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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

The Dinner Set

By FANNY KEMBLE JOHNSON

*A story of the strange doom that wreaked havoc upon everyone
who acquired the set of china*

YES," said the visiting civil engineer, "that was queer; but what do you think of this?"

He liked to give a story a literary turn, and, not knowing his weakness, his club members were surprized when he began:

"Señorita Paquita passionately desired this set of china. It happened to fulfill a need of her nature. She adored the little more added to the usual. About all of her possessions there was a touch which inevitably caused her acquaintances to exclaim in derision, wonder, or envy.

"Now this set of china had more, much more. For one thing, it was a huge set, dozens of everything. There was even a child's set for a doll table. It was as complete as that. It thought of everything, and it was so beautiful, a sumptuous original design, created for a South American potentate who had been assassinated before he could pay for it.

"I do not know how it came to rest at a reduced valuation in a foreign shop in La Paz; but there it was. Even reduced, the price was pretty stiff for anyone not

really enthusiastic; but the *señorita* was that all right.

"She used to go to gaze at it, and there she would stand, counting, pondering, planning to buy, and the dealer would look her way, and blink and smile. Under that lacquered poll he well knew that he would sometime sell her his Chinese white elephant and get his long-delayed profits.

" 'Now what would you make that out to be, *Señor?*' she asked me one morning, noticing me at her elbow bent on some gift-buying for my niece in the States.

"I stooped my head to see what she meant.

"Then I first perceived that the china was strangely patterned. It was as if the designer had wandered in an equatorial jungle world, marvelous and monstrous, and had every so often cut a plate, or a platter, or a cup, or a jug, or a bowl out of it. Can you get my meaning? A plate would be leaves all over and a third of it a great flower, or there would be a tremendous moth or butterfly, or over the

edge of a single tropical leaf you glimpsed the rolling of an immense river, or another piece would merely be an intense blue and brightness of night and stars, or the brilliant wing-tip of a bird, no room for more. But each had one feature in common, one feature which made the dishes a set and not just a collection of unrelated pieces.

"On each piece there was a black and extremely strange figure. It did not appear as if actually meant for a definite object, or if it was, it was meant for something outside of my human experience. If you examined it minutely it became blurred. It all but vanished. It lurked, you could say. It became less a shape than a darkness into which you peered and feared to fall, if you were fanciful. But on other pieces it lurked in another fashion. On the doll dishes I could have sworn the blackness glittered and slid.

"'It doesn't really seem to be anything at all,' I told her presently. 'I fancy it's merely an artistic trick. That bit of black contrasts very effectively with all that gorgeousness, you see.'

"She accepted my explanation with satisfaction. She loved to walk a plain path.

"Soon I heard that she had bought the china. In fact I saw it being carried to her in a gigantic basket by the owner of the shop and his brother. Their yellow faces grinned at me. I offered my congratulations, and, aside from having got rid of an all but unsalable burden, they struck me as looking remarkably relieved and satisfied.

IT WAS a sad thing—the poor *señorita*—she never got to use her beautiful china, after all. She died of acute indigestion that very night, and the set was almost immediately offered for sale by

her brother and heir. He had no use for it and it had been an incredible extravagance on his sister's part.

"It tempted a young wife, an exquisite creature whose husband could refuse her nothing, especially since she would soon become a mother. She also adored the doll dishes but that was because she could look ahead and behold a little girl setting a doll table.

"She stored the set away until some special occasion.

"On her husband's birthday it arrived, and, since this was to be her last-festivity pending the baby's birth, she herself laid the table for the birthday guests. As she stood admiring the long festal board, she bethought her of the doll dishes, and smiling and playful set them out also on a tea table, a cover of lace beneath them, and tiny candles at each table corner.

"When her husband entered and joined her in admiring it, she said she was a trifle tired and would lie down for an hour before dressing. Somewhat later he went to her and found her to be in pain. She was taken to the hospital, where that night the child, a girl, was born dead, and where, two weeks later, the young mother died of an infection.

"A legend began to gather around the set of china. No one desired it for a long period; but finally a rich American, lured by the again greatly lowered price, bought it as a gift for his wife."

"I know," interrupted the man opposite, rudely; "the woman died next day."

"It is true," said the civil engineer tolerantly, "that she was all but drowned in a steamboat disaster on Lake Titicaca within a few days of her husband's unfortunate purchase. But he had sense, that man. It was plain to be seen, he said, that the set of china was hoodooed, and anyone liking to risk it, could have the cursed stuff for a nickel.

"There was an Englishwoman, wife of my superior, a beautiful, healthy, sensible creature of thirty-six or so, who mocked at all superstition. She said she would give him ten pounds for it, and he gladly sent it to her that very day. He wanted to make her a present of it, but she preferred it to be a business transaction. She said scoffingly that she would rather buy her bad luck than have it for a present.

