

Dishes

By Agnes Mary Brownell

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"Well, I guess that's the last of that!" Myra Bray said grimly, and blinked at the smashed fragments of the cup.

It had been so fragile, that even the sound of its breaking was thin and evanescent like a note blown, not struck. Now as it lay on the floor, it seemed dwindled to nothing more than the fine gilt stem that had been its handle, and irregular pinkish fragments like fallen petals.

"Myry Bray! Butterfingers!" Myra apostrophized herself, and darted a quick, sidelong glance in the direction of old Mrs. Bray, her mother-in-law.

It had been old Mrs. Bray's cup. This was old Mrs. Bray's house. When Myra married Marvin Bray it had been with the understanding that they must make their home with his mother, now that Nellie was gone.

Old Mrs. Bray said nothing. The pink cup had belonged to Nellie; Marvin's had been blue. They had been old-time Christmas gifts; and they had never been used. They were too fine to use. All those years they had stood side by side on an upper shelf of the safe, along with the majolica pickle-dish, the cracker-jar that Abbie Carter had painted in a design of wheat-heads, the lemonade-set that George's wife had presented upon the occasion of a visit, and a collection of little china souvenirs--trays and miniature pitchers with "Souvenir of the Springs" inscribed upon them.

"At least the saucer's safe," ventured Myra, after a pause. She had only just come to live with old Mrs. Bray. She wondered how she would take it. "Well--might's well sweep up the muss!"

Old Mrs. Bray spoke. Myra thought she detected a quiver in her voice:

"Pick 'em up," her mother-in-law directed, "and put 'em here in my apron." Myra obeyed. Old Mrs. Bray gathered up her apron and went away to her room. She did not emerge till nearly supper-time.

Once Myra had gone to her door. It was inhospitably closed. Myra thought she detected a faint chinking sound. "Now I wonder"--thought Myra--"is she agrievin' or asulkin'? I'd ruther it was asulkin'--an old pink chiny cup! I'd buy her another, only I s'pose it wouldn't make it up to her--Nellie's and all. Mebbe if I hurried and put off my waist, I could finish up her challis. She don't need the challis, and I do the waist. But mebbe it might take her mind off--losin' Nellie and then losin' the cup. I expect that come hard to Mother Bray."

Myra smoothed her hair and put on a fresh afternoon percale. To see Myra with her thin brown face, her slicked-back black hair which showed white threads like ravellings, in her afternoon house-dress of gray percale, one would never have taken her for a bride. Yet Myra had a very bridal feeling, sitting in her own home, with her own sewing, instead of running the machine in the shop, as she had done before her marriage. That it was, in reality, her husband's mother's home, and her husband's mother's sewing, scarcely altered the case. It was home, not shop. She had been married in August, when work fell slack. Now it was October. She had not broken anything until to-day.

Myra sewed and rocked and looked up at the framed portraits of Marvin and Nellie and Frank as children--the girl in queer plaid, and a locket; the boys in gilt-braided suits. Old and crude as the drawing was, it had a look of them--that steady, serious look of Marvin which

he had never lost, and Nellie's--bold and managerial. Frank had died. Poor mother. She had known trouble.

At five, old Mrs. Bray came stiffly out. She had a curious, secretive air, not in the least mournful nor accusative, as Myra had feared. Myra held up the dress--a soft, gray challis with lavender pipings. Old Mrs. Bray's eyes widened like a pleased child's.

"Want to try it on?" suggested Myra.

"It ain't done!"

"To the last hook." She began to assist her mother into the new dress.

Mrs. Bray was a pretty old woman. There was about her an effect of fragile bloom like that of her old cup. In her gray-and-lavender she was like a quaint pastel.

"There!" cried Myra, standing off to view the effect.

"I ain't agoin' to take it off!" declared old Mrs. Bray suddenly; and waited for the remonstrance.

Nellie had always said: "Why, mother! Of course you'll take it off right away! Wear your good clothes out at home!"

To her surprise, Myra assented. "Keep it on, and let Marvin see how fine you look."

"Wun't you need me about supper?"

"Now you just set and let me get supper alone to-night."

"I'll set the table," decided old Mrs. Bray. "I guess just laying plates won't hurt it none."

