

THAT BLUE PLATE.

BY UNA HUDSON.

The harrowing tale of a disappearing bit of crockery, and of how the remedy came to be worse than the disease.

I SETTLED Nan in her section, and stowed away her traveling impedimenta as best I might in the limited space left for the purpose.

She took her ticket and trunk check when I handed them to her with a word of caution as to their preservation for use in the near future. She had the consciously superior air of a woman entirely fitted to cope with all the difficulties of journeying alone, and launched into voluble directions as to the proper management of the cat and the cook during her absence.

The conductor's warning, "All aboard!" cut short the flood of her eloquence and sent me hurrying from the car.

She thrust her head without the window, and I, as became a dutiful husband, trotted along the platform beside the moving train, endeavoring to catch the final words of wisdom that fell from her lips.

The train gathered speed rapidly, bells rang, whistles tooted, and a trunk laden with trucks rumbled along beside me. Only by the movement of her lips could I tell that Nan was speaking, but I bawled a reassuring, "All right; I understand."

Better, if need be, to juggle a trifle with the truth than that the wife of one's bosom should believe her final injunctions unheard.

And any way, I could make a pretty correct guess as to what Nan was saying. She was probably telling me to guard the blue plate as the very apple of my eye.

Said blue plate, be it understood, was a particularly hideous example of the potter's art, in a somewhat imperfect state of preservation, and our, or rather Nan's, most cherished possession. Her dearest friend had given it to her, and it was reputed to have been brought over in the Mayflower.

It occupied the place of honor in our parlor on a very ornate bracket placed, for the sake of safety, high on the wall. Nan's constant fear was that it would be broken or stolen, and during her infrequent absences from home I watched over that plate as I might a sick child.

That evening I took dinner downtown, and afterwards went to the theater. It was decidedly late when I reached home and I went directly to bed.

But the next morning I bethought me of the blue plate, and dutifully went in to inspect it before leaving for my office.

I glanced carelessly at the shelf where it was wont to stand; then I started with eyes opened wide in unspeakable dismay.

The blue plate was gone!

Of that there could be not the slightest doubt. The shelf was absolutely bare.

I dropped down on hands and knees and began a wild search under tables and behind sofas and chairs. But no plate did I find.

Then I summoned cook.

"Och, murther!" said she, staring in her turn at the place where the plate should have been but was not, "a thafe must have come an' took it in the night while we was asleep in our beds. Sure, an' I wonder what the mistress'll be afther sayin'," and I privately resolved finds it gone."

I thought I could imagine pretty much what "the mistress would be afther sayin'," and I privately resolved that if the best detective in town, and a reward out of all proportion to the value of the stolen object, could procure its return she shouldn't have a chance to say it.

I was an hour late at my office, but as I had reported the theft at police headquarters, engaged two detectives, and

inserted offers of reward for the return of the plate in all the papers, I did not feel that the time had been altogether misspent.

In the afternoon Nan's brother Ted happened in, and to him I confided my trouble.

"Whe-e-w!" he said, with a long whistle of surprise and incredulity. "Some poor cuss was mighty hard up for something to steal; must have been a china crank. But Nan's household god! Hard lines, old man; you have my sympathy."

"Thanks," I rejoined, "but I'd rather have Nan's plate."

That night at the club I repeated the story of my loss to a roomful of sympathetic listeners.

"Don't take it so to heart, old man," said Irvington, who, if he can't find the silver lining to all his clouds, manufactures one to order; "when the first shock has worn off, you'll be better off without it. My wife had a pitcher, regular monstrosity, one hundred years old and absolutely priceless. Well, one day the cat jumped on the mantel and knocked down the pitcher; broke it all to smash. Wife cried her eyes out for a day or two, but now she's a lot happier than ever she was when she had that blame thing to dust and fuss over."

I knew Irvington meant well, but for my part I refuse to hunt for the bright side of an unfortunate situation with a microscope, and I wasn't much comforted.

At the end of a week my detectives had failed to bring to light the blue plate, but they had unearthed a gang of counterfeiters and a nest of burglars, and had arrested on suspicion a varied assortment of shop-lifters, sneak-thieves, and other petty criminals.

