

The Jumping Tureen

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Man alive...even now, sitting in my loft writing this (my candle's burning right low, I ought to replace it) my face burns recalling how this day started...though I allow it ended considerable better than it began.

It was only an hour past dawn and I was already plumb tuckered out...Old Blow and Bluster (that's the new name I've come up with for Uncle Horace, seeing as he shouts and blusters like the north wind) had put me to work helping Cousin Frances make the soup for today's lunch menu. Carrying a big vat of the mess, I came out of the kitchen and headed for the other room.

The restaraunt was already filling up, a right grist of folks for just the breakfast crowd. I remember it so clearly—I was walking past a table where two gentlemen were seated, and I heard one of them say, "I wish you would put that cigar out, Sam. It's not going to help your nerves any." I took a glance at them and saw they both looked considerable alike, with gray mustaches and hair, only the one with the cigar had near seven times as much hair as the other.

I can't reckon whether it was a bit of fried egg somebody had dropped, or a puddle or water, or something else, but whatever it was I stepped on it. I suspicion there never had been such a spectacular fall in all of Gotham—I only wish I had been watching it instead of in it.

When I picked myself up off the ground I was thinking only two things—I didn't know where the soup cauldron was, and I didn't want to find out. Slowly, I lifted up my head, and there was the second man, the one called Sam, staring at me with the most savagerous stare I ever saw in all my born days. I was sure he was going to give me a sockdologer in the nose and I was all set to pull foot and absquatulate out of there, when his friend started to laugh. Sam stared at him like he was laughing in church. "I hardly find this guttersnipe's dousing of me amusing, Henry," he growled—the man talked like a book, even when he was furious!

Henry stopped laughing and picked up the sodden cigar from the table, and looked at me. Then he handed me the cigar and nodded smartly, as if every time he wanted a cigar out the Cook's Assistant ran up and drenched the smoker with the lunch menu.

Sam looked from me and the cigar back to Henry, then back to the cigar again. Then to my intense relief he started to laugh. I took a glance at Henry, and though he was laughing too, I could see his eyes and I opine he was just as relieved as I am.

But I wasn't safe yet—Old Blow and Bluster would have my head on a pole if he saw what I'd done to a customer. I was frozen, not knowing what to do, when Dinah ran up. She started on scrubbing the floor, screeching at me that I was going to get us all sent out on the streets.

My cousin's harsh words threw me into action. "Mr. Sam, please, my uncle will have my hide if he finds out—please come!" His friend tried to stop me, but Sam shook his head and said he thought he could handle it. I took him quick as blazes to the back room behind the kitchen where the cooks and waiters rest during a slow spot, sneaking the cigar onto a platter of dirty dishes.

I grabbed the clothes-screen and set it across one corner. "Please, Mr. Sam—" I started.

“It’s Clemens,” he bristled. That man had the biggest, fiercest mustache I ever did see, and when he was annoyed (which was now) it would get all bristly—or maybe that was the soup.

“Mr. Clemens,” I corrected, then beseeched him to stay put while I found some clothes. I lit up to my uncle’s room. Now Old Blow and Bluster would kill me two times over. The only things I could find that would probably fit were white restaraunt togs, and I knew it was right strange to wear white in the winter, but I supposed Mr. Clemens wouldn’t mind so much, the clothes being dry.

I was just at the lounge’s door when Dinah came up with a washbasin, explaining that Mr. Sam would want to clean a bit. I could have kissed her! But I did mention his family name so she wouldn’t get yelled at if she called him Mr. Sam. Dinah froze, but I ignored her, wanting to deliver the clothes. When I returned to guard the door, Dinah grabbed my shoulder and asked me fiercely if I knew who I had spilt soup on. I said yes, Mr. Sam Clemens and she said no, Mr. Mark Twain.

I laughed, thinking she was gumming me, but then I saw her eyes and I knew she wasn’t.

Well, I’m no high-faultin’ dudine, but I’m not such a mudsill as to not have heard of Mark Twain. He was just one of the most famous authors ever! Why, I’d read his first book, or at least the one that made him famous, the Jumping Frog, and it was the most hilarious thing!

Then Jim Baker came up (he’s real uppity seeing as he’s the Head Cook) and wanted to go in the lounge. Dinah and I both came up against the door real fast. “You can’t,” Dinah said, and before I knew what was coming out of my mouth I gasped. “Mark Twain is in there, buck naked!”

Then a horrible voice roared from in the lounge. Dinah and Jim and I jumped about a mile, and they both pulled foot, but I couldn’t. I hoped to heavens he hadn’t heard me and walked in.

He *wasn’t* buck naked, thankfully. “Child, what is this outfit? Do I look like a circus performer?” So that was all. I almost melted. Quickly I explained it was all that would fit. “But it looks awful smart on you, Mr. Twain, sir,” I said, then gasped slightly when I realized what I’d said.

