

Wealth

This new Aunt Martha story is written especially for every wife who thinks she feels a little ashamed of her husband's bad manners

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FOR a long while now, Dora—or Doda, as she was called—had been moody and disquieted. She was a pretty, supple thing with crinkly hair and dimples and the enviable type of figure which can stand any amount of calories without taking on a single, annoying pound.

She had a long, low sports car and an up-to-the-second house with a patio and a tiny, sunken garden, centered by a fountain on the edge of which a chubby green bronze Peter Pan sat and played his pipes throughout the day.

Pan, and the house and the smart car were one and all the gifts of Jerry Parsons, the lumbering young giant whom Doda had taken for better or worse on a fragrant, moon-touched night 10 Junes or so ago.

In those years, when all the treasures she had now were the unrealized dreams of her heart, life had seemed a fascinating game to Doda. There had been things to wish for then—things to lie awake at night and plan while Jerry slept beside her in the darkness. Hooked rugs and a chiming clock. A dozen things—a hundred things and Jerry in the midst of them, gentle, awkward, lumbering with his minstrel ha-ha and his tousled hair.

In those days when life had been like an over-brimming cup, Doda had felt a pitying tenderness for the lonely. Especially for Mona Richards, who was her best friend and who had been going with that selfish Tom Andrews year after year—hopelessly hoping for the proposal which Andrews never made.

"It isn't fair. Some people, like Mona, have so little. And some people, like me, have so much," she observed one day to Aunt Martha, whose cheeks were like peonies and whose wisdom was so toothsome as her pies.

INTO Aunt Martha's eyes, blue as cornflowers beneath the silken wave of her cloud-like white hair, there crept a soft, pleased expression.

"That's fine, Doda. Lots of folks has blessings, but it ain't all of them that's blessed with sense enough to know it," she said.

But all that was before a sun-baked piece of hill land, which Jerry had inherited from his father, suddenly became a miracle of oil.

Seizing Doda in his great, bear-like arms, he had said:

"It's just too gosh-darned wonderful to be true. We're done with scrimping. Honey. Now you can have all those little, old doodads you've set your heart on. We're rich. And we're young. Gosh almighty. He gave his booming laugh. "It sure is great to have some spare silver in your pocket before you're too old and rheumatic to enjoy jingling one dime against the other."

Thus, through the black magic that lay beneath the crust of a tract of hill land, Doda became an expensive, treasured woman. In a few months, she, who had cash-and-carry, washed her own rayon and made the Sunday roast in to the Monday stew, had acquired the soft, exquisite look of one who is ministered to by many expert hands. Like her house and her garden, she came to have an air of superlative grooming. The hardy peach-tan of her cheeks paled to a smooth, rose-pink texture; the thrifty, competent fingers became graceful, lily-like things, with glimmering, almond-shaped nails. And gradually the slender yet robust body took on a look of delicate fragility.

IN a few months she had changed her entire mode of life. Her house was smartly staffed. There was a second girl who wore frilly caps and aprons, and a butler, with braid down his coat, who brought cocktails to the living room before dinner and coffee to the patio after dinner.

"Gosh almighty, we're so high-hat I don't know myself. Darned if we don't eat all over the house," Jerry said to Mona one night when she was spending the evening with them.

At his slang, Doda's delicately arched eyebrows quirked up in annoyance. What made Jerry so slouchy, she wondered. Though he had acceded to her request that he change to his dinner coat in the evenings, the white bosom of his shirt bulged and his fashionably tailored clothes always looked as if they had been flung at him. Then, too, there was that booming laugh of his and the slovenly way he had of slurring his r's.

"I declare, Jerry, you talk like an immigrant," she protested.

He laughed. Nerve-wracking, that big, hearty laugh over nothing!

"Gosh almighty, Babe, I reckon I do. I got a right to. I was fetched up on a farm."

Standing before her, like a big, awkward dog, Jerry's broad, kindly face wore a puzzled expression.

"Gosh almighty, it's bad enough to have to eat one meal with six forks without having to do gymnastics with your tongue. But," good-naturedly, "I'll try, Babe," he told her.

BUT if he tried, which Doda doubted, his efforts were not productive of results. He had no aptitude for elegance. A bluff, simple chap, whom dogs followed and children adored, he was delighted with, but utterly unchanged by, the magic wealth which had suddenly gushed upon him.

