

Weekly Short Story

By ELLA CLINE

God Gets Even

In the basement of one of our largest department stores I met my neighbor, Mrs. Bernard Krupnik. She was selecting a set of dishes for Passover. Somewhat embarrassed, as if I had come upon her committing a crude social error, she said:

"It is to please my Sylvia. If I were at all superstitious, I would declare that her grandmother Soshie, may she rest in peace, is in that child."

I remained to help select the prettiest set, even if it would be used only one week each year. That Mrs. Krupnik should buy anything for ritual purposes only was a remarkable event in consideration of the part religious observance had played in her past. My neighbor is talkative and self-revealing; I know a great deal about her life-story.

She had lost respect for custom and tradition and all religious observance shortly after she came, a bride, into her husband's home in a village in faraway Lithuania and her mother-in-law discovered that her outfit did not contain the velvet dolman she had expressly stipulated it must contain.

The bride's parents admitted that the dolman was to have been included, but the wedding had cost more than they had anticipated. Nevertheless a dolman would be provided just as soon as they paid some of the debts incurred in marrying off their Yente. It would be that much newer and last longer.

Yente's mother-in-law declared she never would have permitted her son Berelle to marry a girl whose parents could not supply her with a velvet dolman. But since the wedding had already taken place and the young couple were happy in their married state, she could do nothing about it, except find fault with the bride.

She watched Yente closely for any lapse of strict observance of all dietary laws and the many observances obligatory to a pious Jewish woman, and was quick with criticism. Mrs. Krupnik once told me:

"I could not move a step, but 'schwiger would be at my side to see if I had not sinned. If I walked out on Saturday carrying a handkerchief and she caught me at it, you would think from the row she made that I had been baptized and was eating a whole side of pig. . . . May her soul rest in peace, but she always thought the worst of every one."

To come to the point, whereas before her wedding Yente had taken her religion as a matter of course, did as her mother told her to, and gave it little thought, in her husband's home she began to question every rite and custom. For instance, she saw no reason why

Relatives began to take sides, friends left their evening meal and rallied to the support of either faction; the cause for combat was lost sight of in the heat of the fray which was growing in number and in sound every minute when someone shouted, "Es komt the Polizei!" and the yelling and vituperations at once subsided.

Yente would not return to her husband's home, claiming that her mother-in-law would stick a knife into her while she slept; and Soshie declared that she would choke her with her bare hands if ever she dared to cross her threshold again. So on the next day the young couple and their nearest relatives met before the Rav for a just settlement of the affair.

The Rav stroked his gray beard while listening to the terrific din of accusations, all talking at once, and through which the phrase, "Let there be a divorce!" penetrated most frequently. But he noticed that the young couple were quiet and that their eyes clung together in mute misery. He told his "Shamos" to order quiet. The Rav asked a few questions and soon declared that divorce was not indicated because a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law failed to agree. Another such row, he warned, might bring disaster on all the Jews of the village. They must live in peace! And ordered them all home. But Berelle and Yente could find no peace, so they emigrated to America.

Instead of punishing her for her sin, God caused her and her husband to come to America, while God-fearing Jews remained in Lithuania to suffer the horrors of the World War!

In Boston Yente became Jennie and Berelle Bernard. Bernard became a presser in a pants factory and Jennie an ardent Socialist. She consistently disobeyed all the dietary laws and was proud of it. She told me that once having made a milk soup and having nothing at hand to make it "treif" she actually put in a piece of tallow candle. The soup tasted a bit queer, but it was no longer kosher.

She soon learned about free love, too. She once confided in me, "I seriously thought then of divorcing my Benny and then living with him in freedom, only if I did not believe in marriage, it seemed silly to believe in divorce. . . ."

Nevertheless, in the face of their manifold transgressions, the Krupniks prospered. They worked hard and saved carefully until Bernard had a tiny factory of his own. The World War made them comparatively rich. They moved their home several times, each time into a better and more expensive neighborhood. When Mrs. Krupnik became my neighbor, a velvet dolman

at him in scorn, since he could easily afford to become a member. During the year Sylvia would announce every holy day in advance and supervise its observance.

She realized that her parents had a hard struggle to get a foothold in their adopted country and did not blame them too much for their lack of religious zeal, but turned her attention mainly to her older sisters, who, poor things, had not had the advantage of a school for religion.

Her sisters were not at all averse to candles and presents on Chanukah; a masquerade party on Purim; picnics on Shavuoth and on Succoth and Passover was hailed with joy—a feast! Why not join

had already blessed seven. She questioned the difference in eating meat right after a milk dish and not in the reverse order. And eventually there came the time, after many wordy battles with her husband's mother, when she even dared to question the advisability of fasting on Yom Kippur. And right here is where the Almighty lost out, according to Mrs. Krupnik.

