

GOODS AND CHATTELS

LAURA BENÉT

Drawings by Johan Bull

THOMAS PETENY was for many years the public auctioneer of Eltry, and a rare bird in his chosen field, until his back became bent like a gnarled spruce and younger men stepped into his shoes. A fine figure of a man he was when he walked the street, and as necessary to the setting of the village as the town pump. He had a merry blue eye, an unsuccessful nose, and a generous, wide-lipped mouth. He was one who made a fine art of his calling and took as much interest in the articles he put up for sale as though they had been his own tender children. Thomas Peteny was the sole auctioneer that ever I knew who was not ruthless but religious. He was forever attending auctions early and wandering about among the objects, touching and looking at them and sizing up their possibilities — “Getting acquainted,” he would say, “with all their quirks.” And when his hammer struck the block, in spite of its heartiness, his appraisal of the things he auctioned off was never cheap. Once, in confidence, he told me that before every auction he spent hours on his knees.

He lived in a little low-raftered house, full of odds and ends left over from various auctions that no one else could be persuaded to buy. Years before, he had been a sailor and had taken many long voyages. “Never can tell what one may be able to do with driftwood,” said he, “nor what kind of flames will spring out of it. Everything has a soul,” said he, “and battered bodies often the

freshest ones. There are kegs and barrels that float up out of the sea with strange things in them. Treasures — aye — treasures. Did you ever look over roof tops and see what the wind brings?" And then he would smoke his pipe and tell stories.

Those looking through the diamond-paned windows of his small house, where he often worked until late at night, would have seen a strange sight. He would putter and tinker with a chair or a sofa until I'll swear it almost took on a personality. If it was a short, soft sofa or a squat chair, he would address it as "Madame"; if it was a lanky highboy or a learned-looking desk, it was "Sir." How carefully he handled the things, rubbing and furbishing their worn sides, mending rents in their upholstery or steadying their feet! "Poor bits, poor bits," he would say, gazing at them as sympathetically as though they had been beggars or outcasts. He talked a lot to himself, did Thomas Peteny. Well, the upshot of the matter was that everything he handled seemed to win a personality, and his little house took on a prosperous air from the fine old things he had collected.

Then all at once he decided to take a voyage. Whether it was that he was an aging man and hadn't hustled enough on his own account, or whether the town grew fickle, he began to be supplanted by one Robert Marmion. And he took this very hard, did Thomas Peteny. He went off on a ship that was going to far parts of the world. But before his departure two dozen or more of the old pieces he cherished so fondly were loaded aboard — or handed on board, you might say, as though they'd been his relatives — by the men who were assisting him. He stood close beside them when he sailed, looking for all the world as though he were about to conduct an auction on shipboard. And off he went. The sea is a mighty soother when the universe and your own niche in it have gone back on you.

It was nigh a year when one of our townsfolk, who had been to the nearest port, said Thomas Peteny was come home in a great, fine ship — "but not alone," he added with a wink. "He's got lots of companions." The day the coach brought him and his retainers home was a circumstance. Such a body of them! Where he picked up the poor folks and how he persuaded them to come with him, nobody knew. And imagine the surprise when we heard he intended to auction them off as if they had been rabbits — except that in looks they answered to the description. They

were as odd a lot of junk as the household goods collected for a sale; some of them with bent backs and crooked spines, and no smile on their lips, and sway-backed like an old table or sofa; and some squat and determined like a chest or a churn that has sat too long in one place. One old lady looked for all the world like a worn-out spinning wheel. Few of them had any beauty. But there were several with a genteel dignity that refined them to their very bones. The clothes — or rags, I should say — that they had on were as well worn as their bodies.

Mrs. Lavelly Becker said it was the slave trade and they must have Negro blood, and she wondered the Town Council didn't take it up with Thomas Peteny. But the Town Council took matters into its hands instead, and said they were not going to attack and lock up a jolly old man who had never done them any harm — especially as he lodged and fed the folks in his own house. The Council met him one evening over a bottle of Madeira.

"Look here, Peteny," they said, "where did you get these people?"

"From folks that didn't want them," murmured Thomas Peteny. "I came back with more than I took away. *These* have souls. I found greater things in strange corners of the East. Dived into its secrets."

"Do you think it's right and just to do what you are doing?" continued the Council. "Shall we have the parson over?"

The old auctioneer looked bewildered.

"But they needed homes," he said, "they needed someone to look after them. I just had to get them."

"Tables and chairs are a somewhat different proposition from folks," grumbled Deacon Bradley.

"They've got to have good homes," said Thomas Peteny firmly, "otherwise they'll be trampled on. I've done no wrong."

"Look-ee," said the Deacon, "what do you propose to do with the money for which you've bargained their immortal souls? Answer me that, Thomas Peteny."

