

The Prize Pumpkin Pie



Mary Roberts Rinehart

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The Prize Pumpkin Pie.

THE pumpkin contest was over. Four windows of McDonald's department store were occupied by the huge prize-winners, and were constantly surrounded by crowds. It had been a good drawing card, and Andrews, the advertising agent, received the firm's congratulations complacently. But now the time had come when the windows were needed for the new winter display, and Andrews wondered what on earth he was going to do with the avalanche of pumpkin for which he was responsible.

The pie contest was an inspiration—one of those lightning flashes in the darkness of perplexity which are a proof of genius. With Andrews to think was to act, and the evening papers that very day announced that pieces of McDonald's prize pumpkins would be given away, the recipients to bake therefrom pies, luscious or not according to their several abilities, the said pies to compete for prizes given by the firm.

It was a great idea. Men, women, and children thronged into the basement of the store, where the pumpkins were being chopped up. The hardware department reported the sale of innumerable pie pans, and the grocery department trebled its sales of spices, eggs, and flour. Several windows were fitted with rows of wooden shelves, rising tier on tier like circus seats, and by the third day of the contest these were occupied by hundreds of pies—pies with meringue and pies without, pies of rich golden yellow, and pies of soggy dark brown, large pies and small pies, crusts that looked ready to melt with flaky richness, and crusts of rubber-like tenacity. And all day long an interested crowd stood outside, trying, like similar gatherings at the races, to pick the winners.

No whisper of this had come to Miss Serena, although as she sat that night at her darning she was thinking that the pumpkins on the old farm must be ready to use. With a sigh she thrust the worn darning into a fresh stocking, only to hear it fall clattering to the floor through an enormous hole in the toe. Such occurrences being by no means unusual, Miss Serena merely bit off a long thread of darning-cotton and fell to work.

Once she tiptoed into the adjoining room and drew the patchwork quilt, a relic of the old home, more closely around the three boys in the roomy four-poster. Being many years past the emotional age, she did not kiss them, but contented herself with looking long and lovingly at them as they lay huddled close to keep warm.

“Tommy is more like his mother every day,” she thought, as she went back to her work.

Her steel-rimmed glasses were a little misty, and she wiped them clear on the corner of her white apron. She started guiltily at the sound of a light tap at the door, and at the somewhat apologetic entrance of her neighbor from across the hall.

“I saw your light under the door, and I thought I’d bring this over for you to read.” The caller held out the evening paper, pointing with an indicating finger to a certain paragraph. Miss Serena, putting on her reading glasses, took it close to the tiny glass lamp. “Jim and I were talkin’ it over, an’ Jim says you ought to try,” the visitor went on. “You’re such a smart baker there’s no tellin’ but what you’d get a prize at McDonald’s. An’ two hundred dollars would put you right back in your old home, wouldn’t it?”

Miss Serena nodded.

“I’d like to try, goodness knows,” she said. “It would be so good for the boys. It drives me almost crazy to see Annie’s children learning rough ways in the alleys around here. When does it say the contest closes, Mrs. Miller?”

Mrs. Miller consulted the paper.

“Well, that’s too bad,” she said. “The time’s up to-morrow morning at nine o’clock.”

“It’s just as well,” Miss Serena sighed resignedly. “If I had all the stuff I could do it to-night, I do believe, but I haven’t the pumpkin, and not a bit of shortening or spice.”

Mrs. Miller stepped forward impulsively.

“Oh, if you just wouldn’t mind,” she said, “I can lend you shortening and spice, and Jim brought home a piece of pumpkin on his way from work this evening. Do, Miss Serena, and if you get a prize, why I’ll go and visit you at your old home.”

Miss Serena debated the matter a moment; then she put the darning-basket aside and rose determinedly.

“I’ll do it,” she said. “I was going to finish that waist for Sallie Jones, but she doesn’t want it till Sunday, so she can wait. It’s kind of you, Mrs. Miller, to take so much interest, and I’ll send your things back to-morrow. Or, no, when I think of it, will it suit if I return them Saturday? I won’t be paid for the waist till then.”

Mrs. Miller was in no hurry for the return of her groceries, and bustled off to get them. Miss Serena, tying on a gingham apron over her shabby black skirt, built a fire in the warped old stove, and hunted out her old cook-book.

“Eggs and milk! I had forgotten them, and there’s only the milk for the children’s oatmeal in the morning, and those four eggs were for dinner! Well, if I ever get the boys back to the farm they can have all the eggs and milk they want!”