To him money meant release—a joyous freedom to do and have the things he had always wanted, whereas to Doda it meant dignity and all the trappings that go to make up an imposing way of life.

There was Parks, the butler, for instance. Tall, straight-backed, cat-footed—the perfection of his kind.

She liked his purring deference; his "Yes, Madame," and "No, Madame," and the swiftness with which he drew her chair or ran down the steps to open the door of her car.

"Doda and Barks (he insisted on calling him Barks) talk with their eyebrows," Jerry joked to Mona. "Left eyebrow means fill the water glasses. Right eyebrow—two twitches and a pause—where is the salt?"

For to Jerry, the unctuous Parks and the



"Oh, Aunt Martha, I was hoping you'd come," she said . . . and she sobbed out the story of her wrongs.



With a sharp, knife-edged "Jerry!" Dora glanced up to find her husband and two other corduroyed males standing on the threshold. . . . White with fury, she watched the havoc this untimely intrusion had wrought. . . . "How could he? How dare he?"

nightly dinner coat belonged in the same category. "Fol-de-rol," he called them. "But if they make you happy, Sugar, I reckon I can stand 'em," he said.

But they didn't make her happy. After the first excitement of her new wealth was over, Doda felt empty and curiously let down. Small things annoyed her. She developed moods. Jerry began to get on her nerves.

"He's so trying. He doesn't seem to understand that people with money have certain obligations to live up to," she complained to Mona one morning when they were downtown selecting the favors and bonbons for a small bridge dinner she was giving the next night.

"YOU don't mean a word of that, Doda," Mona protested. "I dote on Jerry. He's so big and hearty you couldn't help liking him if you tried."

"Well, maybe you couldn't. You've known him forever, and so make allowances. But what do you think people like the Seymours would think of his 'reckons' and 'aints' and 'goshes'?" she inquired.

"Olga Seymour is so affected and put on I wouldn't care what she thought," Mona said. Doda turned to the girl behind the counter: "A pound of these green mints, please. And, oh, yes, a pound of salted almonds." Then she spoke to Mona, "Well, I care. Olga Seymour is at the head of everything that's interesting in Linsdale. I've been wanting to cultivate her for a long time and the hunting trip Jerry leaves on tomorrow gives me my chance."

She narrowed her eyelids. "I'm going to show the high-hat Mrs. Seymour that there's at least one person in Linsdale who doesn't serve butter pats at a formal dinner."

The meticulous care with which Doda selected her menu testified to the high regard in which she held the Seymours.

In this, however, she was not alone. Ever since Harry Seymour, not good enough to play Broadway and too lazy to play stock, had come to Linsdale as director of the Little Theater movement, he and his exotic, orchidaceous Olga had constituted themselves the intellectual arbiters of the town.

Both of them affected a rather stagey, drawing room manner of speech—broadening their "A's" and using the very latest pronunciation of debatable words. Though they were secretly delighted to be big frogs in a tiny puddle, they lifted supercilious brows at anything that lacked the Manhattan label.

ALL in all, they acted roles so well that there were few who did not accept them at their own valuation. One of the few was Aunt Martha, who shrewdly opined that "the nearest them young upstarts ever got to Europe was Paris, Texas."

Dora, however, had no such insight. To her the Seymours represented all the urbanity which she was trying to inculcate in her own manner of living, and she was much flattered by their immediate acceptance of her invitation to dine.

Feverishly anxious to impress them, she got out her silver service, ordered flowers from the

florist and pastries from Aunt Martha, who was almost as famous a confectioner as she was a sage.

She was unabashedly grateful for the fact that the occasion, which she had taken such pains to plan, was not to be marred by Jerry's rumbling laughter or his careless disregard of the proper fork.

"Mona and Tom can always be counted on to do the right thing," Dora was thinking as she went down for a last inspection of the cocktails and hors d'oeuvres which Parks was to serve before dinner.

"Everything looks lovely, Parks," she praised.

And, as everything looked, so everything went . . . in the beginning. Clanking with bracelets and signous in a clinging gown of a bizarre Batik pattern, Olga exclaimed over the house, declared the cocktails divine and the caviar and stuffed celery "too delicious."

"This place is a little jewel. One doesn't expect to find such discrimination in Linsdale," Olga was saying when suddenly the rumble of deep laughter and the heavy tread of masculine feet were heard just beyond the dining room door.

WITH a sharp, knife-edged "Jerry!" Dora glanced up to find her husband and two other corduroyed males standing on the threshold.

