No. of words on Page - 22

HULDA

By MARY KEY.

Mother and Father had lived in Maryland all their lives. Shortly after they were married the company Father was with asked him to manage an office either in Chicago or in some city in Brazil. He consulted Mother, who said that one place sounded as bad as the other, but as it meant a raise in salary for Father she would gladly go.

My maternal grandmother put them on the train in Baltimore with a large basket of food, my older sister who was just a baby, a colored nurse and many misgivings. The Baltimore family spoke of the "middle west" with a shudder.

A year later Mother was back in Baltimore to have me (Granny had simply refused to have a grandchild born in Chicago). Then back to Chicago again, this time with another colored nurse -- the first one having acquired the same idea of Chicago as all other Baltimorians.

A few years later my younger sister arrived -- in Chicago. Mother had caught on to some Yankee ways and refused to go to Baltimore just to have a baby. I think also that Father "put his foot down" -- an expression we heard and would heed all our days at home. But by this time our nurse had as much of Chicago as she would take.

Mother was advised by a neighbor to try a Swedish girl; there

were so many coming to this country; and quite a few families in Kenilworth (a small village fifteen miles north of Chicago, where we lived now) had hired them. Mother interviewed two girls, sisters who were fresh from Sweden. The older one had taken a "yob", she said, in the next block. So, at $5.00 a week, Mother took Hulda who was neat, tidy and very glum looking. She must have been in her early twenties, though in all the forty-five years she worked for us she always looked just middle-aged to me. I was in the first grade when Hulda came to us. (That was when I broke out in print as the only girl in my class who was neither tardy nor absent all year. My family must have had a brilliant future planned for me -- but not for long.)

Hulda cooked, washed and cleaned up for our family, that now consisted of Father, Mother, three children and my young uncle, Dede, who had come to Chicago to work and stay with us until he could find a good boarding house. He was with us until his death at the age of seventy.

Hulda spoke very broken English and wasted no words. One look was enough to send us scurrying out of her kitchen. It was unfortunate that Father's first name was John, because Hulda could not pronounce a "Jay" -- it was always "Yay", even after half a century in America -- and Mother worried when she went to church on Sunday and Thursday nights for fear she would get lost and not get back to the right Boyds. She always managed, though.

Then we moved three miles farther north to Hubbard Woods. Hulda, at $6.00 a week now, didn't think she would like the change,

but she would see we got moved, fed and properly settled in the new house. She took her suitcase up to the third floor, and there she lived for forty-four years. Dede, my uncle, settled down in the other room up there. He was very particular and worried for fear Hulda might use his towel in the third floor bathroom. Hulda was just as uneasy thinking Dede might use hers.

Hulda kept the house immaculate and didn't like me and my rowdy grade school friends to track in mud and snow. "Outside was a good place for children to play," she would say, and we all stood a little in awe of her. Thursday afternoon, though, on her day out, we would think up all kinds of games to play indoors. Our favorite was to get the ironing board, put it at the top of the landing, get on it and slide down the steps and into the vestibule -- if we were lucky. Otherwise we would hit the door frame. I expect Hulda wondered how her ironing board got so dirty -- until the day she came home early and caught us. She told Mother she was going to leave, and Mother said she would miss Hulda very much but wanted her to do as she thought best. Hulda went stomping up to the third floor, but she had dinner on the table at 6:30. She was never a minute late.

Dede clung to his Maryland ways, bowing from the waist when meeting friends, never pronouncing an R, and having a "little drink" before dinner -- a mint julep in the summer, getting cracked ice all over her kitchen floor, Hulda said -- or a highball in the winter. It took Prohibition to make Dede drink gin, but that he did -- and would make quite a rite of preparing it -- in his third floor room, because Hulda didn't approve of any kind of strong

drink and didn't want her kitchen smelling of it. "Who wants to help me make up a little brew tonight?" Dede would ask after dinner. I loved to help, and finally was allowed to put the drops of Juniper Berry into the alcohol. Then it was shaken for ten minutes by Dede, handled as carefully as a new-born babe, then sampled. I would have just a taste, and would try to lick and smack my lips like Dede.