Midnight saw the finishing touches put to the pie. There it stood in the center of the table—which was kitchen, dining-room, and parlor table in one—its flaky crust pinched around the edge by a knowing twist of Miss Serena’s thumb and forefinger, its spicy filling an aromatic golden yellow, and, heaped on the top in little hillocks of delight, the whites of the eggs, lightly browned.

“And it tastes even better than it looks,” thought Miss Serena, as, the room put to rights and the precious cook-book put away, she crawled into bed.

The boys had bread for breakfast the next morning. Being considerate youngsters they made fewer complaints than might have been expected, but three pairs of hungry eyes kept turning longingly to where, in its arrogant self-sufficiency, the pie sat, emanating distracting whiffs of spice. The scanty meal finished, Miss Serena gathered up the shabby coats and caps and prepared the boys for the street. The pie was carefully taken from its pan, and, resting on a wooden platter, was deposited in an old bonnet-box, lined for the purpose with clean paper. To Jack, with his nine years, was intrusted the responsibility of carrying it to McDonald’s.

The store was not far from the tenement district, but the boys were thinly clad and the morning cold. Jack’s fingers first ached and then became numb with cold. He tried blowing, first on one hand and then on the other, and that is how the accident happened. The pavements were frosty, and he slipped and fell, bonnet-box and all. However, he picked himself up and bravely went on.

“Well, sir, is it a pie?” The spruce young clerk came forward smiling.

“Yes, ma’am—I mean yes, sir!” Jack was stuttering with diffidence. “Aunt Serena sent it. I fell with it down the street, but I hope it isn’t hurt much. Anyhow, it’ll taste just as good.”

But when the lid of the box was removed, there was revealed ruin and desolation. An unsightly mixture of crust, filling, and meringue met the clerk's amused eyes.

It was not funny to the children. Jack's voice was husky with the lump in his throat when he said, in a queer little strained treble:

"Aunt Serena sat up half the night to make it. I don't know what she'll think!"

But Billy's eyes were fast filling.

"It's got all the breakfast milk in it, and I'm hungry!"

"The dinner eggs, too," said Tom ruefully, "and I'm that empty!"

The clerk was not smiling now. Instead, he was looking very hard indeed at nothing. Then he turned and motioned to the little knot of newspaper men who were just beginning their work as judges. They slipped over quietly, and Jack, absorbed in telling his story, did not notice their presence.

"You see, me and these other two's brothers. We're orphans, too. Pop, he died a year ago, and mother, well, it seems a long time—it must be six months. An' Aunt Serena, she came up from the country to look after mother, an' we've never had money to get back. We didn't mind bein' hungry to-day; it's nothin' new, but here I had to fall and spoil the whole thing!"

One of the judges stepped forward and peered into the box.

"We'll just sample this pie," he said. "It looks like the real thing!"

Quite gravely the judges tasted the contents of the bonnet-box. Then they exchanged several solemn winks and tasted again.

"Now look here," said one of the newspaper men. "Don't tell Aunt Serena that you fell, or that the pie is broken. And you come around here this afternoon and see if your pie won anything. There's strong competition, you see, but we're judging by flavor, not looks, so Aunt Serena still has a chance."

Then the judges went back to their work, and three little boys, with lightened hearts, albeit empty stomachs, went on their way to school.

Late that afternoon, Sallie Jones' waist being finished, Miss Serena took her faded bonnet from a hook—the pasteboard box, its home for many years, having gone to its fate that morning—and, putting on an antiquated dolman, started with the boys for McDonald's store. No word of their

interview with the judges, or of the pie's mishap, had passed the children's lips.

They crowded close to the window where the winners were displayed. One was an elaborate affair of enormous proportions, iced like a wedding-cake, and decorated with silk flags and tiny dolls. It was marked "Second Prize." The winner of the third prize was equally ornate, but could Miss Serena believe her eyes? She looked at the number of the ticket she held in her hand. Yes, that was it, eight hundred and forty-one. In the very center of the display was a battered, broken bonnet-box, and fastened to it this inscription on a huge placard:

"First Prize Awarded to No. 841—A Real Old-Fashioned Pumpkin Pie—It Was So Good That the Judges Ate it!"

Mary Roberts Rinehart.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Misspelled words and printer errors have been corrected. Where multiple spellings occur, majority use has been employed.

Punctuation has been maintained except where obvious printer errors occur.

A cover has been created for this eBook.

[The end of *The Prize Pumpkin Pie* by Mary Roberts Rinehart]