

The Daily Short Story

CORNELIA'S CUSTOMER--By Harriet Lummis Smith

Copyright, 1911, by Associated Literary Press, Inc.

"It really isn't anything to get excited about, Aunt Nancy," Cornelia said soothingly.

Cornelia herself was not at all excited. Her serenity was in most agreeable contrast to Aunt Nancy's fluttering perturbation. To be sure, it was Aunt Nancy's silver closet to which Cornelia had lost the key.

"If it falls into the hands of a dishonest person," observed Aunt Nancy, on the point of tears, "then good-bye to the silver, including the loving cup from which General Washington drank and the tablespoon on which your great-grandfather Bennett cut his teeth."

"Dear Aunt Nancy," Cornelia reasoned kindly, "unless the dishonest person were a mind reader, too, he could not possibly know that this particular key fitted your silver closet." She was about to continue her argument along this line when Aunt Nancy executed one of her illogical flops.

"It will be necessary to cancel our invitations for Friday," remarked Aunt Nancy. "With the silver locked up and only half a dozen spoons and three forks available it is out of the question to entertain a dinner party."

Cornelia looked at her watch. "I will get a locksmith at once," she replied. "The key will be ready by tonight and Mary can clean the silver in the morning." She went to put on her street things, wondering that Aunt Nancy could not see how much better it was to be calm and philosophical in case of some trifling annoyance like losing the key of the silver closet.

Cornelia is an observant young woman. Weeks before, when nothing was farther from her expectation than the need of such services, she had noticed the sign "Locksmith" in a window of a little hardware store near where she was waiting to take the car. In the direction of this hardware store she now bent her steps. A bell clanged loudly as she opened the door, and a wizened, elderly person swooped out from a back room and asked what she wanted.

Cornelia explained. "I should like to have you see to the matter at once, if you please," she said, "for my aunt is in a great hurry for the key."

"Can't do a thing before Saturday," snapped the locksmith, seemingly offended because she had not wished to purchase a range for the kitchen.

"But you must, you know," Cornelia answered him kindly. "I must have the key tonight. My aunt entertains at dinner tomorrow."

"I won't have nobody to leave the store with before Saturday," persisted the locksmith obstinately. "Then my grandson'll be out of school, and, if he feels like it, he'll stay here while I get the impression of your lock. Them jobs is more trouble than they are worth."

"Yes, but you see I can't wait for your grandson," Cornelia explained. "You will have to go at once. I will stay and take care of the things until you are back."

She seated herself on a stool behind the counter as an evidence of good faith.

"Anybody in charge of this here store has got to be on to the job," the owner exclaimed. "Only last week a rake was stolen out front while I was waiting on a customer. There's an ice-cream freezer by the steps now that's worth three-fifty. If somebody was to come along now and snatch that!"

"Nobody will snatch anything while I'm here," said Cornelia. "The address is on this card, and please say to the servant that you are the locksmith Miss Hawes was to send." She folded her arms and gave her attention to a shelf of cooking utensils several feet above the locksmith's head. That individual after several half-hearted attempts to distract her attention, put on his coat and departed on his errand.

The echo of his footsteps had hardly died away when a customer appeared. At first view Cornelia had no thought that he was a customer, for he seemed to be strolling along in a somewhat aimless fashion.

"Good morning," said Cornelia, rising. "Can I do anything for you today?" Then with sudden dismay she realized that out of the stock in the hardware store, she knew the price of but one article. It happens, however, that Cornelia is a young woman of resource. "Perhaps I can interest you in ice-cream freezers," she said with her most businesslike air.

Oddly enough, this was exactly what the young man was looking for. "Oh, yes," he exclaimed, with seeming relief, "I should like to look at something first class."

Cornelia led the way to the door. "This is our best freezer," she said, indicating by a gesture the article in question. "If you'll just set it inside, please, it's quite heavy."

"It's a trifle large for the average family, isn't it?" asked the young man.

Cornelia took alarm. She would have had no objection to selling a smaller freezer had she known the price of the others in stock.