Then I was in High School -- illegitimately. After two years in eighth grade and then flunking the final exams, I had mumps at graduation time, so no one thought it odd that I wasn't on hand to get a diploma. Everyone in my class was going to High School next year, and it was high time I did, so they just let me go too. I started out with a flash and was elected vice-president of the Freshman class.

The years I went to High School were fun. The gang would come back to our house, roll up the rugs, turn on the victrola and dance. Hulda's freshly waxed floors were scratched and the ice box raided, and Father would come home to find boys and girls all over the place and the windows wide open. He would stride in, all six feet of him, and close the windows, saying he couldn't afford to heat up all out doors. The gang would leave hastily. Hulda would come in to see if we had put down the rugs in the right place (we never had) and she would tell Mother she would have to leave. And Mother would say, as she did each time Hulda was ready to give up, "I will miss you, but do as you think best."

But Hulda stuck it out -- at $8.00 a week now. She read her Bible every night, went to the Swedish church every Wednesday and

made miles of the most beautiful crocheting. Edge-ing for Mother's bureau scarfs, luncheon sets and bed spreads -- they were admired by all of our friends.

Then I was married. Hulda must have looked forward to this time. My older sister had run off and married the year before, and my younger sister wasn't rowdy. The house wouldn't be so hard to keep up now. Nothing that called for outside help had ever been done to the house. The walls were a soft faded color, and the floors and woodwork had a worn mellow look. The outside stucco just got a little greyer with the years. The drive was so bad that friends with new cars would stop out in front on the road. But our yard was a mass of yellow roses and lilacs brought back from trips to Maryland, and to us it always looked good.

No sooner had the family settled down to a nice orderly life than Mig, my older sister, left her husband and came home to live, bringing two babies and another on the way. I was living in Georgia then, and letters from home were rather contradictory -- Mother's saying they were getting along fine, Patty's, my young sister, telling the bitter truth: Mig getting on Father's nerves; babies and dirty didies all over the house; formulas, strained oat meal and gooey dishes messing up Hulda's kitchen; and Hulda ready to leave. Patty, too. I could just see Mother trying to keep peace.

Mig had her next baby without benefit of ex-husband, and then Mother was suddenly taken ill and had to spend six months in a sanatorium. Hulda took over; and would drive the forty miles out west to see Mother, sitting very straight in the back of "Susie" as we called the week-end car, with her skirts that she always wore

half-way between knee and ankle (leaning on the ankle side) well tucked around her, and enjoying the scenery. Father and Patty in front, with Father driving and Patty holding her breath most of the time. God was good, and they made many such trips, assuring Mother at each visit that everything at home was fine.

Letters that I received from Patty sounded like all Hell was breaking loose at the Boyd's -- and would have, except for Hulda. Her day was a busy one. She started by calling Father in the morning. This took some time, as he was a heavy sleeper and hated to wake up. His mother used to tell us that when he was a child they would send two colored boys to get him out of bed in the mornings. Hulda would knock on his door until he answered, and then go to the kitchen and grind the coffee, then come upstairs and call again with much knocking. Sometimes it took a third try, but Hulda said Father was very tired and had a lot on his mind. She would have a wonderful breakfast ready right on the dot, in spite of half-dressed children under foot and Mig cluttering up the kitchen fixing special baby foods.

Hulda's girl friends thought she was crazy to stay on at our house when there were lots of rich families that would be glad to have her. She wouldn't have so much work, and would get better wages too, they said. Hulda now got $10.00, but other girls got $12.00 a week. "Ak," Hulda would say after a friend had stopped by to visit her in the kitchen, "all they do is talk." She would get out our nicest pieces of old silver to brush up as she entertained a friend, setting the pieces down on the table as she finished them, with our Coat of Arms staring the friend in the

face. Most of her friends worked for people with just plain silver, she said.

Six months was finally up, and Mother came home. How good those dingy walls must have looked to her! Even when part of the hall ceiling fell down with a terrible crash, she said not to worry, that it had been cracked for some time. The doctor said Mother had to have complete rest from one o'clock to four every day, and this Hulda saw was carried out to the letter. If the King of England had called on Mother during her rest time, he would have been told in no uncertain terms that Mrs. Boyd was resting. One time the house caught fire and a helpful neighbour called the Fire Department. By the time they arrived Hulda had put the fire out and told the firemen what she thought of them for coming up the drive with such noise that they wakened Mrs. Boyd. She also gave the neighbour to understand that she would let her know if she needed any help!