Myra set about her biscuits. Marvin had to have his hot bread. Suddenly she heard a little splintering crash, followed by a whimpering wail--"Myry! Oh, Myry! I've broke the sasser!" The last remnants of Nellie's saucer, with their pink, fluted edges like ravished petals, lay spread out at old Mrs. Bray's feet.

"Now ain't that just too bad! (I s'pose she was touching it, for old times' sake--and her trembly old fingers and all, she let it slip.) Never mind, Mother; you got the blue one yet. And mebbe that saucer can be mended--"

Her mother with a jealous sweep of old hands, gathered up the fragments of the broken saucer. "I don't want mended dishes," she said resentfully, and went stiffly away to her room.

That night, when they were alone, Myra told Marvin about Nellie's cup and saucer. "And I just know she's akeeping of the pieces, and amourning over them," she finished. "Such things get to have associations. I 'most wish it had been your cup that got broke. She's got you, and Nellie's gone."

"Gone--what's a hundred miles!"

"I'm afraid she misses Nell."

"Now don't you go getting notions in your head. Nell was a master hand for work, but she didn't keep things up a mite better than you--not so good, to my notion. You're restfuller. Nell couldn't rest herself nor let anybody else. Nell couldn't atouched them biscuit--fact!"

"I try to keep things up as much like Nell as I can. I'd ruther use white table-cloths myself, but Nell always used the checkered. And my own chiny set the folks gave me--but I know Mother'd feel strange without her old white ones. There's lots of pretty chiny in the safe, but Nell

always used it so careful. I've never used a piece. And yet, just adustin' that pink cup I had to go and drop it! I don't s'pose it was ever drunk out of."

"What's the good," argued Marvin, "of having things too fine to use?"

"You and me, Marvin, think the same about them things. But Nell and Mother--they're different."

"You're a good woman, Myry."

It pleased Myra to be told that she was good, and that her biscuits surpassed those of the capable Nell. But such compliments, for all their practicality and worth, sent no flush to her sallow cheek.

In her woman's magazine, which came to her monthly, lovers (and more rarely, husbands) were always breathing into the heroine's ear, "I love you. How beautiful you are!" or sentiments in that tenor. Marvin had not told her he loved her. He had asked her seriously and respectfully to marry him, when it became apparent that the efficient Nell was about to wed. And he had never told her that she was beautiful. She could not have believed him if he had.

Two days after the accident to the pink cup, the majolica pickle-dish was found shattered in front of the safe, when Marvin came out to start the kitchen fire. No one could account for its being there. The safe doors were ajar, and they decided that the majolica dish must have got pushed too near the edge of the shelf, and that a sudden jar had dislodged it. The safe doors were never remembered to have been left open before; the majolica dish had always sat well back; and nothing more jarring than Marvin's step disturbed the habitual quiet of the house. Still, how else account for it? "Mebbe Tom leaped up and done it," suggested old Mrs. Bray. The sleepy Tom, a handsome Tiger-stripe, sunk in bodily comfort, seemed to eye her reproachfully. He had not leaped in years.

Old Mrs. Bray carried away with her the fragments of the majolica pickle-dish and that afternoon, and other afternoons, she passed in the solitary privacy of her room.

Still her retirement seemed to work her no ill. From these solitary vigils she always emerged dressed in her gray-and-lavender. Ordinarily the ladies Bray wore percale on week day afternoons--fresh ones, but prints for all that. That had been Nell's way. Although old Mrs. Bray had a closet hung with good wool dresses, and even one festival silk.

Myra's trousseau had been so simple as scarcely to deserve the name. She had been married in a neat, dark suit, turned out in the shop where she had been employed for more than seven years. Myra had been "on skirts" for most of the seven years; and her dress had been almost a uniform--skirt and blouse. But she had secretly sewed for herself another sort of dress--house-dresses for the afternoon, of inexpensive, but delicate and light-colored fabrics, made a little "fussy." These she never wore. Old Mrs. Bray never wore fussy clothes; and it had not been Nell's way. The gray-and-lavender challis had been in the nature of an experiment. Old Mrs. Bray was plainly pleased; but she rarely wore it. She said it would make it common.

