

The Free Press Short Story

THE END OF A JELLY DAY

MARGARET E. SANDSTER

GRACE HILDRETH had been working hard all day putting up jellies. Ralph, her husband, had not been out of the house more than thirty minutes before she was in the full swing of it.

"I hope Ralph isn't hungry," sighed Grace as she ladled a vivid crimson liquid from kettle to glass. "I hope that he won't be expecting roast chicken and apple pie for supper. It'll be just too bad," she added a shade crossly, "if he's expecting anything at all to eat!"

This was the first time in their short months of married life, which had started in June, that she had felt in the least out of patience with any of her husband's wishes. Putting up jelly through the whole of a blazing day is not conducive to sweetness of temper.

Mid-afternoon wore on to late afternoon, the last sixty minutes were the hardest. As the factory whistles began to blow, and thereby to announce the coming of evening, the task was finished. At half past four the small kitchen was in spotless order again, and rows of brilliant jelly stood in mass formation upon table and shelf. It was a task to be proud of, and yet as Grace surveyed it she sighed. Her sigh held no pride, it held only a vast and cumulative weariness.

"I'm going to take a hot bath," she said herself, as she sighed, "and then I'm going to put on aingham-bungalow apron and sit down on the porch to relax. When Ralph comes I'll give him some ginger ale and some sandwiches. If that isn't enough for him, he can go down to the drug store at the corner and get an ice-cream soda or something. It isn't," she apologized to herself, "as if I don't give him a hot dinner every other night, but this is an exception."

It was an exception, for Grace was usually a plus-perfect housekeeper, and supper was always delicious and on time. She comforted herself, fleetingly, with the reflection that, notwithstanding the fact that she had that day, and such jelly! With this thought she went draggingly into the small bathroom to take the aforementioned hot bath. Somehow the heat was more restful to her than a cold shower would have been. It took some of the ache out of her arms and head. After the bath she brushed her hair straight back from her brow, no water waves to-night, and tied herself into a plain checked bungalow apron.

On other evenings when Ralph came home she was crisp in dimity or organza, or picturesque in flowered chiffon. Her pretentious had been an extensive one. To-night Ralph could realize that she was married to a working woman; she sallied, and like it.

Slightly after five o'clock Grace started to take her bath, so that it was close to six when she finally reached the porch of the bungalow and collapsed into a hammock. The train on which Ralph came got in at six-five and the station was ten minutes walk away.

Grace leaned back, there in the hammock, and felt with intense gratitude the breath of cool air upon her forehead. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply of the cool air. All at once she heard Ralph's voice booming through the alarums and she knew that she had been asleep.

"Why, Ralph," she managed, as her eyes fluttered open, "I must have dropped off and had a little cat nap. I was completely worn out. Why—her drowsy eyes were wide open now, why, Ralph, she managed, "has he brought company home with you?"

Ralph Hildreth was not the sort of young husband who brings company home for dinner without first telephoning. He was considerate as in every other way. For that reason his tone was extremely apologetic as he spoke.

"Don't you care, Mrs. Hildreth, I didn't expect a banquet," the visitor told her as he fairly beamed upon her. "Your husband insisted on bringing me, and told me I'd have to take potluck. I was weak enough to accept, for I live about in hotels a lot; I don't often get a chance to eat dinner in a real home."

Ralph had fallen back a trifle. From behind the shabby figure of his friend he was making signs, family signs, to Grace. Grace answered them with a look that was both cold and unfriendly. "A real home, indeed!"

"Well, it'll be potluck, all right, Mr. Ames," she said to the guest, "potluck of the worst sort, I'm afraid. Why don't the two of you? Was there a faint edge of sarcasm in her voice? "All down on the porch and make yourselves cool and comfortable. I'll go in and get supper started. I won't be long."

Justly she rose from the hammock. What was it she had planned, sandwiches and ginger ale; and possibly an ice-cream soda at the corner drug store? It had all sounded ideal, and yet here she was, involved in the business of setting a table and laying out dishes and choosing forks and knives. To say nothing of preparing a meal when there was nothing to prepare.

"Why on earth did I ever get married?" she asked herself, as she went toward the kitchen that she had quitted just a short hour before, "if Ralph isn't the most exasperating—"

She broke off, short, for she had gained the kitchen and was looking about it at the rows and rows of vivid jelly. Seeing that jelly somehow made her want to cry, it was as she stood in the centre of the room fighting back the tears that her husband came rapidly through the kitchen doorway and joined her.

"I'm so sorry, honey," he said, "I did make it a hash of it, bringing old Amer home! But this was an emergency and you're always so pretty and everything, and you always look so cool and fresh and sweet in the evening that I didn't think you'd mind. Somehow you don't seem like yourself to-night, Grace," he added with a husky lack of care, "whatever have you done to your hair, and what have you got on?"

