

The Free Press Short Story

DEBTS AND DEBTORS

By Ruth and Robert Osborne

JUST one passenger, a slight girl in blue, boarded the eastbound train that frothy January morning when it drew up to the station of the little town in Western Ontario. Most of the occupants of the coach that she entered glanced at her with mild interest and their resumed their former attitudes...

As the train drew forward again on its way the new passenger took a deep breath, which did not escape the notice of her neighbor, and then relaxed. Re-moving her hat and veil, preparing to lean back in comfort, she glanced about the car with eager interest; finally her eyes met those of the woman across the aisle...

Surprised and not altogether pleased, June Webster was inclined to retire into her shell with a stiff little bow of acknowledgment, but something in the friendly face deterred her, and she smiled back, though a trifle unwillingly. "Regular old Miss Fry, I don't doubt," she reflected, "but she's sort of like some of the folks around home. I could not hurt her feelings."

To forestall any further advances, June produced a book and somewhat carelessly buried herself in its pages. Between the book and the fascination of the flying landscape the morning passed rapidly. When the porter's call to luncheon in the dining car roused her she could hardly believe that it was noon. An instant later she felt a hand on her shoulder. "Excuse me," said the high, rather shrill voice of the old lady across the aisle, "won't you go in to lunch with me? I despise those dining cars, specially alone."

Now June, who had never been in a dining car in her life, flights in ordinary circumstances have welcomed company, but as she glanced at the absurd little figure in rusty black with a shabby bag in one gloved hand and a large square satchel, evidently a bird cage, in the other, her heart sank, and she replied, "Why need she be nice to a prying old 'frump' like that? She racked her brain swiftly for a plausible excuse. She couldn't declare she was not hungry; she was ravenously hungry! Meekly she rose and followed her self-elected friend through the train."

Once seated, the little woman introduced herself. "My name," she said, "is Mrs. Pomfret, and I am from a small town down to spend the winter with a niece in Montreal. Then with businesslike directness she proceeded to find out all about June. After a few moments of reserve the girl surrendered completely, for after all there was no real reason for withholding information that it would please her listener to hear and herself to impart."

Before the waiter had brought the ice water Mrs. Pomfret knew that June was on her way to Montreal. And by the time the soup had arrived she knew that it was the girl's first visit to a big city, that she had looked forward to this magic day for "years and years," and that through the agency of an uncle who was "on the road," she would walk directly into one of the large department stores of Montreal and get a position, though in just what capacity she was as yet uncertain; that did not matter.

"Good," Mrs. Pomfret said approvingly as her bright glance rested on the fresh, eager face across the table. "Leading's all arranged for you, I'll warrant." "Oh, yes; mother never could have let me go if they hadn't been. Even now I believe she thinks I might as well walk into a den of lions!" And June gave a vivid picture of the small-town home and family—simple, honest people who had won a modest success at the crossroads store and had then retired to enjoy the fruits of their labors in the peace of their own little home and garden.

"But that wouldn't do for you, you see," June concluded with a restless movement of her vigorous young shoulders. "I don't want peace; I want—well, not war of course,—she laughed,—but, but just life." Her glance was direct and appealing, and Mrs. Pomfret nodded her quick understanding. "Yes, well, you'll get it, I haven't a doubt. May it be all you hope to find it." To June's mixed relief and disappointment Mrs. Pomfret said when they returned to the coach that she was sleepy and settled down for a nap. June found her book less absorbing than before and gave herself up to delicious dreams of the days to come.

When the porter announced dinner she glanced a bit apprehensively at Mrs. Pomfret, who was still dozing. Would it be rude for her to slip in to dinner by herself? She could say she did not wish to disturb her. June had almost decided to go into the dining car alone when Mrs. Pomfret opened her eyes, blinked several times and then said in her high voice: "Shall we go in to dinner now, dear? I'm hungrier than ever."

ever handled in her life, and she was glad to turn it over at once to Mr. Wilberforce, as was customary in that department when anyone paid a large amount of cash. The manager stepped to the cashier's desk, obtained the small change owing Mrs. Pomfret and handed it to June.

With a little pang of homesickness she watched Mrs. Pomfret depart. Perhaps after all a little shabby somebody from home was about her speed. She sighed a little; it was hard to have no real friend in all the great city. But she had been unable to overcome a certain reserved shyness in her nature when she was in the presence of the sophisticated young women with whom she worked.