So the Brays, as in Nellie's régime, continued to wear the common gray percales, and to eat off the common white crockery. And with a strange, bewitched pertinacity, the fine, decorative bits of china, shut away on their upper shelf in the safe continued to get themselves broken.

Once it was one of the glasses of George's wife's lemonade-set. These glasses had ornate gilt bands about the brim, and painted flowers upon the side. Taking down the set one day, to show George's wife's gift to a caller (gifts were never gifts in fee simple in the Bray household. Always part possession seemed vested in the donor) old Mrs. Bray let

slip one of the glasses. The fragments lay in a path of sun, struck through and through with light, they seemed to possess a strange, new iridescence.

"Now ain't that too bad!" sympathized the caller. "Spoils the whole set. You want to get every bit of that glass up and in the ash-can. Glass is awful to grind in."

Old Mrs. Bray gathered up the pieces. They sent out strange gleams like rude gems. Myra and the caller watched sympathetically the eager abruptness of her departure.

"Your mother-in-law is some shaky," observed the caller. "She hadn't ought to go to handle such delicate things."

"I expect she won't come out again," Myra said. "It always makes Mother feel bad to break things."

Old Mrs. Bray did not come out again till after the caller had departed. She had on her gray-and-lavender dress. "Always when Mother breaks a dish seems like she goes and puts on her gray-and-lavender," thought Myra; but she only said, "You look nice in that dress, Mother."

"I know I do," returned old Mrs. Bray serenely, "but I don't aim to make it common, Myry."

At holiday time, Nell and her husband came for a visit. Nell immediately proceeded to take the reins of government. She was a big, good-looking woman, younger than Myra. She had a large, well-modeled face with bloomy cheeks, golden brown eyes, fringed thick as daisies, and crisply undulating waves of dark hair. She disposed of their greetings in short order, retired to her old room to change into serviceable work things, and issued her ultimatum.

"Now don't go to any fuss, Myry. John and me ain't company. Treat us like the family. You've changed the roaster, ain't you, Myry? This ain't near so good a place for it. I've brought you one of my hens, Mother--all dressed and ready. We'll have it for dinner. Now Myry, don't you go to getting out a white table-cloth. Get one of them red-checked ones. I s'pose those are your weddin' dishes--well, leave 'em be, now you got them down. But we won't use 'em common--the old white ones is plenty good enough. Folks that use their best every day has got no best. You might get the potatoes on now, Myry."

"Let me finish settin' the table, Myry," pleaded old Mrs. Bray. A moment later there was a crash, "Oh, Nellie! Oh, Myry! I didn't go to do it! My arm breshed it."

"Marvin's souvenir pitcher his Aunt Mat give him one Fair time! It must a' be'n fifteen year old!"

"I didn't go to do it!" quavered old Mrs. Bray.

"Who ever heard of such a thing? Of course you didn't do no such crazy thing! But that don't save its being broke. Here--let me sweep it up."

"Don't you sweep them pieces up!" shrilled her mother.

This voice of high command on the part of her little old subservient mother gave Nell pause. She stood, dust-pan in hand, looking down upon that stiffly stooping figure garnering into her gathered apron a little heap of splintered china.

"Mother must be getting childish," Nell said to Myra, when old Mrs. Bray had trotted stiffly away with her spoils.

Myra did not reply. She hoped Nell would not discover that ravished shelf of prized old china.

"Well--Nell got ye in hand?" inquired Nell's husband, John Peebles, at dinner. The good-natured wink which accompanied the words, the hearty voice and friendly manner, robbed the words of offense. They seemed rather a humorous gibe directed against Nell. These two got along excellently well. There was about John Peebles an effect of tender strength, re-assuring and at the same time illuminating--responsive to weakness, but adamant to imposition. Even the managerial Nell had not succeeded in piercing that armored side of him--his 'thus far and no further.'"

"Aw--you!" said Nell, adoringly.

"I bet Nell's met her boss!" grinned Marvin. "He don't go so fur as to beat ye, does he, Nell?"

"Smarty!" returned Nell. Her eyes crinkled up at the corners. She had met her match, and she knew it and gloried in it. But she didn't want any sass from the family.