Then it was that Grace did cry. "I've got on a bungalow apron, if it's all the same to you!" she told Ralph, through her tears. "And I haven't done anything to my hair. Furthermore, I don't intend to do anything to it."

Ralph was advancing toward her, arms outstretched. "I didn't mean to make you cross, dear," he explained, "I didn't mean to say you look funny or anything. I only mean that you aren't so pretty as you usually—"

"Oh, getting out of this kitchen," she said, "everything you say makes matters worse. It isn't enough for you to bring home company when I'm so tired I can't drag myself around! That isn't nearly enough, so you've got to tell me I look funny into the bargain. Oh, do leave me alone!"

With a startled look Ralph backed out of the kitchen door. Grace heard his steps go lagging down the hall toward the place where the guest was waiting. "And he can wait a good long time," she told herself, bravely, "before there will be anything interesting in the way of food." Saying which, she sank down with her head against the kitchen table and continued with the tears.

Perhaps Grace cried for ten minutes before she realized that Ralph was not coming back to comfort her. When she did realize the fact she sprang to her feet angrily.

"I'll just teach Ralph a lesson," she told herself. "I'll give that nasty old Ames man a supper he'll remember all his life. He'll remember it because it's so bad. Ralph has no right to be so thoughtless!"

Crossly she went into the dining room, just off the kitchen, a dining room that was her special pride because so few new housekeepers have dining rooms, nowadays. She was about to set the table with a drab tablecloth that had faded in its first washing, and with her kitchen china, when she heard the voice of the guest speaking. The small porch ran around the side of the dining room and it was as if Mr. Ames were in the same room. His voice was clear and pleasant and easy to understand.

"You know, Ralph," Mr. Ames was saying, "I'm completely charmed with your wife. As I said to her, I spend most of my time in hotels—and the sort of young-wives who live in hotels are a depressing lot for an old fogey like me to observe. I remember when I was first married, my wife had a checkered dress like your wife's and she wore her hair slicked back from her forehead, and it was as if my wife were in the same room. His voice was clear and pleasant and easy to understand."

The old man's voice broke suddenly and Grace could hear her husband embarrassed clearing his throat. Listening, with the faded cloth in her hand, Grace did not know that she was standing as still as a statue. Something incredibly pathetic was in the old man's statement and something revealing in it, too. As Grace stood there she realized that she was punishing a guest for something that she had not done. She realized that she was violating all the rules of hospitality that housewives, young or old, should observe.

"Why," she said in her heart, "he's old, and he's tired, too! More tired than I am with my silly jelly making. He's lonesome, and I have Ralph. And he lives in a hotel, a horrid hotel, and I have this darling home. I'm a pig, that's what I am!"

Rapidly she tossed aside the faded tablecloth. Going to the chest of drawers that housed her linen, she took out the loveliest embroidered cloth that she owned. It was not more than a matter of minutes that cloth graced the dining-room table and was covered with the most shining glass and silverware that she possessed. She even found time to run out to the wee garden in back of the house and pick a few flowers for the centre of the table.

Ralph and his guest had been talking for not much more than half an hour when Grace came to the door. She was a different Grace than the one who had banished Ralph from the kitchen. Although she still wore the checkered bungalow apron, she had pinned a spray of magnolias in the throat of it; though she still wore the faded dress, she had added with a husky lack of care, "whatever have you done to your hair, and what have you got on?"

"Supper is served, gentlemen," she announced suavely, "and if you'll excuse the deficiencies of the cook, she'll be glad to have you come into the dining room."

Ralph's unhappy eyes, and his mouth as well, popped open at the sound of her cheery voice, but old Mr. Ames rose to the occasion. Getting up from his chair he made her a deep and courtly bow before the three of them went into the dining room.

The supper was delightful, although it was the simplest sort of one that could ever have been prepared. Creamed potatoes dotted with parsley filled a shallow silver dish, and an omelet so fluffy and light that it looked like a small feather-bed, lay upon a dainty platter. Brilliant sliced tomatoes were in a crisp cool nest of lettuce, garnished with a special dressing that Grace's mother had made famous throughout the whole of the town in which Grace had been raised.

There was from an old recipe, and always kept for an occasion. Luscious raspberries which were left over from the canning filled another dish. The piece de resistance was a wide dish of baking-powder biscuits dotted with melting butter, and a saucer of the crimson jelly that only that afternoon had been completed.

"Look at that jelly, Mr. Ames," Grace told her guest, "and don't blame me for the supper. The jelly's the culprit, not I. There would have been all sorts of things for dinner if it hadn't been for that innocent looking little mold—and

thought you understood. And, say, I don't know how—" he gulped again, "to thank him. But I feel, Grace, that it's your biscuits and your jelly—"

Grace, with head down on her arms on the table, was crying. Only her tears were not the sort of tears she had cried on the kitchen table before she started preparing dinner. They were the happiest tears she had ever shed. Owing her bent back the eyes of the two men met, and before Ralph's hand stole out to touch the smooth, bowed head of his wife, the older man had winked.

