

THE PETRIFIED COAT

Shortly before my fourth daughter was born, I made an announcement that startled my usually compliant and devoted husband.

"You know," I said, trying to sound off—hand and casual, "I think I need a new fur coat."

"A WHAT!"

"A coat. A new fur coat."

"A fur coat?" he said in a loud and unbelieving voice that suggested that I had informed him of my desire to own a diamond bracelet.

"But you have a fur coat---a beautiful fur coat." Then, eyeing me a bit strangely and as if he didn't really want to hear my reply, he added: "What's wrong with it?"

I tried to conceal my impatience but could not repress a very audible and cutting sigh which immediately electrified the atmosphere and invisibly armed us both for battle.

"What's wrong with it??" I gasped. Do you realize my father bought that coat for me when I was a junior in college?" Not waiting for him to interrupt, I sailed on indignantly, giving him a quick resume of what amounted to the life history of the muskrats from the time of their slaughter in 1925 to what I hoped would be the demise of the coat.

I went on. "At school I wore it for two solid years, then it went to Europe with me for a year, then to the University of Chicago, then it taught school with me for a year in a very cold Illinois town where I seldom spent a winter's day without it. Then we were married. I was still wearing that fur coat. Remember the cold December day and the wedding? Have you forgotten how I wore it over my wedding dress after the ceremony? Yes, I know,"--I saw he was about to interrupt, but I was determined to round out the drama with a climatic finale--- "I know you thought it was stunning. It was new to you---see? Well, you know what happened. I just wore it some more. First child, second child, third child and now fourth child coming and I'm sick of it!"

"Of bearing children, you mean?"

"No. You know what I mean." Suddenly I remembered the crowning and most withering point in my argument.

"Do you realize, my darling," I asked with a rather disdainful calm, "do you realize that you have never bought me a winter coat?"

I don't know why I expected that scathing remark to make him hang his head in shame. Instead, he smiled broadly.

"Lucky, wasn't I, darling, that your father knew a good fur coat when he saw one. It's remarkable how that thing wears. Looks brand m new. Remarkable!"

"Remarkable??" I was angry."Have you noticed," and I ran to the closet to snatch it from the hanger, "have you noticed the edges? All worn---in fact, they're getting ragged. Look!"

Orin examined the edges critically. He's very good with a needle and I knew instinctively what his next comment would be, but I generously let him hold forth, feeling all in a moment that I really had become slightly hysterical and unreasonable to suddenly throw the coat at him as if it had been a bomb.

"That's easy," he said. "Just needs turning in. I can fix that in no time. It has plenty of lap. Simple. Is that the only place it shows wear?"

Unfortunately it was, but I had a bigger and better argument to hurl, though I didn't expect him to appreciate it to the full as Orin is not too aware of changing styles in women's clothes. I hated to sound like a fifteen year old adolescent, but the truth was the truth so I said, with a womanly and dignified air:

"It's simply all wrong. It's out of style!"

"It is?" he asked incredulously. "How?"

"Look at this collar. They just don't make them this way anymore-- they haven't, not since 1926 and it's 1939 now!"

"Funny, I always liked that collar."

Exasperated, I continued. "If it only had a decent collar, the kind that stands up, straight, and buttons at the neck instead of lapping over in this horrible way, maybe I wouldn't feel so conspicuous. But this one is impossible!!" I gave the collar a wrench.

"How do you mean--stand up?"

Putting the coat on, I showed him. Considering my ballooning size at that particular time (I expected to go to the hospital within three weeks), I did not cut the figure that would have impressed a model agency, even in a fur coat. It should have been a point in my favor just then for I certainly added little grace and charm to the poor little worn out muskrats as I paraded clumsily about the living room, trying

my hardest to look drab and old fashioned. Orin seemed not to notice the preposterous billowing of the coat, which looked then more like a coon skin tent than a wrap. In fact, he thinks wives that are pregnant are noble looking, so the coat doubtless appeared, in his eyes, more entrancingly beautiful than ever. Ha had a look of deep admiration in his face!

"It's not worth spending the money to have it remodelled," I said. "I'm not that fond of the coat."

"You know," he said, studying it seriously for a few moments, "I could easily do it myself; I know just what you mean. But it will have to have some sort of stiffening under the lining of the collar to make it stand up. Let's see---"

And he caught the coat as it slipped from my shoulders and gently caressed the collar.

"Oh, nonsense, you can't fix it. Forget it. Forget I ever said anything about a coat. I can bear it. My friends are all used to me in this thing now. Might be too much of a shock to them if I looked modish all of a sudden," I added.

I was sorry at once for that sarcastic uncalled for remark but I didn't admit it, especially since it didn't look as if Orin's heart was heavy with sorrow at my having to put up with that disreputable looking wrap. Just the same I couldn't help noticing that sweet and unruffled look on his face as he sat that evening, deep in thought, glancing now and again at the coat, his hair ruffled, his shirt sleeves rolled up, thinking, doubtless, of the collar and the problem he would have to solve.

Just as I was about to say, "I'm sorry I ever mentioned it," he suddenly jumped from the davenport.

"I have it!"

"What?" I asked.

"Remember when we moved the ice box from the beck hall into the kitchen?"

I must have looked frightened out of my wits at this sudden turn in the conversation for he thought better of disclosing his impulsive notion and simply said:

"I think that would work fine. I'll have your collar fixed by tomorrow night."