"There'll be no money," said Thomas Peteny, looking him as square in the eyes as though he'd driven a nail there. "The people that take them will guarantee them a job and pay them wages."

The oddest thing about the whole circumstance was that on the day of the auction, the folks looked rather eager and pleased to know they were going to be placed at last. They were as-

sembled in the courthouse, but there was a carpet on the floor, and when conversation dragged, the Dorcas Society passed around coffee and cookies. The majority of those Thomas Peteny had brought across the great deep were not young enough to do extra heavy work. But as auctioneer Mr. Peteny was in his best fettle. He described all the kinks in the characters of those men and women as if he were taking account of their souls.

"Here's a stiff back for clerical work," he would say, "and a hand that looks small but is apt at grasping a quill pen." He pointed to a stately, gray-haired man.

"And this hand and this back," he'd say, patting another and younger man, "were meant for long evenings under the lamp, putting together fine bits of gold. Jeweller's fingers, upon my word."

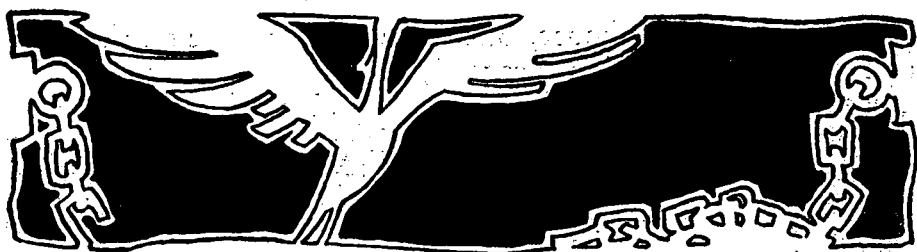
After a minute he beckoned to a tiny, dumpy old woman, who had a figure like a bag tied in the middle by a string. For all the world like a rocker she was, and folk burst out laughing behind their hands. "A cushion in a hard world," said he, "all the comforts of home put up in little." And the old woman nodded. One of the citizens that had a houseful of children and a fretful wife took her, by the by.

Well, Peteny got all but one placed before the day was over, and farmed out with their new masters and mistresses. When he stopped for a last drink, there was only one young girl left sitting on the block, her hands clasped about her knees, a blue apron tied about her waist, and the oddest patched clothes on her back, which was slightly deformed. Her face had a sorrowful and wistful expression like a delicate thing that has early been dimmed by coarse hands rubbing it. "Too doleful," said the housewives and passed her by.

At last up came Mrs. Casimere and spied her limp hands and the long, fine fingers of them. She walked right up to the girl and spoke very plain. "Can you take care of fine, nice things?" she said.

As if you'd shaken her awake, that girl's head lifted and her eyes gleamed. "Yes," she answered clearly.

It ended by Mrs. Casimere's taking her at ten dollars a month. She was the richest woman in town, and people chuckled at her having a raw, green girl, out of the poor house most likely, to tend her choice belongings. She was the envy of the countryside for the house furnishings she had. She'd inherited a solid mahogany



sideboard that cluttered up one side of a room, and highboys that took a polish you could see yourself in clear across the floor. Her chairs were Chippendale and Duncan Phyfe. Her deep-drawered chests smelt of cedar and had carved figures on their sides. And once a month, a supply of china and glass came out of her cupboards that would have set the dames of to-day dancing and prancing. There was a full dinner set of old Nankin, tureen and all; there were Lowestoft bottles; there were pieces of Slipware; there was the finest of fine Wedgwood, and a glass centre-piece with six little vases in it, that held roses on state occasions.

"Not long she'll have her pretties," everyone thought. But though they invented errands to go and call at the house, they never caught the new girl — Lucy, Mrs. Casimere had christened her — idle for a minute; nor did she break or injure a single piece. She did housework as you would have gathered flowers or embroidered silk. She moved and dusted console and butterfly tables as if they had been delicate old ladies taken for an airing. She wiped and washed china as though she were bathing new-born infants. She beat Oriental rugs as you would whip cream — always with a curious, searching look. Mrs. Casimere often found her singing at her work — a curious, soft ditty like a call; and that was annoying. But the girl's strange looks and ways, and her knowledge of house and dairy, won her mistress over. She gave her good, decent gowns and a warm cloak, and even began to put money in the bank for her — for she was a lone woman.

It was a grievance to Mrs. Casimere that Lucy would go nowhere, save when her mistress drove miles into the country to buy some new treasure and took her along to hold the horse. Maybe it was because strangers always looked so curiously at Lucy because of the little lump on her back. A faint color had begun to flare up in her cheeks, and sometimes it seemed as if you could peer into her spiritual body. "Ever ready to flit," said the old grannies and Peters, "ever ready to flit."



