

# The Clerk and the Misconceived Theory

Which Deals With Various Characters. By Leta Stetter.

The boarders at Mrs. Brown's that winter represented various types and conditions of humanity. First there was the widower, who was cashier in one of the banks down town. He was chronically pessimistic and his remarks all savored of the sadness of this life and the uncertainty of the life to come. I gradually fell into the habit of answering his observations by a sad and sorrowful, "How unfortunate!" which left nothing to be desired on my part of the conversation. Indeed, so habitual did this become with me, that one day when he remarked that his daughter was coming to dine with him on Sunday, I murmured with my usual sympathetic sadness, "How very unfortunate!" and did not realize my mistake for fully a minute afterwards.

Then there was a member of the school board, who sat on the right of the widower. He was a nervous little man, who handled his grammar as if it were rare china, but even the greatest caution on his part did not prevent an occasional breakage in the way of "ain't" or "hain't," when the conversation became animated.

Next to him sat a postal clerk of tragic and ferocious mien. He strode into the dining room, and his "good-morning," or "good-evening" was enough to make one tremble. My seat was just opposite but nothing ever passed between us except the salt and the sugar.

At the head of the table sat a music teacher of uncertain age and coquettish manner, but her I mortally offended. In the course of one of our conversations, she remarked:

"Oh, yes; I took a course of Shakespeare undah Doctah Smith when he first came to teach in the college."

"Ah," I said, trying to say the right thing in the right place and at the same time devote myself to a refractory piece of beef-steak, "then Doctor Smith has been in the College a great many years, has he not?" Whereupon she gazed at me coldly, and I, perceiving the error of my way, remarked casually, that it was a nice day and would she please pass the salt.

At the other end of the table sat an instructor in mathematics. To say merely that he was "percise" would be to convey an idea both inadequate and erroneous,—he was a veritable walking geometry. He wore eye-glasses which pinched his forehead into a perpendicular wrinkle, and his mouth was a straight line, he said "good-morning" and "good-evening" as if it were a part of the morrow's demonstration, and the smile which accompanied the words was of the most mathematical variety. Then he would seat himself, adjust his napkin with mathematical precision, and view the sideboard opposite with an expression in his eye which would lead one to suspect that he was mentally contemplating the line AB and speculating on what it might or might not

be doing outside the circle K. The "ain'ts" and "hain'ts" of the school board member were obviously an affliction to him.

Finally there was the little pharmacist, who was always first to come and last to leave. He was an apologetic person and was continually begging pardon, though what for nobody knew. "I beg pardon," he would say, as he poured the cream into his coffee, and again when he buttered his toast, but on the whole he was a good-natured chap and always ready to laugh at a joke.

When we were all gathered around the board of Mrs. Brown, and when we were all more or less under the influence of baking-powder biscuits and plum preserves, even the ferocious postal clerk forgot to scowl and the pessimistic widower smiled ruefully over at the music teacher, who tipped her head to one side and asked him whether he thought that Macbeth was the third murderer, or what he considered the ultimate meaning of "Julius Caesar."

Now, you know, I am fond of theories, and from these observations I had made a theory that each individual has something characteristic to distinguish him from every other individual, some personal trait by which he is marked from the crowd, and by which one remembers him when his face and even his name are half forgotten across the years. This theory was not strikingly original, but I was fond of it nevertheless, and when the clerk came to upset it, I was hurt and disappointed. The school board member first mentioned the advent of the clerk and his wife at dinner time, while he was waiting for his coffee-cup to be refilled.

"I see there's some new folks moving in upstairs," he remarked, tilting his knife against the edge of his plate and reaching for the chili-sauce. The mathematical instructor regarded the tilted knife as if he considered it a personal grievance. His own lay precisely across the edge of his plate, measuring an arc of about 15 degrees. "Indeed!" was his only comment.

"Do you happen to know them?" inquired the music teacher, sweetly, as she daintily buttered a morsel of bread.

"I beg your pardon," said the little pharmacist, "they used to be friends of mine, and I know them quite well, or used to. He's a clerk down in Smith's, and they're going to do light housekeeping because—because it's cheaper at present. I beg pardon," he added as he took another slice of the graham bread.

"Poor fellow!" ejaculated the widower, dolefully, "but misfortune will befall the best of us, and it's useless to try to escape them—entirely useless. We might just as well be reconciled. There's more rain than sunshine in this world, and the sooner we are reconciled the better. I've had my share of trouble and I can sympathize with those in affliction. Yes, indeed, I've had my share of trouble." He sighed deeply and helped himself to the potatoes. The postal clerk only scowled. The gravy was slightly scorched and he had just had a taste of it.

"Yes," resumed the pharmacist, "he is a hard-working chap, but he hasn't made a very brilliant success, and I suppose never will. He's just one of those ordinary, good fellows, who go at the same gait from start to finish."