"Lo, Babe. Gosh almighty, but we've had the dickens of a time. Truck broke down halfway to camp. Couldn't budge the thing, so we flagged a passing car and came back home. Sorry to horn in on your little shindig. I'd forgotten all about it, to tell you the truth. But I reckon you'll excuse our togs and that you can make places for three starving huntsmen who didn't get to hunt. How 'bout it, Barks?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. Certainly, sir," Parks said, and in a moment, with the adroit swiftness of one who is equal to any emergency, he had drawn up chairs and set extra plates and glassware on the table.

Tight-lipped and white with fury, Dora watched the havoc which this untimely intrusion had wrought. Digging her nails into her palms: "How could he? How dare he?" was her enraged thought as the sublimely unconscious Jerry—using his fish fork for the salad—gave a slangy, drole account of their labors with the truck.

Nor did the fact that the Seymours seemed to find him thoroughly amusing appease her. All during dinner and later, when the eight of them settled down to two tables of bridge, she was so infuriated that the delicately savored courses tasted like sawdust and she couldn't remember trumps.

"Wait here. I want you to spend the night," she told Mona, and no sooner had the door closed on the gay farewells of her guests than she broke into the bitterness of tears.

Fumblingly, like a dog that has been whipped, Jerry followed her and Mona up the stairs.

"Gosh, Babe. I'm sorry. Honest. I didn't mean to spoil your party. Gee, I thought we had a swell evening. I sorta liked those nutty Seymours, too. I never dreamed—"

"NO," sobbingly, "you never do," Dora flung at him as Mona, gently but firmly pushed him into the hall.

Mona closed the door upon his hurt, bewildered eyes.

"Don't be an idiot," she said briskly. "Jerry made the party. He was the hit of the show."

But Dora was not to be soothed.

"You'd have thought her life had been ruined," Mona commented to Aunt Martha the next day. "I don't know what's come over Doda. She's discontented and restless and as for poor, old Jerry, she actually seems ashamed of him."

Aunt Martha rose briskly. She tied the strings of a pink sunbonnet underneath her chin:

"I don't guess there's nothin' the matter except she got rich too fast. Black magic, they call this oil money, and black magic I sometimes think it is, the way it has of makin' plumb idiots out of people. I reckon," with her wise smile, "it's high time I looked in on Miss Doda."

When she looked she found her lying on a lounge in the sunroom, spent, inert, with swollen, dark-rimmed eyes.

"Oh, Aunt Martha, I was hoping you'd come," she said; and when Aunt Martha had gathered her to her ample bosom she sobbed out the story.

Patently, with her roughened palm stroking the smooth coils of Dora's burnished hair, Aunt Martha listened.

"Hm, that's too bad. But then what can you expect, dearie? It's always been a wonder to me how a smart, pretty, up-and-comin' girl like you ever married a big, slow, old lummox like Jerry," she said.

BREATHLESS with surprise, Dora sat speechless, looking, wide-eyed and intent, into Aunt Martha's placid face.

"You see, you're so up-to-date. But Jerry is just Jerry, and always will be. He's a country boy, Jerry is, but you're a regular mee-tropolitan, or whatever you call it," she said.

Electrified, Dora drew herself up sharply. "Why, Aunt Martha, what on earth do you mean?"

"Jes' what I say. He ain't up to you. He's awkward an' stupid an' sorta dumb-witted—"

"That's not true!" Dora cut in, her cheeks crimson. "I won't let you say such things. He's keen as a whip, Jerry is. He's the best insurance man in Linsdale. He's a crack golfer and an expert swimmer. He's a straight shooter, too. Honorable and generous and fine. And," angrily, "you know it as well as anyone!" she cried.

"Lord, Honey, I was jes' baitin' you. Of course, I know it, but I wanted to be sure that you did," Aunt Martha said.

For a moment, Dora stared at Aunt Martha. Then suddenly she gave a giggle—an embarrassed, humble, little giggle on the edge of tears.

"Oh, Aunt Martha, I'm such a fool," she said.

"All of us is fools, Doda. 'Specially folks that's been married long enough to start pickin' on each other. Seems like they pick so hard for the clay they forget to dig for the gold. But I'm glad your complaint ain't no worse than it is. I was sorta worried when Mona told me about last night."

"But I ain't now," she added, chuckling. "Cause I've often noticed that when a wife will fight for her husband her fights with him ain't very serious."