

Lucy Maud MONTGOMERY

A TANGLED
WEB

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"ZNANNIA"

*To my good friends
Mr. and Mrs. Fred W. Wright
in memory of a certain week
of laughter*

Aunt Becky's Levee

I

A dozen stories have been told about the old Dark jug. This is the true one.

Several things happened in the Dark and Penhallow clan because of it. Several other things did *not* happen. As Uncle Pippin said, this may have been Providence or it may have been the devil that certainly possessed the jug. At any rate, had it not been for the jug, Peter Penhallow might today have been photographing lions alone in African jungles, and Big Sam Dark would, in all probability, never have learned to appreciate the beauty of the unclothed female form. As for Dandy Dark and Penny Dark, they have never ceased to congratulate themselves that they got out of the affair with whole hides.

Legally, the jug was the property of Aunt Becky Dark, *née* Rebecca Penhallow. For that matter, most of the Darks had been *née* Penhallow and most of the Penhallows had been *née* Dark, save a goodly minority who had been Darks *née* Dark or Penhallows *née* Penhallow. In three generations sixty Darks had been married to sixty Penhallows. The resultant genealogical tangle baffled everybody except Uncle Pippin. There was really nobody for a Dark to marry except a Penhallow and nobody for a Penhallow to marry except a Dark. Once, it had been said, they wouldn't take anybody else. Now, nobody else would take them. At least, so Uncle Pippin said. But it was necessary to take Uncle Pippin's speeches with a large pinch of salt. Neither the Darks nor the Penhallows were gone to seed as far as that. They were still a proud, vigorous, and virile clan who hacked and hewed among themselves but presented an unbroken front to any alien or hostile force.

In a sense Aunt Becky was the head of the clan. In point of seniority Crosby Penhallow, who was eighty-seven when she was eighty-five, might have contested her supremacy had he cared to do so. But at eighty-seven Crosby Penhallow cared only about one thing. As long as he could foregather every evening with his old crony, Erasmus Dark, to play duets on their flutes and violins, Aunt Becky might hold the scepter of the clan if she wanted to.

It must be admitted frankly that Aunt Becky was not particularly beloved by her clan. She was too fond of telling them what she called the plain truth. And, as Uncle Pippin said, while the truth was all right, *in its place*, there was no sense in pouring out great gobs of it around where it wasn't wanted. To Aunt Becky, however, tact and diplomacy and discretion, never to mention any consideration for anyone's feelings, were things unknown. When she wanted to say a thing she said it. Consequently Aunt Becky's company was never dull whatever else it might be. One endured the digs and slams one got oneself for the fun of seeing other people writhing under *their* digs and slams. As Aunt Becky knew from A to Z all the sad or fantastic or terrible little histories of the clan, no one had armor which her shafts could not penetrate. Little Uncle Pippin said that he wouldn't miss one of Aunt Becky's "levees" for a dog-fight.

"She's a personality," Dr Harry Penhallow had once remarked condescendingly, on one of his visits home to attend some clan funeral.

"She's a crank," growled Drowned John Penhallow, who, being a notorious crank himself, tolerated no rivals.

"It's the same thing," chuckled Uncle Pippin. "You're all afraid of her because she knows too much about you. I tell you, boys, it's only Aunt Becky and the likes of her that keeps us all from dry-rotting."

Aunt Becky had been “Aunt Becky” to everybody for twenty years. Once when a letter came to the Indian Spring post-office addressed to “Mrs. Theodore Dark” the new postmaster returned it marked, “Person unknown.” Legally, it was Aunt Becky’s name. Once she had had a husband and two children. They were all dead long ago — so long ago that even Aunt Becky herself had practically forgotten them. For years she had lived in her two rented rooms in The Pinery — otherwise the house of her old friend, Camilla Jackson, at Indian Spring. Many Dark and Penhallow homes would have been open to her, for the clan were never unmindful of their obligations, but Aunt Becky would have none of them. She had a tiny income of her own and Camilla, being neither a Dark nor a Penhallow, was easily bossed.

“I’m going to have a levee,” Aunt Becky told Uncle Pippin one afternoon when he had dropped in to see her. He had heard she was not very well. But he found her sitting up in bed, supported by pillows, her broad, griddled old face looking as keen and venomous as usual. He reflected that it was not likely there was much the matter with her. Aunt Becky had taken to her bed before now when she fancied herself neglected by her clan.

Aunt Becky had held occasional gatherings that she called “levees” ever since she had gone to live at The Pinery. It was her habit to announce in the local papers that Mrs. Rebecca Dark would entertain her friends on such and such an afternoon. Everybody went who

couldn't trump up a water-tight excuse for not going. They spent two hours of clan gossip, punctuated by Aunt Becky's gibes and the malice of her smile, and had a cup of tea, sandwiches, and several slices of cake. Then they went home and licked their wounds.

"That's good," said Uncle Pippin. "Things are pretty dull in the clan. Nothing exciting has happened for a long time."

"This will be exciting enough," said Aunt Becky. "I'm going to tell them something — not everything — about who's to get the old Dark jug when I'm gone."

"Whew!" Uncle Pippin was intrigued at once. Still he did not forget his manners. "But why bother about that for a while? You're going to see the century out."

"No, I'm not," said Aunt Becky. "Roger told Camilla this morning that I wouldn't live this year out. He didn't tell *me*, the person most interested, but I wormed it out of Camilla."