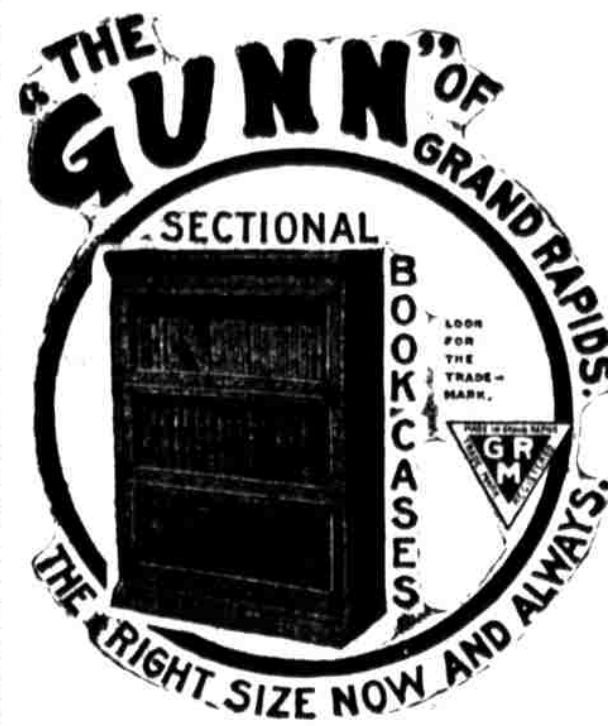
At this juncture the widower was moved to remark upon the tragedy of human-life in general, and the clerk and his wife dropped out of the conversation.

As time went by I tried to apply my theory to the newcomers, and strove with the earnestness of an enthusiast to discover their characteristic traits. But the theory would not apply. To be sure, I did not see much of them, since they never appeared at meals, but they seemed to be exceptionally ordinary.

The clerk himself, had eyes of the commonest blue and wore a horse-shoe stick pin in his tie. His coat had a shiny look across the shoulders and the high-lights on his shoes were sometimes a little dim, showing that he had neglected to visit the bootblack. But these things were not characteristic. Many a clerk wears a horse-shoe stick pin in his tie, and has a coat with a

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shiny look across the shoulders. His wife was a little, slender woman, who did her hair like every other woman and smiled pleasantly if she met you in the hall. But they were very happy together, all the same, so happy, indeed, that I was led to refer to them one day at dinner as "the young married couple up stairs."

The little pharmacist looked at me askance. "I beg pardon," he began, "but they have been married fifteen years."

"Fifteen years!" I ejaculated. "Ah," sighed the widower, "that is a long time. One meets with much sadness and sorrow in the lapse of fifteen years."

So the clerk and his wife lived on week after week in Mrs. Brown's front rooms upstairs, and were as happy as married people should be, which, I take it, is really the highest degree of happiness to which any one can hope to attain. But otherwise his was not an edifying life. All day long he stood behind the dry goods counter in Smith & Smith's big store and measured off silks and woolsens, or patiently parleyed with ladies who came to drive bargains. But at the best the life of the clerk is wearisome. There is a sameness about it which creeps out at last into the face, and as time passed the little man in Mrs. Brown's front rooms seemed to grow more and more ordinary and he became merely "the clerk," without any additional phrase to distinguish him from other clerks. I was beginning to confess that my theory was wrong. I had met with a person who had nothing to set him apart from other persons. I was disappointed.

"What is the name of your friends up stairs?" I asked of the pharmacist one night at the supper table.

"Jones," he replied laconically.

"Ah," said the widower, "I once had a friend of that name, a very dear friend." He bowed his head over the sweet potatoes on his plate and sighed. "But he is dead now; he took a severe cold, which settled on his lungs, and he died. Please pass the pepper?"

"So sad," I murmured, handing over the requested condiment.

The music teacher only looked sympathy. She evidently felt that silence was more eloquent than words.

So I became reconciled to the fact that my theory was a false one. It gradually gave place to other theories, and the clerk continued to wear the coat which was shiny across the shoulders and to display the horse-shoe stick pin in his tie.

Then one evening something happened. I was sitting on the porch about supper time, and the clerk's little wife had gone down to the gate to meet him. At last he appeared around the corner. How very ordinary he was. His walk even was not different from

everybody else's. And then when he saw his wife he lifted his hat to her reverently, courteously, as if she had been his sweetheart. Then they came up the walk together, she telling him of some new wonderful thing she had made for supper. They barely had time to nod "Good-evening" as they passed into the house, and they had been married fifteen years.

The clerk still goes backward and forward on his daily round of duties. Sometimes I see him standing behind his counter explaining why "albatross," which they have in stock, is just as good as "shallie," which they haven't, or patiently waiting with the silks spread out before him, while Mrs. Cole tells Mrs. Black and Mrs. White about Mrs. Addley's latest escapade. His eyes are just the same ordinary blue and his coat still has the shiny look across the shoulders. He still wears the horse-shoe stick pin in his tie. But he is no longer "The Clerk," he is now "the man who lifts his hat to his wife."

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