She had none. They submitted without demur. The dish-pan sunned in the old place. The towels dried along a line of her own stretching. "John and me don't mean to make you any work," she assured them. They made no work. It seemed there had never been so much leisure.

"Myry," inquired Nell, "where's that other glass that goes with George's wife's lemonade-set?"

"Oh, it must be 'round som'ers," Myra returned vaguely.

"Round som'ers! Why ain't they all together?" Nell prodded in further search.

"Where's my pink gilt cup and saucer Aunt Em gimme one Christmas?"

"Ain't it there?" ventured Myra, with a cowardly shrinking from confession, not so much on her own account as for old Mrs. Bray. There was the majolica pickle-dish, the gilt, beflowered lemonade-glass, Abbie Carter's cracker-jar, certain of the fragile souvenir pin-trays stacked in a corner of the shelf.

"Here's Marvin's blue one. It's funny where them things can be. I always kept them here together, on this shelf."

"They're som'ers," Myra repeated vaguely.

Old Mrs. Bray had sat throughout this conversation, making buttonholes in a new gray percale. Once, when Nell was back at the sink, she reached out a wavering, fat old arm, and gave Myra's apron-string a tug, as a bad child pulls a cat's tail in a sort of impish humor. Her eyes, blue and shining as a child's saucer, looked very wise. A little laugh clucked in her throat.

"Mother--you feel chilly? You want to keep out of drafts," cautioned Nellie from the sink.

"Never felt more chipper!" averred old Mrs. Bray.

She had not spent an afternoon in her room since Nell's arrival. Today, however, after dinner, she withdrew with an air of intending to remain there for some time. She took her buttonholes with her. It was likely that Nell could not content herself until she had searched every cupboard and pantry for the missing treasure.

"I declare--it is the beatin'est thing! Whatever can have become of them?" she apprized Myra. "You find much time to read, Myry?"

Myra found time to read her woman's magazine from cover to cover, in the course of the month. Some things she read more than once--

those frankly impossible stories in which the heroines were always beautiful and always loved. Myra had never known a heroine; the women of her acquaintance were neither beautiful nor adored; and were probably quite comfortably unaware of this lack.

"I'm getting notional," Myra accused herself fearfully. The Family Doctor Book, a learned and ancient tome, confirmed these suspicions. It treated of this, and related matters, with a large assurance, like a trusty confidant.

"Funny how long Mother stays in her room!" wondered Nell.

"Mebbe she's fell asleep. Old people need all the sleep they can get. It's mostly so broken."

"I'm agoing to see!" deposed Nell.

Myra had never invaded that withdrawn privacy. But Nell, with her grenadier step, went swiftly and threw open the door.

"What on earth! Mother!"

Old Mrs. Bray's voice streamed quavering out, "Oh, Nellie! Don't scold me! Myry!--"

Somehow Myra was there--past the affronted Nell in the door. In the instant silence they made a strange tableau.

Old Mrs. Bray in her fine gray-and-lavender gown was seated before her little wash-hand-stand. The floral pitcher in its floral bowl had been set to one side on the floor. What covered the towel-protected top of the stand, was Nellie's looted treasure.

There were the fragments of the pink cup and saucer; the leaf-green and brown majolica bits that had been the pickle-dish; the iridescent

curved sides of George's wife's lemonade-glass; Aunt Em's shattered souvenir pitcher; Abbie Carter's cracker-jar with its smashed wheat-heads. Myra only looked bewilderedly; but on Nell's gaping face apprehension succeeded stupefaction and dissolved in its turn into a great brimming tenderness.

"Scold you, Mother? Oh, Mother--what must you think me! (Oh, poor Mother--poor Mother--she's gone daft!)"

"I always admired pretty broken bits of chiny," old Mrs. Bray confessed. "But the pitcher was a accident--reely it was, Nellie. I never went to let that fall. My arm breshed it. But the sasser and the pickle-dish and George's wife's lemonade-glass and Abbie Carter's cracker-jar--I done them apurpose. And I can't say I regret the pitcher, nuther."

