

The Widow Cruse

By MAZO DE LA ROCHE

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By MAZO DE LA ROCHE

Illustrated by Dudley Gloyne Summers

Mr. Unsworth was an impressive figure when he took his morning walks. He was a retired merchant who had conducted a successful business for many years with the utmost probity. The dignity and honor of his past were reflected in his bearing. It was proud without being lofty, magnanimous without being benign, interested without being curious. In short, it was exactly right for a prosperous retired merchant with a well-furnished house, a capable housekeeper and unimpaired health.

Although not curious, he was interested, in varying degrees, in all he saw in his walks. That autumn, as the air grew crisper, he walked farther afield, head well up, sniffing the frosty air, for he was feeling exceptionally fit. It interested him to penetrate into the poorer streets where the lives of the people were lived more openly than in his own region. He watched the children at play, the women cleaning their doorsteps or buying vegetables from carts. His tall spare figure, well-cut grey clothes, and close-clipped white whiskers became a familiar sight on several of these streets.

He would have liked very much to have given pennies to the children, but he was afraid that they would follow him and become a nuisance. He liked best to stroll quietly around, seeing all and attracting as little attention as possible.

In one street there was a certain house which interested him more than any of the others. It interested him first because of the brightness of its windows, the whiteness of the curtains and the fact that a flowering plant showed between them. More than ever it interested him when he had seen Mrs. Cruse. She was so neat, so very thin, and so terribly anxious. One need not look at her the second time to know that she had had a hard life, had coped with almost intolerable things, and was in the stress of a struggle at that moment. Her best room—that is, the front room on the ground floor—had always the sign “To Let” on it. The card had appeared first in the lower right-hand corner of the window. Then it had been moved to the lower left-

hand corner. Now it hung suspended from a cord in the middle. By such manoeuvres Mrs. Cruse tried to draw the attention of the passer-by to her vacant room.

When Mr. Unsworth had first observed the window, the curtains had hung in straight folds with only a narrow space between, through which the flowering plant might be glimpsed. In three weeks they were looped back by white cords affording a complete view of the plant. By another fortnight they were drawn back so far that the curious—for Mr. Unsworth was becoming curious—could distinctly see the glittering outline of the brass bed within. A most attractive room considering the locality, thought Mr. Unsworth, and he could not understand why the room was not taken. Still, the street was spattered with “To Let” cards, and all prospective tenants were, of course, not so discriminating as himself. But he was distinctly disappointed when the card disappeared from a neighboring window which was far from clean and backed by soiled Nottingham lace curtains. He stalked down the street feeling angry and hurt for Mrs. Cruse.

A fortnight passed before he had another of his brief glimpses of her standing in her doorway. This time she was scrutinizing the wares of a pedlar. Mr. Unsworth walked very slowly, not pretending to hide from himself the fact that he was terribly curious about what Mrs. Cruse was examining. Even from the pavement he could see the look of wild longing in her eyes. It was a longing definitely mixed with worry. She could not afford what she wanted to buy. In her hands she held a length of wide pink satin ribbon. Mr. Unsworth drew in a quick breath. To think that a tall, very thin woman whose hair was going grey should be yearning for broad pink satin ribbon and not be able to buy it! He could not believe that such a ribbon would become her, but her longing for it was more touching to him than the longing for finery of a young girl. He had a fierce desire to go back and buy the ribbon for her, but the cool judgment of a long life in business restrained him. Nothing could restrain him from turning at the nearest corner and retracing his steps.

As he neared Mrs. Cruse’s house he saw the pedlar snap the fastening of his box and turn away with a pleased look. He saw Mrs. Cruse disappearing into the passage with the ribbon in her hand! Again he drew a quick breath, this time of relief, for he wanted her to have the ribbon. At the same time, he felt worried that she should spend money so unwisely with a vacant room on her hands.

The next morning was one of snow and sleet. His housekeeper advised him, considering that he had a slight cold already, to remain in the house by

the fire. But his interest in Mrs. Cruse's front room, which had developed into vigorous curiosity, would not be denied. Instead of his silk neckerchief he put on a woollen one. He took a glass of sherry. He selected a heavier walking stick and went forth. He had a feeling of determination somewhere in the back of his head, though he could not have told why.

The mixture of snow and sleet blurred Mrs. Cruse's house so that he was right upon it before he saw what he did see in the window. This was the snowy white curtains well drawn back, and each one tied with a loop of broad, pink satin ribbon. The poor woman. Oh, the poor woman! This was what she had been spending her scanty means for—to lure, to entice the eyes of the passer-by to her vacant room. If Mr. Unsworth had not a lump in his throat as he splashed on down the street through sleet and snow, he had something that made him swallow hard. He had always been kind. Now, suddenly, he was becoming tender-hearted. Living alone has this effect on some natures and the very reverse on others.