But I had not set out to pose as a public benefactor, and would have greatly preferred the return of the blue plate to the thanks of a grateful community.

At the end of two weeks I fell into a positive panic. I could neither sleep nor eat; I could do nothing but think of the missing plate. My friends said I was getting thin, and my mirror told me I was growing haggard.

Altogether I was most unhappy, my

feelings being, I should imagine, very similar to those of a condemned criminal who sees the days slipping by without bringing the pardon he had hoped for.

The day before the time set for Nan's return, Jack Halliday came into my office with a beaming face and an air of great mystery.

"Old chap," said he in a stage whisper, "I've come to save you."

"Humph!" I said shortly. "I don't exactly see how you can unless you've got my blue plate up your sleeve."

"You've hit it," said Jack Halliday, "first crack out of the box. I've got, not one plate, but dozens of 'em. Pay your money and take your choice, and be made happy again."

I looked at him wonderingly and pityingly. We never had been particularly close friends, and it seemed odd that my misfortune should have so preyed upon him as to unsettle his reason.

"I'm not lunny," he said, probably reading my thoughts, "but I've discovered a fellow who manufactures crockery and furniture and stuff that the Pilgrim fathers brought over with them. Great scheme, too. He's positively coining money."

I didn't believe that Nan could be taken in by any imitation, however good, of her blue plate, but I was too desperate to let slip any chance, and I went with Jack to interview his maker of antiques.

It was a queer hole he took me to, entered through a furniture repairer's shop, and crowded with all manner of Colonial furniture and with shelves of dishes ranged along the walls.

I verily believe that place contained more household stuff than all the early settlers of this country put together ever laid eyes on.

Jack explained the object of our visit to the proprietor, whom he seemed to know, and pointed to a shelf of blue plates.

Seen from a distance the plates certainly looked very like ours, and when one was put in my hands for a close inspection I could have shouted aloud for very joy. So far as I could see, it was a most faithful imitation of Nan's missing treasure, and there certainly

was a chance that she might be made to believe it the genuine Mayflower plate.

I promised faithfully to maintain the most inviolate secrecy as to the nature of the place, there was a transfer of coin of the republic, and the plate was mine.

As can well be imagined, I lost no time in getting home and placing my spurious household god on the altar of the late departed. I looked at it from all points of view, and decided, with a sigh of vast relief, that unless Nan should take it down for a close inspection she would never know the difference; and she might not even then.

Doubtless there were points of dissimilarity between the original plate and the substitute, but I believed they could be detected only by careful comparison of the two.

Then I brought cook in and promised to die and haunt her if she so much as said "plate" to her mistress.

Cook, despite her menial position, is a lady of sense and discretion, and, in any event, would, I believe, have refrained from making embarrassing disclosures; however, it seemed as well, and better, to make quite sure.

That night I slept the sweet, dreamless sleep of the conscience-clear, and awoke the next morning to pleased anticipation of my wife's return.

I was on hand when the train pulled in, and took prompt possession of Nan and her various belongings. She cheerfully surrendered everything to my care save a brown bag that she insisted upon carrying herself.

"You see," she explained quite calmly, "it's the blue plate, and I'm afraid you might break it."

The blue plate!

Surely it couldn't be that I had heard aright. I stared at Nan and stuttered unintelligibly.

"What's the matter with you, Dick?" she demanded impatiently. "One would think you didn't know I had taken it with me. You must have known, for I called to you the very last thing after the train had started, and you yelled, 'All right; I understand.' You remember, don't you?"

"Yes, of course I remember," I said weakly.

"You see," explained Nan, "Amy has a miserable little cream jug that she is forever talking about, and I was bound to show her my plate, and it's *much* handsomer than her cream jug, and, any way, I don't believe the cream jug is genuine."

I made some reply, but whether an appropriate one or not I haven't the faintest idea, for all my mental powers were concentrated in an effort to evolve some scheme whereby I might remove my recently purchased plate before Nan should see it.

She would, I well knew, never forgive me for the deception I had thought to practise upon her.