Mother would try to do a little sewing at times before lying down, but invariably Hulda appeared in her doorway to remind her that she should be taking her rest. Mother would sneak back to bed. She never could fool Hulda. None of us could.

Then Father's company changed hands, and all the older men were let out. For a man in his late fifties, during the depression, a job was hard to find. But Father didn't worry. He said something would show up. It didn't, and funds got a little low. Mother said she would not use her charge account but would shop at the cash and carry. Patty got a job. Hulda would make soup out of every waste scrap of food, and good it was too. Dede offered

all he had to the family, the poor dear. His good clothes, his gin and his golf club (the only luxuries he allowed himself) kept him low in spot cash. Mig and her three children lived on as usual - no corners cut there. The growing children needed the best there was.

So Mother had a talk with Hulda. In spite of all she did to help us save, there just wasn't $15.00 a week to put out. Hulda said she was used to our ways, was settled on the third floor and would just stay on without her salary and that Mother could pay her when Father went back to work. "I got all the money I need," Hulda said. She sent a check each month to her father in Sweden, gave to her church and spent money on car fare to and from her church and her sister's house. She had plenty up in her room to last her a long time, besides the stock she had bought from time to time since she had been with us. So every week Mother would write down in a little book, $15.00. This column got longer and longer, but was kept carefully in a special drawer of the secretary.

Finally one of Father's Democratic friends called to say there was an opening at the City Hall, which Father gladly took. I think he liked it. He had always been a staunch Democrat, worked hard before every election and never failed to vote, seeing to it that all the family over twenty-one got to the polls. This included Hulda, who never failed to vote the "right way". Grandfather had been a Senator from Maryland and politics had always been a part of Father's family life; but Hulda didn't approve of his working at the City Hall. "Ak," she would say, "the idea of Mr. Boyd working down there with not even a private office of his own."

Now Mother could pay Hulda again, and a little extra each week on the back wages.

Then Patty was married, "with babies all over the place," she said. But Hulda had the house immaculate. Brass candle sticks, andirons and feet of the Duncan Phyfe table shined till they glowed; and furniture was rubbed down to a deep lustre. Dede officiated over the liquor, but Hulda saw to it that everyone was offered punch with a grape juice base, and cookies. The bride was lovely - "best looking one in the family", our friends always said. I was Matron of Honour, back for the wedding, and had a wonderful time. Home, family and friends looked awfully good.

When we first moved to Hubbard Woods it was a small country village; now it is known as the "Gold Coast". As we lived our life, large new houses were built in spacious yards, and there were two or three cars per house, with uniformed chauffeurs. This was very handy for us. We were picked up by neighbours on our way to and from the store, and were driven to church by friends who would call each Sunday. We never dared not go -- unless we had a darned good excuse. Others would have extra seats at the Opera or Matinee, and one of us was always available. But on the week-ends Father would drive home in the office car, an open Dodge - 1916 model, I think. Father had the office boy teach him to drive, and drive it he did with his large foot well down on the throttle, but obeying every traffic sign. Even if he didn't see a stop sign or manage to come to a full stop at a boulevard, he would then stop in the middle of the road, look carefully each way, while traffic would come to a stop with much squealing of brakes. Father got

into low, (this usually took a little while as he would often back before finding first gear) and off we would go. Mother loved to ride and so did Hulda and of course us three gals, but Dede said if it was all right with us he would take the trolley -- "the old reliable," as he called it. Father would come tearing up our rocky road and stop almost at the front steps, a little beyond or not quite to them -- and once into them,which knocked down one of the railings. It stayed down, giving the house a little lop-sided effect, sort of a Devil-may-care expression, until Father "got around" to fixing it, which he did the following winter, saying that the wood was rotten and would have fallen down anyway, even if he hadn't jarred it a little. He was right, too, for a few years later the other side became very wobbly; but this was propped up with a pole and friends warned not to lean against it.

By this time Mig's children were pretty well grown, and she decided to finish her hospital training that she had started during the first world war when her newly-wed husband had gone overseas. The problem was the $300.00 that the hospital charged for training. Hulda paid part of this -- to get Mig out of her kitchen, I always thought -- and Dede put up the balance.