The sleet and snow, combined with the east wind, did their work. Mr. Unsworth was not out of doors again for a fortnight, and when he did go his legs felt too shaky to carry him as far as the mean street where Mrs. Cruse lived. Days passed before he again approached the window where the card hung. He had hoped against hope that it would be gone, that the room would be taken, but it was not so. The card still hung there, the curtains were still drawn back by the ribbon loops, but a new bait was displayed. Between the curtains on a table stood a blue glass vase which held six pink carnations. Not paper ones. Mr. Unsworth could tell that by the way their heads were beginning to droop. "Well, well," he said aloud, hitting with his stick at a bit of orange peel on the pavement, "this beats all. Why is it that she can't let that room?"

Four other "To Let" cards had disappeared from windows in the same block and still hers stared out at him every time he passed. But she was not to be daunted. He was filled with admiration for her pluck. She would have made a good business man, he thought. When the pink carnations died, red ones took their place. When they in their turn wilted, a tiny Jerusalem cherry tree appeared, for it was now the Christmas season and they were on the market.

The cherry tree made the window very gay. Surely it would do the trick, thought Mr. Unsworth, swinging his stick in anticipation as he neared the house. But it did not. If Mr. Unsworth had been more familiar with the business of letting rooms, he would have realized that at this time of year people were settled for the winter and shrank from any change before spring.

Six days before Christmas he met Mrs. Cruse face to face on the street. She wore rusty widow's weeds and looked very respectable. There was a look of anxiety in her eyes, though their natural expression was rather piercing, as though she were beginning to realize that life was a stone wall against which she might beat in vain. Yet her chin was held at an aggressive angle, for if she were discouraged the world must not know. She gave him a quick glance as they passed, and a flicker of recognition brightened her eyes. She had often seen him from her window.

Mr. Unsworth was reasonably sure that she had lodgers already in the house (he had seen her buy vegetables in fairly large quantities from the huckster, and when she passed him she carried a large paper bag from the top of which appeared the round shining face of a bun), but he passed the house at a time of day when they would be at their work. The only other occupant of the house he had seen was a youth of nineteen who, he judged, was the widow's son old enough to be holding down a steady job, but in these days, Mr. Unsworth remembered, steady jobs were not easy to get. Still, the youth impressed him as being indolent from the way he lounged along the street and entered the door with a cigarette always hanging in the corner of his mouth. Just the sort of youth to sponge on a brave, struggling mother, Mr. Unsworth thought.

He was so very comfortable himself, so contented with his lot as Christmas day drew near, that the thought of this gallant widow and her unlet room seemed to him unnecessarily cruel. He tried to think of some way in which he might help her. He thought of sending her money in an envelope, a nameless gift. It was a good idea but not good enough. What the woman wanted was to let her room and, even though he sent her a sum equal to three months' rent, the room would still be vacant. What she wanted was a lodger, and the problem was how to provide her with one.

The solution came three days before Christmas at five o'clock in the morning. He had been enjoying a wakeful spell. Enjoying it because he had slept soundly throughout the night, had wakened refreshed, and pleasantly conscious of the armor his downy blankets provided against the cold, and of the silky smoothness of his sheets. It was still pitch dark, but a near-by clock had just sounded the hour in its tower. Like an inspiration, almost at the moment of waking, the thought came to Mr. Unsworth that he would rent the widow's room for himself. She should have no more tossing about in the early morning wondering how she should make ends meet, for he was sure she often did this.

Taking the room would not necessarily mean occupying it. He would tell her that he was engaged on some literary work which required a quiet which he could not get in his own house. All he would need to do would be to spend an hour in the room every morning and, considering the interest bordering on curiosity, which he felt toward Mrs. Cruse, that would be no hardship. It might even be a benefit to him because, if he had an hour's rest at this point in his morning walk, he might easily do another mile or so before luncheon. He could scarcely wait for morning to come. He had not felt this peculiar sort of excitement since he was a young man, this feeling of straining toward the day with eagerness. Why, he could almost go back farther and say he had not felt like this since he was a boy.

Yet when he stood on Mrs. Cruse's doorstep with the knocker in his hand, his courage almost forsook him. Why was he there? Was he making a fool of himself? Would the widow, with her piercing grey eyes, see at once that he was a sham and resent his intrusion? On the whole, he thought, with the knocker in one hand and his chin in the other and his stick dangling from his wrist, it might be better to send her a present of money and keep the personal touch out of the case.

While he stood so, the door opened and the youth stood before him, hat on the side of his head and cigarette in the corner of his mouth. He stared in a moment's surprise, then said:

“Did you want to see the room?”

“Yes. I should like to see the room.” Driven to speak, Mr. Unsworth spoke in a full, resonant tone.

“Ma!” called out the boy over his shoulder. “There's a gent here wants to see the room.”

The two males stood taking each other in with rather hostile glances, while Mrs. Cruse changed into a clean apron, wiped her nose on a corner of the soiled one and tucked in a loose strand of hair.