"Say!" Laura Meek's voice behind her made her swing round in astonishment, and her chin unconsciously rose an inch or two in self-defense. But there was a tinge of natural red in Laura's carefully powdered cheeks. "Say, you know you're all right! I deserved that 'fall-down you gave me and no mistake. Shake on it."

Warned to a friendly glow, June "shook on it." The following morning there was a summons for Miss Webster to appear at the main office. June answered it with-out trepidation, hoping it might mean a transfer to another department. It was Mr. Trompet himself that awaited her, a thin elderly man with keen gray eyes and an aquiline nose. Mr. Wilberforce was standing near him. "You sold quite a large cash order yesterday, I believe, Miss Webster?" said Mr. Trompet.

"Yes, sir." "Can you tell me in what form the payment was made?" "There were three one-hundred-dollar bills, four fifties, I think, and a ten and a five."

"You think? You did not count them then?" "I watched the customer as she counted them out, and then, as Mr. Wilberforce stood quite near, I simply handed the roll of bills immediately to him." "You could not swear that there were three one-hundred-dollar bills then?"

"Yes, I noticed them particularly, but the fifties I am not sure about. 'S'ill there must have been four—"

"Miss Webster," the head of the firm said quietly and looked straight at her, "there was a one-hundred-dollar shortage in your department last night." June was genuinely distressed. "Really, Mr. Trompet? How dreadful!" "This customer was a friend of yours, I understand?"

"Well, not really, I suppose," June admitted. "I only met her on the train coming to Montreal." "You could not vouch for her then? And how about your own eyesight? Can you rely upon it absolutely?"

"Oh, yes! Yes to both questions," Mrs. Pomfret is absolutely honest, and besides I saw her count out the money."

"You think then she could not have fooled you?" "Oh, no!" June reiterated vehemently. Mr. Trompet turned to the younger man. "What do you think of it, Wilberforce?"

"Why, it seems to me Miss Webster might be mistaken, as I evidently was myself. Strange old party come in, you know, simple, guileless old soul apparently,—no one suspects her,—buys a lot of stuff and pays with a roll of bills—like this." He picked up a roll from the desk and ran them through his supple white fingers; then he drew from among them a one-hundred-dollar bill folded in the middle so that the \$100 marks on each end lay together. "You can see how easily this hundred dollar bill might seem to be two."

"Oh!" June's fascinated eyes never left his fingers. "There was a moment of silence. "But she couldn't have done that!" exclaimed the girl suddenly. "Her fingers are stiff with rheumatism, and she fumbled the bills and counted them out slowly one by one."

Suddenly realizing the import of her words, she turned a horrified gaze on Mr. Trompet. His own eyes, cool and calculating, but a little sad, were not looking at her. She followed their lead to the white face of Mr. Wilberforce. "Have you anything to say for yourself, Stanley?" asked Mr. Trompet not unkindly. Wilberforce tried to laugh, naturally, but succeeded only in smiling in an ugly way. "Why, Mr. Trompet," he exclaimed, "you have known me for years. Surely you are not going to accuse me on the testimony of a new clerk. And her hands—" he turned to glance significantly at June's tensely clasped fingers—"are certainly not crippled with rheumatism!"

"Stanley!" Mr. Trompet's shocked, imperious voice checked the young man's insinuations. "Don't make matters worse by being a cad! You spoke truth. I have known you for years. I have known your family intimately for even longer. That is why I have not pressed charges some time ago. At first I hoped I was mistaken; then I hoped you might some day come to me with a straight story. But I can let it go no farther."

He turned to a drawer of his desk, and drew out a slip of paper. "Here, I think, is a complete and accurate list of your—borrowings. I will give you six months to make them good—somewhere else." Mr. Trompet motioned toward the door. When Wilberforce had gone, Mr. Trompet turned to June with a look of relief and spoke in a lighter tone. "As for you, Miss Webster, I believe we need just such a young woman as you for assistant manager of the cloak and suit department. Mrs. Burton will be the manager henceforth. She is invaluable, but somewhat elderly and perhaps a trifle set in her ways. Your fresh insight, good taste and tactful courtesy will be just what we need to balance her substantial knowledge of the business and her other solid qualities."

"I hardly feel that I have earned this,"

RESTAURANT DISHES AT HOME

By Betty Barclay

Have you ever gone into raptures over some dish served in your favorite restaurant or tea-room? It may have been a salad, a dessert, a meat dish, or even a humble vegetable dish or soup. Somehow, it had a flavor that won your heart.