It was mid-March when Mrs. Casimere took to her bed with a cold. She was a proud woman and difficult to please, so it's doubtful if any neighbor would have been willing to nurse her — even had she asked them. But there was a strong right arm — frail as it was — stretched out over her all the time. That arm was Lucy's. Such broths and desserts as the girl made! And it was a funny whimsey of her mistress's during that illness that such nourishment as she could take must all be served up to her on the best china. Even Doctor Grindle laughed one day when he saw the piece of flowered china Lucy brought up filled with custard.

"You place great faith in your handmaid, madame," he said to her.

"I do," said Mrs. Casimere defiantly.

"She looks fragile. Don't break her," said he as he bade her good-morning.

Mrs. Casimere pretended not to be worried. But that night, to make sure that Lucy was sleeping soundly, she called across the cold hall to the wing in which the girl lodged, "Lucy, fetch me an extra shawl!"

There was no answer. Lucy must be asleep. So that determined old lady, her mistress, stepped across the hall. No Lucy lay upon the bed or drowsed in the chair. But after a minute, Mrs. Casimere's eyes rested on an exquisite, blue vase, like an urn of some old, transparent ware, unfamiliar to her. By Lucy's rocking chair it stood, and had evidently recently been purchased. It was full of lavender, rose leaves, myrrh, or something that gave forth a sweet, sweet odor. Mrs. Casimere forgot to be chilled. She forgot to faint. She gaped. It seemed as if she were looking at something sacred. "The child bought it for a keepsake," she muttered.

But where was Lucy? Back to bed she stole and called her again. In a few minutes she heard the familiar feet come pattering. But she did not ask her about the treasure. Mrs. Casimere was a grand old woman after all, and merely said that she must have a

hot drink. She was cosseted and tended and tucked up as if she had been a flower in a jar, and no harm came of the episode. Her neighbors and kinsfolk didn't know of it until years afterwards.

Spring was slowly coloring all the lanes. Lucy came to her mistress, now quite well and bustling about her house, with a lame arm. She had hurt it on the mop and broom, she said, while they house-cleaned. There was a look of great suffering in her blue eyes, so she was sent (or taken, I should say) to the best bone setter in the next village. She'd always been a docile, tight sort of a lass, reserved and self-contained, so Mrs. Casimere was surprised to see how she blanched and flinched, and how the salt tears ran down her cheeks when the gruff old bone setter, peering at her over his glasses, stripped her arm and took hold of it. It looked straight and shapely, though somewhat mottled, so when he said, "Why — it's broken," Mrs. Casimere, in her black jet bonnet with the plumes, fell to quivering and shaking like a dish of jelly, and Lucy looked as if her last hour had come.

The doctor felt of Lucy again, none too gently I heard. "A bad dislocation of the shoulder," he said, "And" — passing his hand over her back — "a malformed spine!" He growled and took snuff. "Well, well," he said, "This is very, very dangerous — must be seen to immediately, madame, and the proper remedies applied. Have you had a fall, girl?"

"Yes," said Lucy in a voice like a beaten mouse.

The bone setter cleared his throat and looked important. "You step out of this room, madame," he said to Mrs. Casimere. "I'll summon my apothecary," and he rang a bell. "The small bones of the arm must be put in place at once and a splint put on it. Don't cry, girl." And he held a vial of camphor to her nose. "This is mere child's play. But what will have to be done later, madame," he lowered his voice confidentially, "is to put her into a jacket waistcoat to straighten the twisted spine."

In bustled the young apothecary; but when the two turned to hold poor Lucy, with Mrs. Casimere looking in at the door in misery, Lucy lay at their feet in a cold swoon and had to be revived and taken back in the gig more dead than alive. Her arm had been set and bound with old linen and put into a sling, and she was forbidden to do any work at all. Her mistress sat by and talked to her like a kindly, gentle mother about her own good, and how she needed her. That day week was set for the bone

setter to come over and attend to the arm, and Lucy was given bitters and cordial and aniseed cakes. But she lay or sat on her bed, mute with fear, and would not agree to anything. I have no doubt she would have pined away in a short time; she was veering that way. But the very night before the bone setter was to come with the jacket and torture her, the wing of Mrs. Casimere's house caught fire!

They talk about that fire to this day. None knew how it started. It began creeping around in the roof, and must have smouldered very slowly for hours before Mrs. Casimere and the extra girl and man she had hired to do Lucy's work smelt the smoke. The stairs to the wing went almost at once and the poor old lady could not get up. She lost all her grand air and just stood outside on the lawn, wringing her hands and crying to Lucy to jump and save herself. Neighbors and firemen put up ladders and rushed through the burning rooms. But nothing could they find of Lucy. And pretty soon the roof fell in and that ended the search. Poor Mrs. Casimere! She had had silk gowns that would stand alone for richness stored in that wing along with some old family pieces, but her mind didn't seem to dwell on them at all. She just moaned and wept for Lucy.