“Dear me, Jack,” she said, hurrying down the passage, “why didn't you ask the gentleman in? Come right in, sir, and I'll show it to you.”

A moment later Mr. Unsworth was standing in the very room he had seen so often from the outside, alone with the woman whose worries had given him such anxious thought. The room was smaller and dingier than he had expected, but it was very clean and there was a gas grate. He explained, every word ringing false in his own ears, what he wanted.

“You mean to say that you won’t be sleeping here?”

“No. I shall only require the room for a short time each day.”

“Well, you have to pay the regular rent for it just the same, sleep or no sleep.” She eyed him aggressively.

“Oh, I quite understand that.”

“And you understand about the gas?”

“Yes. I put a quarter in the slot and the gas comes.”

She looked at him searchingly.

“What about meals? My other lodgers take breakfast and dinner. I don’t like letting my rooms just for lodgings. It don’t pay so well. You needn’t be afraid of my cooking. I could feed you up so you wouldn’t look the thin man you do.”

Mr. Unsworth was embarrassed. He was proud of his slender figure. And she was not at all what he had expected. He began to see how she might easily intimidate a prospective lodger. There was nothing pathetic or ingratiating about her.

“I am willing to pay the full board,” he said.

“Full board!” she exclaimed. “And never eat a meal? You must have more money than brains! Or perhaps . . .” The suspicion in her eyes deepened. Was this handsome gentleman possibly insane? She looked toward the door, wondering if her son had gone out.

Mr. Unsworth spoke with dignity.

“I shall occasionally require a meal but, as I cannot tell you definitely just when, I feel that it is only fair to pay for them all.”

“And you mean to say you’ll take the room? I’m very particular, you must know. I like a gentleman to be tidy and respectable and not get ink on the furniture if he’s a writer. I had one writer gentleman before and he was a terror. Left owing three months’ board, too.”

“I’m not like that,” said Mr. Unsworth heavily. “I’m willing to pay in advance and, if I do any damage, I’m willing to pay for that, too.”

He took the room and paid a month’s board and lodging in advance. As he walked down the street he was sure that Mrs. Cruse was peering after him between the curtains, not so much elated by his munificence as suspicious of his strangeness. Certainly it had been very different from what he had

expected. He had expected to leave the house in a glow of well-doing, but what he felt was embarrassment and a little alarm. He had let himself in for a certain responsibility and he must play up to it, and that under the penetrating gaze of Mrs. Cruse.

He had said that he would not take possession of the room until the New Year. So ten days intervened in which he might reflect on what he had done and have the satisfaction of knowing that the widow was in funds. He ate a hearty lunch, and thanked his stars that he had not engaged to take any of his meals away from home.

He had his Christmas dinner where he always had it, the house of his late partner who, like himself, was retired. He was a Mr. Robertson, a widower of long standing who had lately taken a bride twenty years younger than himself. Mr. Unsworth had always enjoyed his quiet Christmas dinner with his old partner, but this year he rather dreaded it. The new Mrs. Robertson made him feel old-fashioned, seemed to put him definitely on the shelf. At the Christmas dinner she was even more intimidating than she had been before. There were only the three present, whereas formerly Mr. Robertson had always collected a couple of other old cronies.

Mrs. Robertson was very plain, but you forgot all about her looks when she talked. The talk came from her in short explosive bursts, while she leaned toward you, showing her teeth and savagely watching for the effect of her words upon you. She laid herself out to fascinate, to astonish the two elderly men. Her husband had grown moderately used to her though she depressed him, but the effect of these explosions of talk on Mr. Unsworth was devastating. If he chewed he could not tell what she said, so he bolted his food, his eyes fixed in apprehension on her face. She did not leave them to enjoy their wine and cigars in peace, but sat between them exploding in the face of first one and then the other. Everything she told them about had been great fun. Every one was so amusing. She had roared with laughter. By the time the evening was over Mr. Unsworth hated her with a slow, concentrated hatred. He wondered what poor old Robertson had been thinking of when he married her. She had made little of the present he had taken her, though he had spent a good deal of thought and money on it. She had passed the latter part of the evening, however, in showing him trivial gifts from friends of hers with an explosion of appreciation for each.

Never again, vowed Mr. Unsworth, slumped in his easy chair at home, never again! For the first time in his life he felt old, a back number. He thanked Providence that he was not, under the circumstances, in Robertson's shoes.

The failure of his Christmas dinner turned his thoughts back to Mrs. Cruse. How was she getting on? Was the expression of her mouth less baffled, of her eyes less piercing?

He thought they were when she opened the door to him on the morning after New Year's eve. She smiled severely, yet pleasantly at him as he stood there, a dispatch case in his hand, like a student arriving for an examination.

"So you've come?" she said.

"Yes, I've come. Didn't you expect me?"

"I never expect anything in this world," she returned, "until I see it." Then she added grimly: "Except trouble."