It was a shock to Uncle Pippin and he was silent for a few moments. He had had a death-bell ringing in his ear for three days, but he had not connected it with Aunt Becky. Really, no one had ever thought of Aunt Becky dying. Death, like life, seemed to have forgotten her. He didn't know what to say.

"Doctors often make mistakes," he stammered feebly.

"Roger doesn't," said Aunt Becky grimly. "I've got to die, I suppose. Anyhow, I might as well die. Nobody cares anything about me now."

“Why do you say that, Becky?” said Camilla, betraying symptoms of tears. “I’m sure *I* do.”

“No, you don’t really. You’re too old. We’re both too old to care really for anybody or anything. You know perfectly well that in the back of your mind you’re thinking, ‘After she dies I’ll be able to have my tea strong.’ There’s no use blinking the truth or trying to cover it up with sentiment. I’ve survived all my real friends.”

“Come, come, what about me?” protested Uncle Pippin.

Aunt Becky turned her cronelike old gray head toward him.

“You!” She was almost contemptuous. “Why, you’re only sixty-four. I was married before you were born. You’re nothing but an acquaintance if it comes to that. Hardly even a relative. You were only an adopted Penhallow, remember. Your mother always vowed you were Ned Penhallow’s son, but I can tell you some of us had our doubts. Funny things come in with the tide, Pippin.”

This, reflected Uncle Pippin, was barely civil. He decided that it was not necessary to protest any more friendship for Aunt Becky.

“Camilla,” snapped Aunt Becky, “I beg of you to stop trying to cry. It’s painful to watch you. I had to send Ambrosine out because I couldn’t put up with her mewling. Ambrosine cries over everything alike — a death or a spoiled pudding. But one excuses her.

It's about the only fun she's ever got out of life. *I* am ready to die. I've felt almost everything in life there is to feel — ay, I've drained my cup. But I mean to die decently and in order. I'm going to have one last grand rally. The date will be announced in the paper. But if you want anything to eat you'll have to bring it with you. I'm not going to bother with that sort of thing on my death-bed."

Uncle Pippin was genuinely disappointed. Living alone as he did, subsisting on widower's fare, the occasional meals and lunches he got in friends' houses meant much to him. And now Aunt Becky was going to ask people to come and see her and wasn't going to give them a bite. It was inhospitable, that's what it was. Everybody would be resentful but everybody would be there. Uncle Pippin knew his Darks and his Penhallows. Every last one of them would be keen to know who was to get the old Dark jug. Everybody would think he or she ought to have it. The Darks had always resented the fact of Aunt Becky owning it, anyhow. She was only a Penhallow. The jug should be the property of a born Dark. But old Theodore Dark had expressly left it to his dearly beloved wife in his will and there you were. The jug was hers to do as she liked with. And nobody in eighty-five years had ever been able to predict what Aunt Becky, would do about anything.

Uncle Pippin climbed into what he called his "gig" and drove away behind his meek white horse down the narrow, leisurely red side-road that ran from In-

dian Spring to Bay Silver. There was a grin of enjoyment on his little, wrinkled face with its curious resemblance to a shriveled apple, and his astonishingly young, vivid blue eyes twinkled. It would be fun to watch the antics of the clan over the jug. The thorough-going, impartial fun of one who was not vitally concerned. Uncle Pippin knew he had no chance of getting the jug. He was only a fourth cousin at best, even granting the dubious paternity about which Aunt Becky had twitted him.

“I’ve a hunch that the old lady is going to start something,” said Uncle Pippin to his white nag.

II

In spite of the fact that no refreshments were to be served, every Dark and every Penhallow, by birth, marriage or adoption, who could possibly get to Aunt Becky’s “levee” was there. Even old rheumatic Christian Dark, who hadn’t been anywhere for years, made her son-in-law draw her through the woods behind The Pinery on a milk-cart. The folding doors between Aunt Becky’s two rooms were thrown open, the parlor was filled with chairs, and Aunt Becky, her eyes as bright as a cat’s, was ready to receive her guests, sitting up in her big old walnut bed under its tent canopy

hung with yellowed net. Aunt Becky had slept in that bed ever since she was married and intended to die in it. Several women of the tribe had their eye on it, and each had hoped she would get it, but just now nobody thought of anything but the jug.

Aunt Becky had refused to dress up for her guests. She wasn't going to be bothered, she told Camilla — they weren't really worth it. So she received them regally with a faded old red sweater pinned tightly around her shrunken throat and her gray hair twisted into a hard knot on the crown of her head. But she wore her diamond ring and she had made the scandalized Ambrosine put a little rouge on her cheeks.

"It's no more than decent at your age," protested Ambrosine.

"Decency's a dull dog," retorted Aunt Becky. "I parted company with it long ago. You do as you're bid, Ambrosine Winkworth, and you'll get your reward. I'm not going to have Uncle Pippin saying, 'The old girl *used to have* good color.' Dab it on good and thick, Ambrosine. None of them will imagine they can bully me as they probably would if they found me looking lean and washed-out. My golly, Ambrosine, but, I'm looking forward to this afternoon. It's the last bit of fun I'll have this side of eternity and I'm going to lap it up, Ambrosine. Harpies all of 'em, coming here just to see what pickings they're going to get. Ay, I'm going to make them squirm."

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