"She had never been ill a day in her life except when her babies arrived, and that she did not count; but about a week later, as she sat gayly having tea with her best friend, and her own eldest daughter and that daughter's fiancé, she had all at once the most terrible sensation.

" 'I am dying,' she said with entire conviction.

"As they carried her to a couch in the room she had a hemorrhage. Luckily the seventeen-year-old girl had enough sense to use an ice-pack until a doctor could be had.

"She lay ill for months, as near death as one could be not to die.

"Every now and then she would say to her daughter, who became her nurse, having developed a fine talent in that direction, instantly recognized by the doctor—every now and then she would say, faintly smiling:

" 'Do not let any of my beautiful china get smashed, Iris.'

"Iris was afraid to cross her mother in the least way; but she said to the nice youngster she meant to marry some day:

" 'I hate it, oh, how I hate it!'

" 'You don't——' he began, and stopped. It was so evident that she did. 'And you an English girl!'

"Iris looked at him obstinately.

" 'You never had a native nurse who took you through a graveyard uprooted by an earthquake. You never played with

a witch-woman's children as a treat. You never saw a dead girl propped up against a window, trimmed like a Christmas tree in all the family finery, on the chance that her unfaithful lover might come by and she come alive long enough to strangle him. What do you know about anything in this country, you silly English boy?'

"Brooks deplored this mature flood of speech in one so young.

" 'I know that you ought to have been sent to school in England!' he cried fervently.

" 'My mother is dying,' said Iris, 'and I know what I'm going to do about it.'

"But the young man had no idea what she meant until he caught her doing it the very next evening.

"Her mother had been lower than ever that day, and Brooks had been sitting on the veranda rail for an hour, waiting until Iris could find a moment for him. He was just thinking that he might as well get along, and try his luck later, when a faintly echoing crash reached his ears. He thought nothing of one crash; but when it was followed by a second and a third, he investigated.

"THE grounds behind the bungalow ran down the hill for some distance and were bounded by a stone wall with a blue wooden door in it. This door stood open, and it was from the other side of the wall that the crashes were continuing to come, quite loudly and clearly now. Still Brooks never thought of what they might be, but walked carelessly on and peered through the blue doorway.

" 'At least you might come and help me,' said Iris in a sobbing voice.

"Then he saw that she stood in front of two great clothes-hampers of glittering dishes.

" 'You can start on the other hamper,' said Iris.

"These two young English persons—for Brooks was so wrought up by the unreasoning grief of his sweetheart that he found himself smashing with a cold fury equalling hers—stood there and broke a thousand dollars' worth of china, in about thirty minutes. He told me it seemed as if living shapes struck against the wall; but I always discounted that. After all, he was young and excited. They broke even the last little doll plate, and by that time it was night.

"They went inside, and Brooks closed the blue door very carefully and locked it very particularly before he turned to kiss Iris' tear-marked face. As they stood clasped, suddenly Iris broke from him and ran into the house as if she had heard a call. He followed her to the sickroom where she was standing by her mother, who had certainly appeared to be dying an hour earlier.

"The German doctor stood by the bed too, smiling and patting Iris on the back heavily.

"It was time she took that turn for the better,' he said loudly.

"Iris' mother did not look any better to Brooks; but he understood presently that what seemed to him so much like the sleep of death was really the natural and invigorating sleep of life.

"And indeed it turned out to be all of that, for within a month the English-woman was as well as ever.

"On the day her husband was expected home from his bridge-building in the Andes, she said:

"We'll use our beautiful dishes this evening.'

"She spoke to Iris, who burst into tears and looked at Brooks.

"He rose to the occasion. He even swore that he had persuaded Iris to do it.

"You broke my beautiful, my wonderful dishes! You pair of superstitious——' Words did not fail her, but she was too self-controlled to continue.

"We did it to save your life,' mumbled Iris, her face obscured by a pink linen sleeve.

"Her mother opened her mouth, but closed it without speaking. Only her look inquired:

"What on earth have I raised to young womanhood?"

"Brooks defended his love.

"Then why didn't you send her home to England? What else could you look for in a girl brought up in this country?"

"Oh, I thought you put it in her head,' countered his future mother-in-law. She turned and left them, speaking to herself in a tone of indescribable exasperation:

"I do believe the idiots think that is why I got well.' "

THE visitor collected eyes—some speculative, others entertained.

A man asked: "Well, *was* it?"

The story-teller rose, looked at the time and moved toward the door.

"I don't know," he said. "I was not the disinterested observer—because, you see, it happened to *my* wife."

He departed with a courteous hand-wave, and an enigmatic smile.