"I shouldn't advise you to get a smaller size," she said firmly. "It is much better to have a freezer large enough to meet an emergency. Your wife might wish to entertain several at luncheon, you know. And there is nothing to prevent making a small amount of cream in a large freezer."

The young man was impressed. "That's a good idea," he exclaimed. "Perhaps a still larger one would be even better, in case we wanted to give a regular party."

It was necessary to head him off again. "No," said Cornelia with decision. "If you give a party you will need a caterer.

A freezer larger than this would be in your way."

"That's right," agreed the customer, who for tractability left nothing to be desired. "I'll take it; what's the price?"

Cornelia had no idea that business success was so simple a matter. It occurred to her that the ability of the men who made fortunes had been greatly overestimated. Then a sudden startling thought broke in on her self-congratulation. In her efforts to ensnare her customer she had forgotten the price the locksmith had made. "Thr-four and a half," she said uncertainly.

The customer made no protest. He drew a \$5 bill from his pocket and Cornelia made change from her own little purse. "Now, I'll have this sent, please," he was beginning.

"Oh!" Cornelia looked at him in blank dismay. "I'm afraid I can't send it. Not before Saturday, anyway," she added, remembering the grandson. "I suppose it would be too heavy for you to carry, wouldn't it?"

There was appeal in the gaze she lifted to his. She could not bear the thought of losing a sale for so trifling a reason. Luckily the customer was still accommodating. He protested hastily that the freezer was not at all heavy, and looked about him with the air of a man about to make purchases with a view to setting up house-keeping. Cornelia felt it was time to assume a distant manner and she did so with immediate effect. The customer left the store, carrying his single purchase in his hand.

When the locksmith returned grumbling, Cornelia announced her sale, and he looked at her with reluctant admiration. "You done him out of a dollar," he observed. "That freezer wasn't worth but \$3.50." His sudden accession of respect for Cornelia received an immediate check from the dismay with which she received the news.

"Don't you think he will come back?" she asked anxiously. "He was such a polite young man. I can't bear to think I've cheated him out of a dollar."

The locksmith grudgingly assented that the customer's return was possible. He added darkly, "I would have been a different thing if you'd sold it a dollar under price. We'd never see hide or hair of him again."

The customer did return within a few days. He came in looking about him in the same undecided manner which had characterized him on his previous visit, and yet he did not look to be a young man lacking in determination. After he had purchased a screwdriver and a pound of nails he came to the point.

"The young lady who waited on me before, your daughter, perhaps?"

"She ain't no daughter of mine," said the locksmith. "Nor yet a clerk. She was asking about you this very day," he added calmly.

The young man spun about. "What?" he shouted.

"She lives with her aunt at the Rutherford apartments. She wanted a key made for a lock, and she stayed in the store while I went to get the impression. She overcharged you a dollar for that freezer," explained the locksmith, reluctantly, opening his cash drawer, "and she asked if you had been back to complain."

It seemed that the young man did not care about the dollar.

"See here!" the locksmith said. "The young woman came down this morning to bring the key. It stuck a little, you know. I've filed it off and it's ready to take back, if you'd like the job. I promised her I'd send my grandson when he came from school."

The young man thought it would be a pity to trouble the grandson. He said, with feeling, that growing boys need all the playtime they can get. At the entrance of the Rutherford apartments he met Cornelia coming out.

"Oh!" cried Cornelia, dropping her purse in her excitement. "Have you come about that dollar?"

"I've come to bring your key," said the young man, and gave it to her.

Explanations followed, and then came argument. Cornelia was not sure that selling an ice-cream freezer to a stranger constituted an introduction. The young man, on the other hand, was positive about it.

"But your wife," Cornelia hinted, delicately.

The young man blushed. "You invented the wife and I held my tongue. I was afraid that if I explained that I was a bachelor you'd wonder what I wanted with an ice-cream freezer."

"What did you want with it?" Cornelia was indiscreet enough to ask.

The young man's reply was not verbal, but such as it was it was responsible for a marked increase in his questioner's color.

"Oh, well," said Cornelia, swinging the key on her forefinger, "it may come in handy some time."

It did.