Not that Yente really believed that one could break so stern a law with impunity, but made irritable by repeated quarrels, egged on by members of her own family, who advised her to obey the Jewish laws and yet not give in to her mother-in-law—regardless of the fact that to do so was a human impossibility—she became desperately unhappy. Coming in with a few other young married women into Schul on Yom Kippur, her mother-in-law scrutinized her sharply and suspiciously as if she was certain that she, and she only, had partaken of forbidden nourishment, she marched right home and ate.

Having committed the terrible sin of eating on the most holy of fast days, Yente waited for dire consequences which she believed inevitable, for regardless of the many debates on the subject with her mother-in-law, she had a deep, inborn respect for that dread day, Yom Kippur. She was tired of everything, anyway, quarreling all the time as if a man married a velvet dolman. She did not care if God killed her for her sin.

But God did nothing about it. It was middle afternoon and she ate heartily, having been without food or water for over twenty hours. The food did not choke her nor the water strangle her. The heavens did not open and consume her with fire. The hills near the village did not tremble and fall apart; the river nearby did not boil and storm; the sun calmly continued in its course and began to descend in the west; in the synagogue the evening prayers were begun. The wholesome food agreed with her strong, young body and instead of instantly and miserably perishing, Yente felt all the stronger for the row that evening.

For when Soshie came home from Schul and discovered that Yente had eaten before evening and had not even taken the trouble to hide the evidence of her sin, her rage was terrible to behold.

She began by giving Berelle two resounding slaps for having that kind of a wife. The young man pleaded bitterly that he was not at fault since the match had been arranged for him by his parents. Thereupon Soshie turned, with strong hands ready, to Yente, who eluded her and ran through the village to the home of her parents, yelling all the way that she was being murdered.

kept a broadtail trimmed with sable for best wear. She had forsaken Socialism long ago.

As she put it, "If those 'schlemiels' worked as hard and saved as we did, instead of talking all the time, there would be no need for a general division." She ignored free love altogether, with growing girls. But religion still meant nothing to her and God seemed weak and indifferent until her Sylvia began to display disturbing traits.

Jennie had gone her way, fearless of God or man. She had four daughters and when the last one came, she admitted she made her first great mistake.

Bernard was terribly disappointed in again not having a son, the baby was born weak and sickly, so to console him she let him name the child for his mother, may her soul rest in peace, and that was her mistake.

The fourth was a lovely child, but always ailing and delicate, one that had to be catered to continually. Changing Soshie into Sylvia had not helped any; at a surprisingly early age Sylvia developed an alarming religious complex.

The first day she attended a private kindergarten she returned with shining eyes and a little prayer she had learned which the teacher had included in a fairy story. She lisped her prayer morning and night. Explain to a child of five!

At six Sylvia asked permission to attend a Sunday religious school with a little Jewish girl who lived next door and would not be denied. After that, the deluge!

The religious school was of the conservative type and the instructors carefully explained every holy day as it came along and put emphasis on every Jewish law and custom. Sylvia learned eagerly and demanded to know why none of the holy days were kept, nor the laws honored in her home.

Once, when she was about eight, when butter and meat were served at the same meal, she refused to eat, had a long crying spell, and kept the household up most of the night with her suffering caused by a severe attack of indigestion. The doctor explained that she was high strung and must be humored until she was mature, at least. There was nothing much the matter with her physically, but if such spells occurred frequently, she might become a chronic invalid. He suggested that the advice of a psychoanalyst might be of advantage. Mrs. Krupnik became frightened; did that mean that the child might become crazy?

Nothing would persuade the child to discontinue to attend the religious school. Her father had to join the synagogue so that she should not attend at a disadvantage and men should not point their fingers

with the trail and lovely Sylvia as instigator, the older girls began to frown on the mixing of food in the kitchen, and demanded that a set of dishes be purchased for Pass-over use.

So here she was, after twenty years in America, she who had dared so bravely in that village of the old world, who had disowned all ties of religion for the sake of a mysterious freedom in the new world, buying special dishes, and rather liking it. It reminded her of her home before she married, of helping her mother scour and clean and change all the dishes and pots. Such fun!

If her mother-in-law, may she rest, had not made such a fuss about a dolman, a rag, Mrs. Krupnik might never have strayed, she told me, sighing, while the clerk took her address and assured her that the dishes would be carefully packed and promptly sent. But she thought it was clever of God to wait patiently all these years to make her retract. He knew she was stubborn and would have resisted. But what can one do with a delicate child who might get a brain sickness? For Sylvia's sake, Mrs. Krupnik could forgive even her mother-in-law, may her soul find peace.