The meal was a jolly one. The omelet melted away and the creamed potatoes vanished and the biscuits, spread with their sweet butter and fresh jelly, fairly evaporated. When at last the three diners had reached the fruit cake and coffee stage, the duck had fallen and it was necessary to light the candles. As they sat cozily in the mellow light of those candles, Mr. Ames drew a long breath and spoke.

"Young woman," he said to Grace, "you've changed my ideas about modern married couples. When I do what I'm going to do for your Ralph I'll be just too bad! Because then he'll be able to afford a maid, and maybe if you have a maid you won't prepare many, more meals like this one that we've just eaten. You see, I was sort of undecided about things when I came into the office this afternoon. In fact, I'd just about made up my mind to bring in a new manager—a fellow from the plant of a New York competitor of ours. But after seeing how you run your home—and seeing the ability Ralph showed in his choice of a wife—I realize that I'll do better to appoint a manager from my own staff. After to-morrow Ralph will be that manager. As for his pay—well, we'll say, as a beginning, that it'll be doubled."

Grace was so startled that one of her writing teaspoons dropped with a little clatter on to the table. "But," she stammered, "just who are you, Mr. Ames? I thought you were only somebody that—"

Mr. Ames spoke. "Well," he said, "I don't wear a frock coat and a top hat when I go calling, I've always liked shabby clothes. Mother, when she was alive, my wife nearly died twenty-five years ago—used to throw out my suits when they got too shabby at the elbows and knees, but since her going I've clung to the old ones. However, I've changed the subject abruptly. I'm getting away from the matter in hand. In other words, and despite my looks, Mrs. Hildreth, I'm the owner of Ralph's company. I don't often meddle around the office except when I'm making changes. That's probably why you haven't heard Ralph say anything much about me."

Ralph gulped before he spoke. "Mr. Ames," he said, "is my boss, Grace."

SLATS' DIARY

OLIVER N. WARREN

Sunday: The preacher at church this a.m. took for a text that all should love their naber as theirself. I thot it okay duke until I thot of how Jake have been warming up to Jane of lately. That are diffrant.

Monday: I see in the newspaper that the male carriers is to take a centes of the unemployment and etc. that gets paid for not doing no thing. I have noticed that the ones out of a job that I no always managed run way to be in that condition.

Tuesday: Pa complained to Ma about the grocery bill that come to him the onset of the month & she cooks to much that the family cant eat and etc. But Ma had a ally all reddy & replide & ad she hat to do it so she can ekonomize by preparing food from left over things.

Wednesday: Ant Emmy got the wint of a argymint with the wether burro. She called up & set the gov. gesor how about a slower this evning he sed okay by me, take one if you need it. She got 1/2 mad & when she told Pa & Drake ifen they both left & then the other 1/2 of her got mad & that 1/2 was her mouth.

Thursday: I sed to Bliters can you keep a secret & he replide & sed you bel I can & then I sed I am in need turrible bad of 2 bits. He sed rest easy old boy. I want say no thing about it to nobodidie. P. S I suppose he diddent no what I ment

Friday: Jake might as well not go to school or nothing for ennyhow he goes right on larning to be dummer & dummer. He calst on Klay last evning & when it got late she ast him did he think he could stay all night & he sed he dont no but will telefome home and find out & him stepping out with giral

Saturday: Well, they tent no school today or tomorow & am I werrying. Tho I and only worry I have is wondering how the teacher can get by without no kids to make worry. I bet she sed & I no I am glad.

NATURE SAYS CHEW! JUICY FRUIT KEEPS TEETH SPARKLING

Ruppert Thinks Ruffing is O. K. Now



Pictured in the Yankee dressing room are Col. Jacob Ruppert, owner of the change, and Charlie Ruffing, ace pitcher, who hurried the Yanks to a win in the World Series. Remember how bitter these two were toward each other in the spring of this year? Owing to Charlie's fine record this season, and his victory in the series, we'll bet the Colonel will admit Ruffing's ability wants in quick order next spring.

ENERGY for your CHILDREN THE FAMOUS EDWARDSBURG CROWN BRAND CORN SYRUP

GARROLL'S advertisement listing various food products and prices such as Custard, Vi-tone, Oxo Cubes, Marmalade, Wafers, Cheese, Jellies, Flour, Sardines, Sunlight Butter Bars, Sugar Wafers, Pitted Cherries, Fresh Coffee, and Aylmer Peaches.

CARROLL'S LIMITED advertisement listing fresh produce prices: Potatoes (6 lbs. Nice Size 15c), Onions (10 Sound and Dry 18c), Lettuce (2 Firm Heads 15c), Celery (Large Stalks 5c), Grapes Tokays (2 lbs. Fresh 19c).