"Yes, Mother! Yes, yes! It's all right; I understand. (Myry, don't you leave her! I thought she was gettin' childish, but Oh--to think--I'll have John go for Doc Bradley right away. Let 'er amuse herself--but don't you leave her alone a minute! Poor Mother! Poor old Mother! Aplayin' with broken chiny dishes!)"

"What's Nell awhisperin' to ye?" inquired old Mrs. Bray, sharply. "There's nothin' to whisper about as I know. Did ever you see anything purtier than this pink chiny piece, Myry? It broke so clean, and curved as a petal. And this here piece of George's wife's lemonade-glass--it's handsome as a brooch. See how the flower come out! Why, Myry, I've set here and fairly eat off these dishes!"

"Yes, Mother. But sha'n't we put them up now! Some one might drop in--Nell bein' here."

She could not bear that Marvin and John and the doctor should see this pitiful child's play.

Old Mrs. Bray assented with the utmost good nature. She drew up a box of lacquer and proceeded to lay her china service carefully and dextrously away. She set the box quite openly along the shelf beside her bonnet-box and the snug, little brown round pasteboard roll that held her little old round muff. Presently they heard steps in the sitting-room. Some one had dropped in--but it was only Marvin and John and old Doc Bradley.

Marvin's face held a look of scared apprehension; John's withheld judgment; Nell was frankly red-eyed. She had been walking fiercely back and forth in the yard unable to face again that piteous picture.

The only unclouded faces there were Doc Bradley's and old Mrs. Bray's. She gave him a shrewd look. He returned it in kind. "So--o--" said old Mrs. Bray, noting their various scrutiny. There was even an effect of state about her as she settled herself in her special rocker. But she said, quite simply and conversationally,

"Do you want I should tell you about them dishes?"

"Well--it was thisaway. And understand--I don't blame nobuddy. Folks are different. I always loved pretty dishes, but I never got to use 'em. First on account of you being little"--she eyed Nellie and Marvin with benignant allowance--"and after that, because of Nell always bein' agen' using things common. She's like her father. He was thataway. He was a good man, but he 'lowed good things shouldn't be used common. And then when Myry come with her purty weddin' dishes and all, I'd hoped she'd be sort o' different--more like me. But seem like she favored Nell. But I'd never thought of breakin' them if it hadn't a be'n for the pink cup. That give me the idee. That very night I broke the sasser to it. I figured I'd get the use of them dishes some way."

Old Mrs. Bray clucked pleasantly, and resumed.

"I'd always wanted to wear one o' my good dresses afternoons, too. Well--Myry made me one. And she was reel good about wantin' me to wear it common. I had a good man. I've had good children. I've lived a long life. But two things I wanted, I never had--pretty dishes to use, and to be dressed up afternoons. Myry makin' me that dress turned my head, I reckon. And the pink cup finished it."

"I take the full blame. It was me done both--broke the cup and sewed the dress"--spoke up Myry. "And it's you I favored all along, Mother. If you knew how I've honed to set the table with my weddin' dishes. And I could show you--I've got some things you've never seen--house-dresses--pink--sprigged--"

"Meanin' no offense, Nellie--and Marvin--you can't help bein' like your pa. I guess I'm just a foolish old woman."

"We're all like we're made," sounded the oracular accents of Mr. Peebles. "Joke's on you all right, Nell."

"I guess I'm it," she admitted cheerfully.

Doc Bradley looked sharply at Myra when she let him out. Perhaps he noted the pathos of that thin face; those speaking eyes, that seemed to confess a secret longing.

"If you should feel the call, just break a few dishes on your own account!" he advised her. "I like to see folks get what they want. If they want it bad enough, they'll get it." He thought it might be a dress, perhaps--something pretty. Women in Myry's case have odd notions.

Myry had an odd notion. She wanted to be told that she was beautiful and loved.

"You little black stringy thing!" she told herself fiercely. "He's fond of you. And good to you. He's like his pa; he won't show it common. And anyways--you beautiful!"

But every month she read, with a new and avid interest, those far-fetched, extravagant tales of beautiful and beloved women.