Now Hulda, mellowing a little in her older age, Mother said, took on the added responsibility of Mig's children. Peggy, the youngest, was her pet, and she would get extra cookies, a dessert she particularly liked and a motherly pat. As Peggy grew older she had a hard time making the little allowance that Mother gave her last all week. When she was broke, she would go sit in the

kitchen and tell Hulda her troubles -- no money to go to the movies with the kids. And while Peggy sulked, Hulda would go to the third floor and come back with a dollar for Peggy. Even though Hulda didn't approve of movies, had never seen one in her life -- and never did -- she wasn't going to have Peggy left out of all the fun.

I came home each summer with my two babies for a visit, and how good it was -- the clean cool house with all the furniture just as it was when we were kids -- ours was not a family for changing things around. I often wanted to close my eyes when I first arrived and see if I could walk to a certain chair or table. I know I could have, but I was always too anxious to see all the faces -- Mother, Father and Dede always the same to me. And Hulda in the background ready with a hearty hand-shake and a smile now too, standing in her blue and white striped dress with a little white apron, then getting back to the kitchen the minute the formality of home-coming was over, to have the next meal ready on the dot.

Hulda would give me instructions on her day off. "Remember, Mrs. Boyd was to get her nap from one to four -- and don't let her wear herself out doing for those children." Hulda also took her vacation while I was there, and each year would tell Mother that instead of paying her for her two weeks while she was away, as was customary with servants, she would rather go without pay and stay as long as she wanted. And off she would go, while we settled down to a slovenly sort of housekeeping. But never did Hulda stay even the whole two weeks. Whether she didn't trust us to give the

family the right things to eat, or whether she just knew that the longer she stayed the more cleaning up she would have when she got back, I never figured out -- but it was her way of saving the family thirty-six dollars -- she got $18.00 now.

Hulda was a wonderful cook. Before butter was so expensive she would make us Swedish cookies, and she could find the most wonderful hiding places for them where we kids could never find them. But the rest of her cooking was strictly Southern. She could make the best spoon bread, corn pudding, baked hominy and beaten biscuits (the latter she would put through the meat grinder three times instead of beating -- and they were delicious.) She cooked rice as dry as a feather. She would scrub the mold off a ten-year-old Maryland ham and cook it so that a sharp knife would cut it paper thin, and it tasted like something out of this world. Our neighbours must have enjoyed the good smells that came out of our kitchen. She baked bread twice a week. "This store bread" had no nourishment in it, she said, and the hot rolls she made at the same time were the talk of the neighbourhood, as was her wine jelly that she made when there was sickness at home or nearby. In summer she canned tomatoes from the garden, and made currant jelly, picking the currants when they "just suited her". It always jelled. In winter she put up orange marmalade.

Every night when Hulda was through in the kitchen she would take all the family silver and put it in a hamper to be carried upstairs by Father when he went to bed. It was put in the hall closet, and each morning as Hulda came down, she would take the silver back -- a custom that I thought was carried out by all families until I was married.

How Hulda found time to do all she did, I will never know! Besides her regular work she was always thinking of extra things to be done; she saved all the left over grease and made soap, took down faded curtains and dyed them, put up extra shelves in the pantry, took complete charge of all the house plants. One rubber plant that Hulda said was given to Mother when my youngest sister was born was still flourishing when Patty was married.

One year Hulda decided to try her hand at wall papering. All her friends worked for people that had their homes redecorated every year or so. She started with her own room, to see how it comes out, she said. A friend of hers that she met at Church lent her a big brush, gave her some paste and left over wall paper. She was so proud of the outcome that she asked Mother if she could do the bedrooms. After that she did the first floor, excepting the hall that still had plaster falling from the ceiling, and she painted the kitchen. Several weeks later a neighbour met Mother and said she heard from Hulda that we had had our house redecorated.

Now Mig was on duty at the Hospital most of the time, her children grown and away at school. Hulda had more and more time to crochet. She was over sixty years old, but did not look or act it. Then one day she became ill. She had never been sick a day since she had first worked for us, and Mother was dumfounded. She called our doctor, who took Hulda to the hospital. Mother went to see her several times, and then h[redacted] Hulda h[redacted] died.

Our home never seemed quite the same. Hulda was more than a devoted and faithful servant; she was a true friend.

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