I have no recollection of how we got home. I suppose we took a car in the accustomed way, but if put upon the witness stand I wouldn't dare to swear to it.

I know Nan talked light-heartedly, telling me of her visit, and I said things at intervals, but my mind was nothing save a jumble of blue plates.

I do, however, remember distinctly that when we reached home we found a messenger boy camped on our front door-step. He had a package addressed to me, and I, blissfully ignorant of the nature of its contents, took it, and we went inside.

"It's Ted's writing," said Nan. "What on earth can it be? Do open it, Dick, and see."

I opened it and found—a blue plate and a note.

This is what Nan, who does not believe in a man having secrets from his wife, read over my shoulder:

It's dollars to doughnuts that Nan won't know the enclosed from her own beloved plate. What are you going to give me for helping you out of your scrape?
TED.

"What *does* he mean?" Nan demanded. "Has he gone crazy? And why is he sending you a plate? It looks very much like mine."

"Yes—no—I don't know," I said idiotically, unable to formulate a plausible lie at such short notice. "Nan, don't you—er—want to go up to your room and—er—wash your hands or—er—comb your hair, or *something*?"

"I do not," said Nan very decidedly. "I want to know the meaning of Ted's ridiculous note, and I want to put my plate on its shelf."

She turned toward the parlor, but I barred the way.

"Nan," I begged, "don't go in there just yet. There—there might be a burglar in there, you know."

"Dick Ellerton," said Nan, "have you been drinking? The idea of a burglar in one's parlor at three in the afternoon!"

"It is rather absurd, isn't it?" I agreed. "It's—it's a right good joke. Ha! Ha!"

I laughed weakly, hoping Nan would join in my merriment. But Nan was not in a laughing mood.

"I don't see the joke," said she.

"It's not a joke," I said, rallying my scattered wits for one final convincing lie. "It's a blue plate. You see, there's one in there on the shelf. I was—was lonely without ours, and I found one down-town something like it and brought it home for—for company, you know. I intended to take it down this morning, but forgot it. Of course it's just a wretched imitation, and I didn't want you to see it."

"Oh, I see," said Nan. "And, of course, that's why Ted sent you one. But he's very much mistaken if he thinks I wouldn't know my own from a clumsy imitation. It was nice of him, though. I'd no idea he was so thoughtful. You poor dear! I didn't know you thought so much of the plate or, of course, I wouldn't have taken it away. We'll go right in and put it in its place. And I don't mind," she ended magnanimously, "your having the other."

I waited a moment, wondering what the fate of Ananias did not overtake me. Then as I heard no feet on the stairs, and seemed to be enjoying my usual good health, I followed Nan into the parlor.

Once inside the door my overstrained nerves gave way entirely, and I sat down on the nearest chair with a sickening, dull thud. For piled on the sofa was a stack of bundles, each addressed in a different handwriting, but all more or less familiar, and instinctively I knew what the brown wrappers concealed.

"It looks," said Nan judiciously, "like Christmas or a donation party."

And she began to untie strings and slip off papers.

The plates she placed one by one on the table; the notes she read. I was not called upon to explain; that was quite unnecessary; the notes did that fully and freely.

I sat and watched Nan and the ever increasing pile of plates in fascinated silence. So many evidences of my friends' solicitude for my comfort and happiness would, I reflected, have been most gratifying, but for the trifling fact that throughout it all I traced the machinations of Jack Halliday, who is a notorious practical joker.

Nan went into the hall and came back bringing Ted's plate. Then she took down mine from the shelf, and the collection on the table was complete.

"There are," said she, in an awful voice, "exactly sixteen of them."

Then she picked up her brown bag and carefully unpacked the only and original blue plate. For a moment she studied it intently. Then she took one from the table and carefully compared the two.

She took another from the table. After a time she returned *three* plates to the pile of those contributed by our thoughtful friends.

"I was mistaken," said she in the voice of one from whom all joy has fled. "There are seventeen."

Then she fell upon my neck and wept the bitter tears of disillusion.

It was even so. Line for line, crack for crack, nick for nick, Nan's plate and the other sixteen were identical.