She had placed a table with a chair beside it and an ash tray on it in the middle of the room. He set his dispatch case beside the ash tray, and hung his hat and coat on a hook on the door.

"If you'll give me a quarter," she said. "I'll start the fire for you. It's bitter cold here, being shut up so long."

Mr. Unsworth produced the coin. There was a rattle, a spurt, then a clear steady flame sent warmth into the chill damp of the room. Mr. Unsworth seated himself at the table, took out his writing materials and tried not to look like a fool.

"If you want anything," Mrs. Cruse said from the doorway, "just come into the passage and shout. I'm always in the kitchen below."

"Oh, please don't trouble about me." He spoke anxiously. "I shan't want anything, and when I've done I'll let myself out."

She came back into the room and he was surprised to see an apologetic yet mischievous twist to her mouth. She said:

"You haven't missed anything out of the room, have you?"

He looked vaguely about.

"No-o. It looks just the same to me."

"Well, I took the pink satin loops off the window curtains. I thought as you was only going to be here for a part of the day you wouldn't mind. And they'll come in handy when the room's vacant again. It was them that caught your eye wasn't it?"

"It was," he replied firmly. "And, seeing that they led me to take the room, I think I have a perfect right to enjoy them while I'm here. So will

you please just tie them on again?”

He did not know why he had said this, but it was probably a desire to get nearer to Mrs. Cruse, to keep her from going away quite so soon, leaving him alone with his blank paper.

She gave an astonished look, then without a word marched upstairs and returned with the pink ribbon. She looped back the curtains carefully, then said:

“Now I hope you’re satisfied.”

He saw that she had got quite red and that it became her, turning her eyes from grey to blue-grey and making her face look less worn. He was pleased with himself, for all along he had felt that she had the upper hand and now he felt that he had it. He took up his pen with gusto and wrote the date at the top of a page.

He thought about the writing fellow who had preceded him in the room. He wondered what he had written here and whether it had been of any value. Not much, he judged, or he would have been able to pay his board. Though, of course, there had been times when quite famous writings had not brought in any money. He liked to think that the fellow had done good writing here and that he had succeeded him. Strange if he should turn to writing at his age and make a name for himself . . .

An hour passed and he began to think that he might safely go. If he went very quietly Mrs. Cruse might not know how short his stay had been. He must ask her for a latchkey so that he might come and go at will. He rose and stretched himself and turned off the gas. The small room had become insufferably close. There was a knock at the door. Mrs. Cruse entered, carrying a tray. She said:

“I brought you a cup of cocoa and a hot scone. It don’t seem quite fair that you should be paying for a lot of food you don’t get, and you with so little flesh to speak of.”

Mr. Unsworth was positively frightened at being forced to eat in the middle of the morning. He also felt huffy at this second reference to his slightness.

“You’re not very fat yourself,” he retorted gruffly.

“Me!” she cried. “The way I work and the way I worry, I’ve cause to be thin. If you worked and worried the way I do, I shouldn’t wonder if you was

a skeleton.”

Mr. Unsworth peered at the scones. There were three of them, split open and buttered, and a small dish of blackberry jam as well as the jug of cocoa.

“Thank you very much.” He waited for her to go, thinking how he might put the scones in his pocket and empty the cocoa out of the window. But she did not move. She said:

“I don’t suppose you’ll mind if I sit down while you eat. Then I can take the tray back with me.”

There was no help for it. He set to work doggedly on the scones, and was surprised to find how easy they were to eat. They were as light as feathers, so hot as to melt the butter, and the jam and cocoa were excellent. He made a clean sweep of the tray.

“I expect you feel a little more comfortable now,” observed Mrs. Cruse complacently. “I certainly do myself. I couldn’t bear the thought of taking all that money and giving nothing in return but the room.”

She got his topcoat and helped him on with it. She followed him to the front door, talking about the weather and the price of coal. When he asked for a latchkey she said that the last gent had lost the extra key, and that she was always about in the mornings and didn’t mind a bit letting him in and out.

Mr. Unsworth took a brisk walk before returning home. He was surprised to find himself able to eat his usual lunch without discomfort. He had feared that his housekeeper would worry about him. He was pleased with himself. He gave a little grunt of satisfaction as he remembered how he had made Mrs. Cruse return the pink satin loops to the curtains. He had got the upper hand of her and made her blush, and how it had become her! Behind her defiant, baffled look, she was a nice woman. A kind, sweet woman, he was sure, who deserved a better deal in the game of life than she had got.

Promptly at eleven o’clock he was installed in his workroom, as he now called it. He had provided himself with a new volume of biography so that he might pass the time with profit. However, he kept one ear cocked for the approach of Mrs. Cruse from the basement. When he heard her he closed the book and began energetically to write. This time she brought him cocoa, a slice of plain bread and butter, and a piece of raspberry tart. He was glad to see her, and began to eat and drink without protest.