To the grief of the village, Thomas Peteny's last illness was the next disaster — and it was not a lingering one either. The women who sat up with him heard him mutter during the day when the fever was on him, "Aye, a delicate thing, fetched oversea from a land where they know the soul. Hard work I had to get it," he said, "magical work — more than with the others. But it's late, too late. Careful handling it needed — careful handling." And then his talk wandered off to a ship and how he must get on board with his gear. . . . And at the end, the gay, bright old man died uncomforted. Two months before, he had destroyed all his papers; so we knew no more as to the origin of that gang of folk he'd carried so proudly over the water.

He was no sooner under the earth than rumors flew as fast as the flames that had caught Mrs. Casimere's house that different ones of the men and women Mr. Peteny had disposed of in neighboring townships had disappeared. Bodily and altogether, not leaving even a shred of clothing behind them, and after serving so faithfully too. The employers were sorely put out about it. One of the men bound over to an antique dealer was said to have had

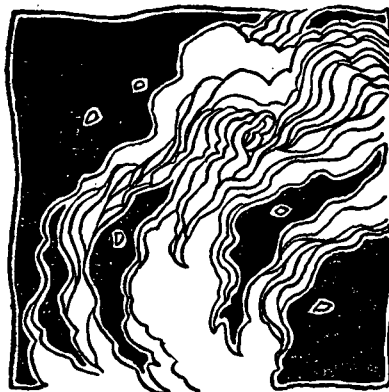
the most wonderful skill; and the dealer wrote quite a letter about it and what the loss meant to him. The man had left a huge carved chest behind him, and the figures on it grinned oddly.

Another grand excitement was that Mrs. Casimere had had a parcel of men to dig out the ruins. "I must give the poor child decent burial," she said, and offered a reward to the first one of the men who should find the charred remains of a body. So you may well believe that they dug with a will, though it took two days to uncover that little room that had been Lucy's. Every piece of the noble old furniture was charred sticks, the rugs matted rags, the curtains and knickknacks charcoal. But in the centre of the room, blackened by smoke, lay a delicate blue vase, broken into six pieces. It showed the marks where it had been mended and riveted again and again by cunning fingers. The men lifted the pieces carefully and brought them in a cloth to Mrs. Casimere.

"All we can find, ma'am," they said — and one of them whispered behind his hand that the pieces quivered when he touched them.

Mrs. Casimere looked. It was the selfsame vase that she had seen on Lucy's floor. She gave the men money and hurried them away, and whether there was a funeral rite or not, no one but herself ever knew.

But alack, her houseful of wonderful treasure went to a nephew who did not value them at all! Poor old lady, her mind began to go soon after that. It was the township of Eltry, Connecticut, wrote up the case. The queerest in the Town Records.



THE BABBITT IN HIS WARREN

An Indictment of Rotary, Kiwanis, the Lions, and All Their Cubs

BRUCE BLIVEN

LET'S be fair about it. Luncheon clubs are by no means altogether bad, and I do not propose to pretend that they are. No institution which has won the allegiance of so many thousands of men could fail to have some elements of value. When I say — as I do say most emphatically — that they should be abolished, I do not suggest that a vacuum should be left. I propose that they should be supplanted by something better. My contention is that as they now exist, they do not justify the time, energy, and money which are spent on them.

My first indictment, and one of the most serious, is that many of the things done at their meetings are simply downright silly. Numerous commentators have pointed out in recent years that American life is cursed with infantilism, the refusal of adults to accept a grown-up point of view. The luncheon clubs, with their kindergarten singing, their paper dunce caps, their insistence on the use of first names, their fines for this and that, their practical jokes, are certainly one of the most infantile features of the current scene. And it is no defense to say that if this is the level on which the members want to amuse themselves, then this level is good enough. On the contrary, the whole history of civilization from the Cro-Magnon to the French Academy has been brought about by operations under the alternative theory.

Neither is it adequate rebuttal to reply that business men, keyed up and tense from their labors, get wholesome relaxation out of horseplay. Having long been a business man, and having associated with many others of the breed, inside luncheon clubs and out of them, I can testify that this famous tenseness is largely mythical. The life of the average business man, especially in the smaller cities where the luncheon clubs have their greatest hold, is reasonably easy-going — and often unreasonably so. After all, only about four occupations actually deserve to be called nerve-racking. Telephone operators, jugglers, information bureau clerks, and city editors have some right to complain; but the tense business man is a rare exception. Usually he is a neurotic and should see a doctor.