The next morning the ash-man hauled away from our premises the remains of seventeen blue plates.

Eventually Irvington's prophecy was fulfilled, and the white dove of peace came back and once more spread her wings over our distracted household, for Nan and I, acting upon the advice of a certain eminent authority on interior decoration, banished from our home everything we did not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful. The blue plate, in parenthesis, had been neither.

But Colonial china as a subject of conversation is tabooed in our family.

A DESPERATE DEAL.*

BY SEWARD W. HOPKINS.

The astonishing device employed by a father in order to compass a certain marriage for his son.

SYNOPSIS OF CHAPTERS PREVIOUSLY PUBLISHED.

SIR PETER ARNOLD and Mr. Loftus Bond, bankers of London, are trustees for the estate of the late M. Henri Rougière, a Belgian, long resident in England. By his will he provides that his fortune, a vast sum, shall go to his only daughter, Marie, on her marriage, provided she does not marry her cousin, M. Alfred Rougière. His brother, Alfred's father, comes over from Belgium, determined to get hold of this money for his son. By representing to Marie that the bankers are interested in certain London hospitals, to which the fortune is to go provided she does not comply with the terms of the will, he gains her consent to wed a certain Mr. Bunker Hill.

By scanning the newspapers closely M. Rougière has learned of this Hill as a young man without friends, who has been knocked down in the streets by Lord Shumway's carriage and taken to a hospital to die. By telling the authorities that he is the young man's uncle, the Belgian has him removed to his hotel and made as comfortable as possible, and in due course acquaints him with his scheme for him to marry the niece in order that she may become a rich widow. The will, of course, says nothing about whether she shall marry Alfred Rougière or not, once she has married somebody else. So Marie is brought from her school to the hotel and married to the young man Hill, whom the doctors have declared cannot recover. Then she is taken back to Belgium by the Rougières, who have need of her money to recoup their fallen fortunes.

Alfred contrives to worm himself into the good graces of his cousin, the young widow, and late in June he is giving a farewell bachelor dinner at the château. Meantime Hill, taken away on Lord Shumway's yacht, has not died, and, returning to London, finds out through Messrs. Arnold and Bond the trick that has been played on Marie Rougière. He betakes himself at once to Belgium, arrives in the midst of Alfred's pre-nuptial festivities, and demands to see his wife. Alfred, very much frightened, requests him to call the next day and see his father, bows him out into what he makes the American believe is the *porte-cochère*, but which proves to be a strong room with an iron door, which is at once bolted from without.

Hill contrives to make his escape, but not until the occupants of the château have departed. He discovers, however, entries in his wife's diary that lead him to suppose she was not entirely indifferent to him at the time of their strange marriage, and he is more determined than ever to find her. He obtains track of the party finally in Algiers, whither he betakes himself, and turns up at the governor-general's ball. Marie, dancing with Alfred's friend, Lieutenant Fournier, asks to be introduced to "that splendid American," whom she has failed to recognize. But Alfred knows who it is, and attempts to prevent Fournier arranging for the presentation. But his father, ignorant of the facts, commands him to let the girl alone, and Alfred, helpless in the face of the impending revelation, staggers into another room to brace his nerves with brandy.

CHAPTER XIII.

AN INCIDENT AT THE BALL.

M. ROUGIERE, wondering very much what this was all about, sought his son and found him leaning on a table, his face white and drawn, his eyes set and staring, and his general appearance that of a man who had suddenly come up against a terrible disaster.

"For Heaven's sake, Alfred," he said, "what does this mean? Why, at a time like this, when the whole world, one might say, is looking, do you show this emotion? What is there in the appear-

ance of an American officer to cause you this pain? I know you do not like Americans; but at a ball like this, where all nations gather, your actions are at least puzzling."

"Are they?" answered Alfred, with a grim smile. "Well, do you know who that officer is?"

"I do not. I have not the pleasure of knowing a single officer of that army."

"Well, that's Hill."

"Hill? I am still unwise. What Hill?"

"Bunker Hill, the man you married Marie to in London."

*This story began in the April issue of THE ARGOSY. The three back numbers will be mailed to any address on receipt of 30 cents.