“You’re not getting on very well, are you?” she said, seating herself on the edge of the bed and eyeing the scant lines he had written.

“The work I do,” he replied, taking a large bite, “requires a great deal of thought.”

“Ah!” Mrs. Cruse looked sympathetic. “That’s what keeps you thin. It’s thoughts—worrying thoughts—that keep me thin.”

“You have a lot of responsibility, certainly.”

“Yes. I have three boarders besides yourself. Mr. Boyle, he’s a vet. Mr. Cohen, he’s in the clothing business. And Miss Rogers, she’s a milliner. They’re all reliable, but there they are—waiting with their mouths open to be fed.”

“Yes, indeed,” agreed Mr. Unsworth, attacking the raspberry tart, which was the most delicious he had ever tasted. “Feeding a household is a great responsibility.”

“Then there’s my Jack. He’s a boy, but he never knows his own mind. He’s only got one vice. And that’s correspondence courses. I’m always having to foot the bill for a new one. He thought he’d be a draughtsman and took a course for it. But he got discouraged, and thought he’d be a motor mechanic and took a course for that. Next it was some sort of plumbing. I shan’t be surprised if the next course he takes is one in undertaking. If he does that, he can have his mother for his first subject. It’s beyond bearing.”

“You shouldn’t give in to him. You should be firm,” admonished Mr. Unsworth, finishing his piece of tart.

“I try to. I do, indeed. But what’s a poor woman against a grown man? And he was such a delicate child! If only his father were living . . .”

Mr. Unsworth’s kind face grew still kinder. He nodded sympathetically.

“There was a man to depend on. Weighed two hundred pounds and wasn’t tall either. I always think you can depend on fat. If there’s anything I miss in my present life, it’s fat.” She stared at Mr. Unsworth.

He tried to puff himself out, tried not to look thin and undependable, but was conscious of not succeeding.

Mrs. Cruse went on:

“There’s Mr. Boyle—he’s big and rawboned—North of Ireland. There’s Mr. Cohen—small and dapper, not an ounce to spare. Then there’s Miss Rogers—mostly hair and eyes. And now there’s you.”

They talked on and on. Before Mr. Unsworth knew it, his lunch hour was upon him. He had no time for an extra walk in which to get up an appetite, but found that he had an appetite without it. A new interest in life made his circulation quicker. He was eager for tomorrow to arrive.

It became the usual thing for Mrs. Cruse and him to have a long talk while he ate his little morning repast. One day he became so interested in telling her of his early vicissitudes—for they had reached the stage of mutual confidences—that it was too late for him to go home for lunch.

“You’d better have your lunch here then,” said Mrs. Cruse. “It’s your right. You pay for it. You can have it here any day you want.” She looked at him kindly.

He said that he was shy about meeting strangers.

“There’s no one here but myself. None of them comes home until night.”

She produced an omelet, some cold meat and fried potatoes. They sat at one end of the long table in the basement dining room, with an oil heater blazing away beside them and an enlargement of Mr. Cruse’s fat face beaming at them from the wall.

After that Mr. Unsworth took his lunch with Mrs. Cruse more often than not. He explained to his housekeeper that business in the city was claiming his attention. Every morning he set off jauntily from his house, dispatch case in hand, moving straight as an arrow to the widow’s house. Once or twice Jack joined them at lunch, seeming to quail under Mr. Unsworth’s stern glance.

The inevitable day came when Mr. Unsworth appeared at the evening meal and was introduced to the other boarders. He had shrunk from it for weeks, yet had been goaded to it by his overpowering curiosity to see the entire household. Mrs. Cruse had talked so much about them, so intimately described their idiosyncrasies, that he felt he must see them.

He would not have believed it possible that he could feel so much at home among them. They were just as Mrs. Cruse had described them, only more human. They accepted him with respect but without embarrassment. Mrs. Cruse sat at one end of the table, Jack at the other, Mr. Boyle and Mr. Cohen on one side, Mr. Unsworth and Miss Rogers on the other. This nearness to Miss Rogers was a new and wonderful experience for Mr. Unsworth. She was fragile, she was pretty, she had a soft voice and eyelashes so long that it was hard to keep from staring at them. She was

thirty-two, but was so innocent and gentle that she seemed more like eighteen to Mr. Unsworth. It was even more terrible to think of her battling against the world alone than to think of Mrs. Cruse battling.

From this time on Mr. Unsworth became divided into two men—the man dominated by Mrs. Cruse and the man dominated by his housekeeper. As the one grew, the other shrank until, at last, the man who returned to his housekeeper was no more than a husk, a shadow of his former self. The other man, the one whose blood was beginning to move quickly in his veins, soon learned that Miss Rogers' Christian name was Peggy. He began to loiter with her in the passage after dinner, bending his distinguished head under the flickering gas jet the better to see her face.