Mark Twain sagged a little. I don’t know why—if I was famous I’d want everybody knowing who I was. I said as much, and he looked at me but said nothing. Then he asked what my name was.

I told him Kit, and he nodded. He asked why I was working in the restaraunt, and I explained about Mama’s death, and Papa sending me off to live with my uncle. He asked what I was going to do when I was grown—and I’d never thought on it any! Everyone expected me to be a governess if Providence stepped in, a factory girl if it didn’t. It ws the same with all women. I told him so, but then I asked why was he interested in a girl who spilled soup on him and gave him ugly clothes?

When he looked at me with that *mustache* I started to apologize, saying it was none of my funeral anyway and I’d better leave, sorry about the soup, but he just sighed and sat down.

He said he’d been giving lectures for awhile, because he’d gone near bankrupt. He felt right low about hurting his family. He said at one point he hated everybody so much he spent the day cursing out the window at everybody he saw.

I asked, a little trembly, if his friend Henry had helped him any.

“Ah, yes, Henry Rogers,” Mr. Twain—or Mr. Clemens—said then. “He’s been a lifesaver to me.” He explained Henry’d been whisking him from lecture halls to dining halls to salons, meeting people who were all the same. He said it was a relief to finally talk to somebody who didn’t care about the cut of dresses in Paris this week, or the proper cufflink positioning.

I allow I might have blushed slightly when he said that.

Then—of all things—he *thanked* me for spilling the soup! He said, sort of grudgingly, he hadn't laughed like that for awhile, and it was the best birthday present he could've thought of.

I gasped. His *birthday*?

He said then that he couldn't have standed going to this party he had to go to, but now he felt all right, even in the "ridiculous getup" I'd got him. He got up to leave.

Well, I reckoned that was the nicest thing anyone had ever said to me, and so I took out my journal to put it down before I forgot it. Mr. Clemens stopped with his hand on the doorknob and asked what I was doing, so I told him. He asked if I wrote things often, and I said I reckoned so.

Then Mr. Clemens sat again, and told me he had used to do the same thing, though he hadn't for awhile and he hadn't shown it to anybody. I said of course he hadn't. It wasn't just events I wrote in my book, I said, but how I felt about them, and I didn't want anybody knowing my feelings about things. Some things, anyway.

He asked if I'd ever considered being a writer. I blinked and said there weren't many women writers—the wrong thing to say. Mr. Clemens's spacious eyebrows went up and he started listing near a million women, most ones I hadn't heard of. I stopped him at "George Sand", 'cause that's no woman's name. But he said that 'George Sand' was fake, her real name being Mme. Doody-vant.

I began to imagine all the disguise names I could use for myself, then stopped short, explaining that I hadn't had much learning, and I was literate but wasn't great shakes at much else.

Mr. Clemens went all bristly again and proclaimed that I should "never let schooling interfere with my education." I grinned a little and told him my old schoolmarm would disagree. Then he declared, "Education, Kit, mainly consists of what we have unlearned."

Sakes alive...the man talked like he was reading lines. I tried to look, quiet-like, to see if he had a script somewhere hidden. I didn't see one, though I wished he had one, because I sure could use it. I couldn't think of what to say. I hadn't ever thought about being a writer, but maybe it wouldn't be so bad.

I might have I blushed again, to think of such a famous man thinking about *my* future.

Trying to decide what I should ask next before Mr. Clemens couldn't stand my company any more and left, I reached up to fix the psyche knot my hair was tied up in.

"Stop!" Mr. Clemens bellowed all of a sudden, and I froze, totally hornswoggled as to why I should. Then he said I looked just like his image of Joan of Arc! I just stared at him. He sighed and explained he was writing up her story and so had been thinking about her a bit lately.

Then it ocured to me what I could ask. What was his favorite thing he'd written?

He made a horrible face at that but thought on it for a moment. "A story entitled Three Men and a Fish which I wrote at eleven and is perfectly horrible and utterly unknown by the public."

We were talking about the new book Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde which Dinah and I had read together when there was a knock on the door. Mr. Clemens, to my great surprise, looked awful disappointed for a moment. He explained he now had to return to "the evils of the world and Rose Atson's luncheon."

Old Blow and Bluster and Henry Rogers stood outside the door. My uncle was about to holler something but stopped short at the sight of Mr. Clemens, who called to his friend, saying he ought to try our soup. "It's a delicious cleanser of the writer's soul," he bellowed, "and also serves as a wonderful moisterizer."

I yelled "Happy Birthday" at him as I ducked under Old Blow and Bluster's arm and ran upstairs, looking back to see his mustache soften just a little. Then I went straight to write th— Oh! My candle's shot...well, don't worry, I'll be back.