Later on in your home you wished you could prepare a similar dish for the family dinner. Those in charge of the meals at restaurants, clubs, hotels, and tea-rooms, are constantly seeking for new flavors, new foods, and new ways in which old foods may be prepared. Naturally they discover food secrets that the average housewife might never learn.

The most delicious restaurant dish may be served on the home table, however, provided the housewife can wheedle the secret from the chef, or discover it by carefully studying the dish that has been placed before her.

Surprising as it may seem, many of the restaurant dishes which please the diners, are dishes that are prepared in almost the same way as they are prepared in the average home. Frequently the sole difference is in some subtle touch, some extra seasoning that transforms the ordinary into a dish, temptingly different.

For instance, a touch of sugar is, in many cases, responsible for the difference in flavor. Sugar is recognized as a quick-energy food, but comparatively few realize that it has the property of accentuating and pointing up the flavor of vegetables. Incidentally, many meat dishes may be bettered if a small amount of sugar is used—not enough to sweeten, but merely enough to bring out the desired flavor.

Here are three typical restaurant and tea-room dishes that may be prepared with ease by any housewife.

STEAK EN CASSEROLE

- 2 pounds round or rump steak
1/2 cup flour
Salt and pepper
2 tablespoons fat
1 teaspoon sugar
2 onions
1 green pepper
2 carrots
2 cups canned tomatoes

Season the flour with salt and pepper and pound it into the steak with the edge of a heavy saucer. Brown the meat in a hot frying pan. Transfer to a casserole and add the sliced onion, chopped green pepper, sliced carrots, tomatoes and sugar. Cover and allow to cook slowly for two hours, or until meat is tender. This may be served right from the casserole.

PIMIENTO CABBAGE SALAD

Add one-fourth cup vinegar to one tablespoon flour, one-half teaspoon dry mustard, one-half teaspoon salt and one tablespoon sugar. Place in a small saucepan over the fire for a few moments, without letting it come to a boil. Then slowly add one cup diluted, evaporated milk, stirring constantly until the mixture thickens. Boil for one minute and remove from fire. Add two tablespoons salad oil, a dash of onion juice and one can of pimiento chopped fine. Mix thoroughly and serve with shaved cabbage.

CORN SOUFFLE

Mix in a saucepan two tablespoons of flour with one tablespoon melted butter. Pour in slowly one cup of milk. Bring to the boiling point. Add one can of corn, one teaspoon of sugar, one teaspoon salt, pepper to taste, and the well-beaten yolks of two eggs. Fold in the whites of the eggs, beaten stiff. Then turn into a buttered baking dish, and bake for thirty minutes in a moderate oven. Serve immediately.

Mothers Value This Oil.—Mothers who know how suddenly croup may seize their children and how necessary prompt action is in applying relief, always keep at hand a supply of Dr. Thomas' Electric Oil, because experience has taught them that this is an excellent preparation for the treatment of this ailment. And they are wise, for its various uses render it a valuable medicine.

BATTLE WITH A BOG

Readers of "Lorna Doone" can never forget the terrible drowning of Carer in the bog. That death trap is still to be seen in the Exmoor country, and not so long ago a valuable hunting-horse was engulfed in the mire and the rider barely escaped with his life. Another Briton, who had a narrow escape from a similar bog, tells of a thrilling experience in this relation. He was with an official of the Ordnance Survey, who was correcting the map of the country. In the dusk he and the rest of the party lost their way and go into Redmire. It was winter, the bog was unusually wet, and they could scarcely trip from one stone to another. Six bullocks had been lost in that very spot during the year.

All at once the Britisher sank above his waist, and was rapidly being sucked in farther. He called to the officer, but in the dark the latter could not see him. The water had reached the man's armpits. Happily he had with him a stout bamboo six feet long. He placed it at-ward the surface and held his arms as far extended as possible. By quickly jerking his body he gradually lifted it and threw himself forward as far as he could. Finally he managed to cast himself up to the surface. The suddenness was so great that it tore the leather gaiters off his legs. For a quarter of an hour he lay stretched out, gasping, before he could get breath enough to worm himself along to dry soil.

June said falteringly, "I shall always be grateful. I am certainly very much in your debt, Mr. Trompet." "On the contrary, my dear young lady, I am the debtor."

SLATS' DIARY

BY ROSS PARQUHAR

Friday—well Burnance Flick is dum-some dish served in your favorite restaurant or tea-room? It may have been a salad, a dessert, a meat dish, or even a humble vegetable dish or soup. Somehow, it had a flavor that won your heart.

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