She told him of the difficulties of the millinery business. How, because of the cool, damp summer, she had not sold off the season's hats and still had a number on hand. He wished that he might buy them from her, but could think of no plan to make such a purchase plausible. He worried about the left-over hats considerably after he went to bed, but when he fell asleep he dreamed of her eyelashes and that they were tickling his cheek.

“Oh,” she exclaimed one day, “I feel as though I had known you for ages. I tell you all my troubles. I don't know what I should do without you.”

“And I don't know what I should do without you,” he replied. And he did not know whether to be glad or sorry that they were under the gas jet because something inside him was impelling him to kiss her.

His advance toward intimacy with Mr. Cohen was not so pleasant. Mr. Cohen was in financial difficulties and was behind with his board.

“He'll go off without paying just like the writing gent did, as sure as my name's Lily,” cried Mrs. Cruse.

Mr. Unsworth got no thrill out of knowing that her name was Lily, yet he felt more and more drawn to her and he began to worry about Mr. Cohen and his unpaid board. It would be terrible if he went off like the writing gent had done.

One night after dinner he asked Mr. Cohen to stop a minute in the basement dining room, that he wanted a word with him. He stood looking down with troubled eyes into Mr. Cohen's sallow, animated face.

“Yes?” said Mr. Cohen eagerly. “You would like something in the clothing line? I have a nice suit of a chocolate brown that would just fit you.”

“All I want,” replied Mr. Unsworth, “is that you should pay your board. Mrs. Cruse is a widow. Life is uphill going for her. I don’t think you should take advantage of her.”

Mr. Cohen did not question Mr. Unsworth’s right to champion Mrs. Cruse. He had a simplicity of nature that made him accept life as he found it.

“Me take advantage of any lady? Never! I will pay my bill in full next Saturday night.”

But Saturday night came and went and he did not pay the bill. Mr. Unsworth tackled him again, this time on the stairway. Mr. Cohen looked as though he were going to faint.

“How can I pay?” he exclaimed, “with things so dead in the clothing business? I’m at my wit’s end to meet my creditors. If only I could sell a couple of good suits this week I could pay her.”

Mr. Unsworth said heavily:

“I need two good suits. I will go to your shop tomorrow and see what you have.”

He went, and bought the chocolate brown suit. He carried it to Mrs. Cruse’s house and laid it in the chest of drawers in his room, for he dared not let his housekeeper see it. He ordered also a black suit to be made to his measurements. He paid for it in advance. On Saturday night Mr. Cohen settled his bill.

Mrs. Cruse’s gratitude to Mr. Unsworth touched him deeply. Again he had the pleasure of seeing her face warmed by a becoming flush. A strongly protective feeling was roused in him, but he continued to dream about Miss Rogers’ eyelashes. He wanted very much to take her to a concert, for he discovered that she was fond of high-class music, but he could not yet make up his mind to ask her.

Mr. Cohen and he were now firm friends, but he was still a little stand-offish with Mr. Boyle. Mr. Unsworth distrusted him. Then one evening Mr. Boyle invited him up to his room. He had a bottle of Scotch there, and gave Mr. Unsworth a drink. He told Mr. Unsworth a funny story. It was the first really coarse story that Mr. Unsworth had ever consented to listen to. He not

only listened but laughed heartily. He searched his mind for a funny story in return, but could not find any.

They talked until so late and Mr. Unsworth took so much Scotch that he decided to spend the night in his room at Mrs. Cruse's. This was the first of many nights. His housekeeper would have been greatly worried by his absorption in his financial affairs—for he continued to pacify her with lies—had not his physical condition been so good. He was actually putting on flesh.

The more often he went to Mr. Boyle's room the better he liked him. He began to imitate his hearty, horsey manner. One night, over a bottle of Scotch, Mr. Boyle confessed to him that it was his ambition to buy a partnership in the veterinary establishment in which he was an assistant, but he lacked the necessary funds. Mr. Unsworth immediately offered to lend him the amount required, at a low interest. Mr. Boyle did not flush becomingly, as Mrs. Cruse had. He became purple with gratitude. Mr. Unsworth thought he might be going to have a stroke.

But, though he had many interests, the chief one was Miss Rogers. When he sat in his room, his writing materials before him, pretending to work, he would write "Peggy" again and again over the sheet. At last he reached the point of writing "Peggy Unsworth," and had to snatch up the paper and crumple it when he heard Mrs. Cruse coming.

By the time spring was well established he had taken Miss Rogers to several concerts and was seriously thinking of leading her to the altar. She was growing prettier all the time, and was affecting a tender shade of green in her dress with touches of pink.

One evening in early June, when the front door stood open and the shouts of children came in on the balmy air, he opened the door of his room and went up the stairs with the purpose of finding her. His mind was made up. He would ask her to be his wife.

In the passage above he saw a figure that looked like Mr. Boyle at the first glance. At the second, he saw that it was too broad for Mr. Boyle. At the third, he discovered that it was two figures clinging together—Mr. Boyle and Miss Rogers hugging each other. He crept softly down the stairs.