During the remainder of Nell's stay, old Mrs. Bray and Myra felt a certain delicacy about inaugurating the use of the white cloths, the wedding china, and the pretty bits on the safe-shelf. But when the Peebles's visit was over, the table achieved a patterned whiteness and a general festive appearance. Old Mrs. Bray donned the gray-and-lavender every afternoon, and Myra bloomed out in pink print. She scarcely ever went abroad now, but for all that, her world was infinitely widened. Once Marvin, dangling from two spread fingers a tiny yoke, inquired doubtfully, "Do you think it's big enough to go round his neck?"

He was always urging her to have help in, and not to tire herself out. But curiously, he never noted the pink print any more than if it had been dull slate. That had not been his pa's way; and it was not his way. But he was good to her. What more could a woman ask?

After Nell came, he felt aggrieved--quite useless and in the way. The women were always displaying things--digging them out from the bottoms of drawers--clouds of soft, white things, with here and there a rift of color in tassel or tufting.

There came a night when he sat alone. In the beginning, he had tried to read--he picked up her woman's magazine, eyeing it curiously, that these silly, floppy sheets should hold, as they did, women's eyes. There were pictures in it--always pictures--pictured embraces, with words beneath. "How beautiful you are! I love you--I love you! How beautiful you are!" Always harping on the same thing--love and beauty. As if life were a sentimental thing like that!

He flung it down. How could he stay his mind on such stuff, when Myry--when Myry--

Nell, important and managerial, occasionally came out and elbowed him about in some mysterious search. At such times, old Mrs. Bray, done up for the night in a highly flowered and mantle-like garment, came creeping inquiringly in.

"Now, Nell--you know what Myry told ye--if you was to fergit now--"

"All right, Mother. I won't forget."

"You know where to find 'em--"

"Yes, I know where to find 'em."

"Now, Nell, I promised Myry--"

"What did you promise Myry?" Marvin flared in sudden jealousy. Both women eyed him, as from a great and unattainable height. Then Nell's capable back disappeared beyond Myry's door; and his mother's little old grotesque and woolly figure was swallowed up by the black hall.

Again he took up the magazine. Again looked at the picture. Again, scarcely seeing them, he read the words. Again he sat; and again Nell elbowed him importantly, and his mother in her snail-like wrappings, came creeping in to remind Nell--

When Doc Bradley came out, at first he thought the man, sprawled loosely in the chair, must be asleep--till he lifted his eyes. They were sleepless and inflamed like a watch-dog's.

"Hold on! Wait a minute! Nell's boss now. You don't want to go in looking that way--you'd skeer 'im!"

"What'll I say?" inquired Marvin hoarsely; "Myry's a good woman--she 's been a good wife to me--too good--"

"Tell 'er something she don't know! Say something fond-like and foolish."

"You can come in now," granted the lofty Nell.

Somehow, old Mrs. Bray had preceded him. But he never saw her. He never even saw the managerial Nell. He saw his wife's face, looking so little and white from out a ruffled lace cap. There were circles of ruffles about her thin wrists. There was a lace ruffle in the neck of her gown. For these were Myry's coronation robes; it was about this adorning that old Mrs. Bray had continuously cautioned Nell. Nell, in that smug, proprietary manner of hers, had turned back a blanket--enough to show the tiny yoke which he had dangled, and the neck which it encircled, and the red and wrinkly head on top of that---

Like a well-conned article of catechism, words came to Marvin--words he could never have got from his pa.

"Oh, Myry--I love you! How beautiful you are!"

A strange cosmetic glowed on Myra's white cheek. Happiness is the surest beautifier. He might never say it again. It was not likely that he would. He favored his pa. But she had had her great moment--her beautiful and beloved moment. She smiled drowsily up at old Mrs. Bray, beaming beneficently above; and remembered, in an odd flash, the pink china cup. This was her cup--full and running over.

"Come on out now, and let her sleep," ordered the dictatorial Nell. "Who'd a' thought, now, Myry had her little vanities? That lace cap

now, and them ruffles--for Marvin! Some folks has the strangest notions."

"'Tain't notions!" protested old Mrs. Bray.

"Oh, yes, it is! And all right, if you feel that way--like you and your dishes, now."

"Myry and me both is powerful set on dishes," exulted old Mrs. Bray.