clarified. She sprang to her feet, wild with excitement and hope, and dashed off several blocks, to one of her hunting-grounds, the free edge of a lumber yard. Here she rummaged until she had collected a number of long, light pieces of wood, which she bound together with an old wire and dragged home.

The afternoon and all of the following day were spent by Lettie in the most secluded corner of the Penfield back yard, and no king in his castle was ever more unapproachable. Crink and Thad were left in no doubt regarding her desire for isolation. The beloved Fil Caesar was fended off with an active coldness that wounded his affectionate nature. Bonnie Geraldine limped about the yard without exciting even the fleeting compassion of her mistress.

Mrs. Penfield, glancing from the window occasionally at the small figure busily working with hatchet and nails, sticks and old wire, was moved to pity save the disappointment which she feared was in store. It was not done that the child's whole being was set on success and that she was staking everything on one venture. And yet how could she make anything out of her little old scraps that anybody would buy? The week gathered to its Saturday close and the moment of probable crumbling of Lettie's castle in the air.

(To be Continued.)

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"Magnificent! Magnificent!" was all the dentist said.

"Then you don't find anything to do to them?"

"To do to them? Why, there are four to be pulled, six to be filled and a bridge to make," said the dentist.

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A Safe Way.

He was talking to his friend Scribbler, the journalist.

"Do you believe in writing anonymously?" he asked the latter of the pen.

Scribbler looked to see that the door of his study was shut ere he replied in a confidential whisper:

"Well, I've often wished that one of my productions had been anonymous."

"What was that?"

"A letter proposing to Mrs. Scribbler," groaned the author.

Many people imagine that Worms or Tapeworms exist in adult subjects. A simple dose of "Dead Shot" proves that they do. 372 Pearl St., N. Y.—Adv.

Some Driver.

Are you a good driver?

Motor, golf, charity, pile or slice?—Philadelphia Record.

Accommodating.

Tailor—I should like to know when you are going to pay that bill. I can't come here every day in the week.

Jones—What day would suit you best?

"Saturday."

"Very well, then, you may call every Saturday."—London Answers.

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The Brute.

Wife (with empty pocketbook)—I'd like a little—a little change, dear.

Heartless Husband—So would I. But the last anything we had disappeared from.—New York Sun and Globe.

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