He went into his own room and shut the door behind him. For the first time, he locked it and threw the key with a clang on the table. He sat down, staring blankly before him, seeing only those two figures

clinging together. He broke into a sweat, caused by the chill of his disappointment meeting with the heat of his anger. He was not so angry at the two on the landing as at himself, for he had made the embrace possible by his loan to Mr. Boyle. His own character was so honorable that the thought that Mr. Boyle might hug Miss Rogers without intending to marry her never entered his head. Mingled with his disappointment and anger was a strong relief that he had never given himself away, that Peggy had never found out that he cared for her other than as a friend.

He had become calm by the time the two appeared at his door arm in arm.

“You are the first one to know,” cried Miss Rogers, smiling up at him from under her eyelashes, and the thought crossed his mind that they had lately been tickling the cheek of Mr. Boyle.

“If it hadn’t been for your loan we couldn’t get married,” said Boyle, wringing his hand.

“Are you going to be married soon?”

“Right away?” shouted Mr. Boyle, grinning at his fiancée. “And if Mrs. Cruse will have us as a married couple, we’re going to stay on here.”

Mrs. Cruse would and they did. As the bride had no male relations Mr. Unsworth gave her away and, strangely enough, when the day of the wedding came he was glad he was not in Mr. Boyle’s shoes. She was too young for him. He was better off as he was.

Mrs. Cruse gave them the wedding breakfast. Mr. Cohen, who had no religious convictions, was best man. Mrs. Cruse had bought a new dress for the occasion. Without warning she had laid aside her widow’s weeds and appeared in bright blue with flowers in her hat. Mr. Unsworth was pleased with her appearance. She was putting on flesh.

When the Boyles settled down as a married couple in the house, turning Mr. Boyle’s bedroom into a “den,” things were more pleasant than ever. They were like one family. When the warm summer evenings came Mr. Unsworth would hire a taxi and take Mrs. Cruse for rides around the parks and into the country. Her only worry now was Jack. He wanted another correspondence course. He wanted a course in short story writing. He could stay at home beside his mother and write stories that would bring in a lot of money.

“He’s such a good boy,” sobbed Mrs. Cruse, sitting on the foot of Mr. Unsworth’s bed while he drank his cocoa, “yet he worries me to death. With

all his courses, he never earns a penny. If only his father were living it would be different. He never raised a finger against Jack, but he'd just give him a look and Jack would quail. That's the way with a fleshy man. His presence is commanding, and a look from him means more than an hour's harangue from a thin one."

"I will see what I can do with Jack," said Mr. Unsworth, swelling himself out.

He climbed the two flights of stairs to Jack's attic room. The youth was sitting in his shirt sleeves, perusing booklets on the subject of the short story course.

Mr. Unsworth eyed him sternly and said:

"Now, Jack, let us hear no more about this short story business. You've had courses enough and none of them has led to anything. You don't want to sponge on your mother, do you?"

"I ain't goin' to sponge on her! I'm goin' to learn to write short stories and make lots of money."

"Nonsense! From what I hear, not one short story out of a hundred is accepted. And, besides, what would you write about?"

"Well, I could write about the Boyles."

"They wouldn't like it. They'd probably leave. No, the thing you must do is to get a real job, go to work and help your mother."

"You just leave me to look after my own affairs, please. I don't want any interference from you. Who do you think you are? Do you think you're my boss?"

"Yes, I do." He sat down beside Jack and talked to him long and not unkindly. He saw that Jack quailed before him and he felt proud. The next morning he took him to the warehouse of a friend and got him a situation. The warehouse was on the river bank, where Jack could watch the boats pass. He was quite docile and had given up the idea of the correspondence course after pocketing the substantial bribe Mr. Unsworth had given him.

Mr. Unsworth said nothing to Mrs. Cruse about the bribe. All she knew was that he had got the upper hand of Jack and had put him into a situation.

"Well," she said, her face flushing in the becoming way it had, "I couldn't have believed that I'd depend so on a thin man."

That night Mr. Cruse appeared to Mr. Unsworth in a dream. He handed Mr. Unsworth a carving knife with a smile that was almost a smirk. He uttered the words, "Before you can say knife," and disappeared.

Mr. Unsworth was somewhat worried by this dream. What was its portent? Did the departed Mr. Cruse resent interference in the affairs of his son and his widow? What was the significance of a carving knife in a dream? What the meaning of the cryptic words? What was going to happen before you could say "knife?" He brought up the subject at the dinner table. General opinion was not encouraging. A knife in a dream might mean anything from suicide to murder, at the very least the severance of a tie.

