

# The Storyteller

## THE HABIT OF JERRY

'I'm going to save his soul!' announced Hannah Smith with decision.

'I should just like to know how you're going to do it?' observed her neighbor, Mrs. Hallet, stopping her rocking to emphasise her sense of the unlikelihood of Hannah's success. 'First of all you've got to find the soul to save it. Theologically we all know he's got one, but outside revealed teaching you'd never know it—you've got to make an act of faith to be sure of it.'

'He's sort of numb,' admitted Hannah.

'Sort of numb! He's clear numb; whatever has happened to the man it's frozen up all his life, soul and all! He puts me in mind of the big cakes of ice I saw once in a window advertising artificial ice—they had slices of oranges and bananas, all sorts of fruit frozen in them. Your boarder may have sweet bits like that in him, but they're all caked over!'

Mrs. Hallet resumed her rocking as if it would carry her past a subject of which she had finally disposed.

All the more reason for thawing him,' said Hannah, suggestively shading her face from the heat of the stove as she lifted off her big preserving kettle.

'You're not in earnest, Hannah?' protested Mrs. Hallet.

'That's precisely what I am; I should think it was about the best thing a person could be if she was going to turn apostle.' Hannah laughed as she spoke, but the light of a propagandist was in her eye. 'That man isn't bad,' she added, turning on Mrs. Hallet as if she had been his accuser. 'He's just numb, as you say. He doesn't go to church, and he won't go to church, and he's despairing, in his quiet way. Of course despair is a sin, but it isn't a vice—I'm sure there isn't anything wrong in the poor fellow in that way. Something has taken the mainspring out of him; he has lost faith and hope—'

'And so you want to practise charity,' Mrs. Hallet interrupted her. 'Well, if anyone was ever designed, and made, and sent into the world especially to that end it's Hannah Smith. But how do you mean to save his soul?'

'I mean to cook for him,' announced Hannah, so solemnly that round-faced, merry Mrs. Hallet shouted.

'Well, considering that he's boarding with you, I should imagine that's what you'd have been doing all along,' she gurgled.

Long, lean Hannah, the very antipodes of her thick-set neighbor, who had been her seat-mate at school forty years before, turned to look at her reproachfully.

'I'm going to cook to save him,' she said firmly. 'I've been thinking a great deal at odd times about the way we neglect cooking as an influence. I've been convinced more than once that we ought to realise how the flavor of something a poor outcast from home and loved when he was a child would affect him, how the smell, say of frying doughnuts, might move a lonely person's conscience by recalling his grandmother's kitchen, and with the kitchen of course the teachings of that dead grandmother, and how some one in the grip of a temptation might be torn from it, by—well, I don't know—by a pumpkin pie, or warm gingerbread, or something homely if he could smell and taste it at the critical moment. I'm certain there could be a lot done by establishing—'

'Mission kitchens!' Mrs. Hallet could barely articulate the words, she was so convulsed with laughter, over her friend's theory of influences. 'Oh, Hannah Smith, you certainly are queer.'

'I'm going to cook for him on a different basis,' repeated Hannah Smith firmly. 'I've been trying to make him comfortable, and now I'm going to do more.'

Hannah Smith was accounted the best cook in the community at the same time that she was one of its best women. Mrs. Hallet began to wonder, as she heard the ring in her friend's voice and remembered her skill and goodness, whether, after all, Hannah might not start her boarder heavenward by this strange footpath. Hannah interrupted her thoughts to say, 'And after I've got him thawed and receptive by means of old-fashioned home cooking, I'm going to borrow your Jerry.'

Mrs. Hallet's eyes softened; this time Hannah had suggested an influence that her neighbor understood and felt was irresistible. She arose to go.

'You shall have Jerry, and welcome, any time you want her,' she said. 'I guess you're going to succeed.' Jerry was little Geraldine, Mrs. Hallet's young daughter's legacy to her mother when she left the world untimely, left it the richer by her baby of two weeks old.

The baby had proved to be hopelessly crippled from birth. At first Mrs. Hallet had found it hard to be reconciled to accepting the maimed little life as the price of the blooming girl who had given it to her. As time went on and Jerry unfolded the wonderful sweetness of her heart, the loveliness of her wan face, the fragrant spirituality of her childish character, her grandmother had begun to see that only in physical strength she was lacking, only in her feeble limbs was halting, and she loved the child with a love that held in it something of awe as well as gratitude to her for having come to bless her lonely home. If Hannah saw that Jerry was the one who could best arouse her boarder, then Jerry's grandmother was able to feel such respect for her friend's discernment that the funny notion of conversion through home cooking lost its ridiculousness.

Hannah set about this propaganda at once. She had discovered that the stranger whom she had taken within her gates had spent his boyhood on a farm, and, being country-bred herself, and from the same section of country, she knew what dishes had saluted him doubly, through his two senses, when he came in hungry from school, and she set about preparing them.

The boarder was a silent, listless man, with nervous hands and a stoop in his high shoulders. Hannah had spoken truly when she had said that he was despairing; how truly she could only guess. Defrauded of all but a pittance by the man who had been his best friend and confidential partner, betrayed and deserted by the woman whom he had loved when misfortune overtook him, Charles Hermann had allowed himself to drift into apathetic scepticism toward everything in which he had once believed. He lived a harmless life, as far as a negatively unproductive life can ever be harmless, and the future held no hope for him, as the past held no pleasant memories. No pleasant memories subsequent to the day when he had left his father's farm. But around that early life clustered the remembrances of a just father, of a sweet and tender mother whose death had been the end of that innocent, happy life; the first link of the long chain of misfortunes that followed it.

He came into Hannah Smith's cheerful dining-room and stood still a moment, arrested by the odors that struck him with a magic that transported and rejuvenated him.

'What have you for supper, Miss Smith?' he asked. 'Is it—it can't be scrapple and apple butter, and—not doughnuts too? Why, it's the very supper mother used to get up for us when father and I came in on an autumn night from hauling mine props to the station!'

He spoke with such a new ring in his voice that Hannah's other boarders—there were not many—looked up to see if it were really Mr. Hermann.

Hannah smiled, her kindly smile lighting up her high cheek-bones into a kind of beauty.

'It's our old home supper too, Mr. Hermann,' she said. 'I was raised on a farm like you, and when I feel as if I wanted to find the little Hannah Smith that used to be me I cook up some of the things my mother used to have.'

The man looked at her with a sympathetic glance, and took his place at the table silently. Hannah noted with satisfaction that her viands evidently had the old-time flavor, and she fancied that tears were not far off to serve as their sauce. A glamor of youth rested over her table to the eyes of Charles Hermann, and Hannah smiled to herself as she saw the melancholy stealing over him which was sweeter than indifference. From this night of the beginning of her apostolate Hannah preached eloquently the poignancy of association from the pulpit of her shining cook stove.

Little Jerry was helping her to arouse the object of her compassion, unconscious of the reason for her being urged to 'make friends with Mr. Hermann.'

A reserved little soul, Jerry was not disinclined to her fellow-mortals and the lame child and the empty-hearted man soon evinced a marked enjoyment of each other's society. The man told the little girl stories of the dear old days on that lost hillside farm, remembering details that he would have said that he had forgotten, helped to memory by her dilating eyes, and no less by the spurs to memory with which Miss Hannah was nourishing him.

In her turn Jerry told him stories of her dolls, of the angels, of her three newest kittens, of her flowers, and her suspicions as to fairies that ran along on the