He was worried a good deal by the dream, but soon a deeper worry drove it completely from his mind. The autumn brought with it heavy financial losses. Two companies in which the greater part of his money was invested failed almost simultaneously. If he had not been so absorbed by the doings at Mrs. Cruse's he would almost certainly have had warning of the coming crash. As it was, he was unprepared for the blow, and for several days his mind felt numb and he could only sit in his rented room and brood. He could not bear to be in his own house or to face the reproachful looks of his housekeeper, for, with woman's intuition, she had divined that, instead of being immersed in his affairs, he had been neglecting them. She had watched him develop into a different sort of man and nothing that happened to him could now surprise her.

His one comfort was Mrs. Cruse. Of course he did not tell her the extent of his losses, but she knew that he was harassed by money matters and she laid herself out to cheer him. She made new dishes to tempt his appetite, and the strange thing was that the more despondent he became the hungrier he grew. His digestion seemed impervious to worry when he ate the food prepared by her. Yet, in his own house, everything now disagreed with him.

When he and his lawyer had surveyed the wreck of his fortune he found that he had just enough income left to support him at Mrs. Cruse's for the rest of his days. He sold his furniture, disposed of the lease of his house, and settled down in the room which now had become his home. He brought a few of his best-loved possessions with him, so that he was able to make himself very comfortable indeed.

By the time a month had passed in this new life his spirits had become as good as ever. In fact, he had a sense of relief that he had washed his hands of his old responsibilities. The weather had become abominable, as it does so often in November, and now he could sit comfortably by his gas fire till bedtime. The returning home at night had always tired him.

Nothing could have come about more naturally than his proposal to Mrs. Cruse. He watched the desire to marry her approach him, but he did not try to escape. He wondered if she, too, saw the approach of a crisis. All she did was to talk and talk to him. She told him so many of her past troubles that his own dwindled to insignificance. She comforted him with cheering words. Then one day she exclaimed:

“Oh, if only I were a fleshy woman, I could be a greater support to you in your trial. I do think there’s nothing like flesh to lean on . . .”

“I ask for nothing better than you to lean on,” said Mr. Unsworth, putting his arm about her just where her apron tied, “and you will make me very happy if you will lean on me.” And so they leaned on each other.

There was no reason for delay. They were married as soon as the license could be got.

By the time Christmas came they wondered how they had ever got along without each other. It was hard to say which was the more devoted couple, they or the Boyles. Jack Cruse was getting along well in his situation and had a girl of his own.

It had been arranged that the Christmas dinner was to be their wedding feast. All the household were in a state of happy anticipation. Mr. Boyle who, as a partner in the veterinary concern, had got a car for use in his work, had motored into the country and bought a magnificent turkey, young but extraordinarily large and fat. Mrs. Unsworth, as she must now be called, had made delicious mince pies and one of the handsomest plum puddings ever seen. Mr. Cohen had provided the punch. Mrs. Boyle had herself trimmed the windows and the picture of the late Mr. Cruse with holly and evergreens, though her husband was a little anxious about her standing on chairs in her present delicate condition. Jack had brought his pretty, plump, black-eyed girl to dinner.

Mr. Unsworth, looking handsome and dignified, sat before the still intact turkey glistening in its own rich juice. He looked around the board in a glow of satisfaction. Life had been kind to him, he thought. How little he had anticipated when he had rented the room out of pity for Mrs. Cruse that he would be a happy husband in that very house. His wife, wearing her wedding dress of maroon silk, was smiling at him from her end of the table. That becoming flush was now almost always in her cheeks. He suddenly noticed that her cheeks were quite plump. He looked at Mr. Cohen and saw that he was filling out. Jack, too, was no longer the thin youth he had been.

His girl showed dimples wherever dimples have the habit of appearing. Even Mr. Boyle was looking less rawboned. As for Mrs. Boyle—but her roundness was of that touching, transitory kind not to be described in cold words.

The carving fork was there, but not the knife.

“Lily,” Mr. Unsworth said, “you have forgotten the carving knife.”

She sprang up agilely and fetched it from the kitchen.

“Dear me, how stupid of me. I was just putting a good edge to it, and then Peggy called me and I forgot to bring it.”

She put it in his hand, and he was surprised to notice how full and firm his own hand looked. There was no doubt about it, he was getting stout!

He was about to plunge the knife into the yielding bird when his eyes were drawn to the portrait of Mr. Cruse. A smile that was almost a smirk broadened the face above the triple chin. This was the face of Mr. Unsworth’s dream. The dream came back with astonishing clarity. He saw now what the shade of Mr. Cruse had meant. The knife it had been offering him was a carving knife. Its message had been, “Before you can say knife you will be married to Mrs. Cruse.” The ghost had been a kindly one, the words of fair omen. “Before you can say knife . . .”

Knife suspended in hand, Mr. Unsworth looked up into the pictured face of Mr. Cruse, framed in holly, and grinned in good-fellowship.

THE END

TRANSCRIBER NOTES

Mis-spelled 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.

Because of copyright considerations, the illustrations by Dudley Gloyne Summers (1892-1975) have been omitted from this etext.

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[The end of *The Widow Cruse* by Mazo de la Roche]