At that I went to bed.

The following afternoon, after returning from my weekly Walking Club (I had left Orin in charge of the three children), I found the living room in a typical state of happy disarray. The four of them had been having a rip roaring time, it seemed. The dining room chairs were in the living room, turned upside down for doll beds. In one corner a blanket hung pinned from one

window to another. Coloring books were strewn over the rugs. There were crumbs on the sofa. All of this was a familiar setting on my days off. This time, however, bits of fur seemed to be floating about here and there. I knew Orin had been up to something and I didn't have long to wonder for, five minutes after I returned he presented me with the remodelled coat.

"Look", he said, beaming impishly. "I did it. I made a nice stand up collar. Slip it on.

He held it up. I slipped my arms into the sleeves and then Wham! Something hard settled on my shoulders.

"Button it up! Button it up before you say anything!" he ordered. I buttoned it and took a glance in the mirror. Definitely a clever improvement.

"But, Orin," I said, "what makes the collar so stiff and so heavy"

"Is it heavy? Oh well, I don't think you'll notice it when you get used to it. It does make it stand up nice and stiff, doesn't it now?"

I fingered the collar, puzzled, and looked again at Orin who seemed pleased but also guilty, something; I couldn't, for the moment, figure out.

"But Orin, what's in it? it's so hard!"

"Well," he began, "remember the time we moved the ice box?"

That ice box again! "What on earth has it got to do with this?" I demanded impatiently

"We--ll, after we moved it I tore up the linoleum under it. Just happened to have a few strips of that linoleum, thought it might come in handy some day. And it did. Darling, that's part of the linoleum flooring I put under your collar!"

Suddenly I began to laugh. I laughed till I cried and had Orin worried for awhile. I hated to tell him that though he had neatly hidden it under the lining of the collar so that no one would ever guess I was having my neck supported by linoleum, I knew I couldn't bear the weight for more than ten minutes at a time. I waited until my next shopping tour, a week later, to really test it out (we had a cold day one September) and to test my own strength along with it. By the time that shopping spree was over, I had become hard hearted and honest again. I remember coming home in a state of complete exhaustion.

"Orin!" I cried. "Take it out! I can't stand it! It nearly killed me. Oh, my poor neck!" He did or said he would.

Shortly after that I went to the hospital where my fourth lovely daughter was born, I asked him once when he came to visit me if he had removed it and he said, "Yes, yesterday. Too bad it didn't work."

"By the way," I said, reconciled now to the old fur coat and its deficiencies (didn't I have a brand new daughter?) "but while I'm here you'd better take it to the cleaners. It hasn't been cleaned for years and it must be very dirty. I know they charge fortunes for cleaning a fur coat and I hate to invest even that much in it now--but I won't wear it unless it's clean."

Then we changed the subject.

Ten days later I was back at home, unnecessarily weakened by the now outmoded procedure of keeping a new bother prisoner in a bed for that length of time. Inez, our young girl helper, took charge of the children and helped the baby and me get nicely settled it. Then she announced that she'd like her day off on Thursday (the following day) if I could manage. Feeling unusually spry for the moment I said, "Of course." Orin had to teach that day too so I was to be left alone with the new baby and the three children. He worried a little about me and gave me strict orders to "take it easy." He especially emphasized the fact that going down into the basement was out of the question

for me.

"If you need anything from the basement tell me now and I'll get it for you. Don't be trying to run downstairs. You're still weak and might fall. Is there anything you need from there?"

It couldn't think of anything at all and again, just before he departed, he said, "Remember now, don't go to the basement!"

This last repeated warning seemed unnecessary and naturally made me suspicious. Why didn't he tell me not to go upstairs, I wondered? After all, I'd have to make the same kind of descent and ascent from the second floor as I would to go to the basement, but he seemed to have forgotten that we have two stairways. Or had he? I wondered about it for awhile after he and Inez left. What could there be in the basement that he'd rather not have me see? Something, surely. Just

the way he said, "Don't go to the basement." It couldn't have been a pleasant surprise or he would have told me. He's one person who can't keep a good thing to himself. I had forebodings of disaster. Something is wrong in the basement and I had better see what.

The three little girls were busy in their playroom. I took a peek at the baby and then gathered my long housecoat up around my knees and opened the door to the basement. Slowly and cautiously I stepped down—one—two—three—four—five—till I reached the bottom. The furnace room looked just the same, pipes and all. From there I passed into the laundry. Inez had done the washing and it was all folded neatly on the white table. Everything was in order. Beyond the laundry we had a dark store room that I always hated to enter because the light switch was on the other end for some inexplicable reason and always necessitated pawing at the damp cold walls till the switch was found. This time, however, I felt I must not leave a stone unturned. I didn't even hesitate to but opened the door quickly. I took a step or two and WHAM! Something struck me full in the face, something hard and flat, something swinging from a pipe on the ceiling. If I screamed I don't remember it. Without knowing how I found the light I switched it on. Then I gasped, not with fright, but with amazement and utter disbelief. There, hanging from the pipe, was my *fur* coat. But it was not my fur coat, soft and thick, but a mummy, a petrified coat, stiff as a board and as unyielding. I gave it a slap with my hand and there was a resounding sound, as if I had clapped a drum!

What had happened? It didn't take me long to figure it out. But I'd let Orin explain.

That evening when I heard the door open I rushed to settle myself in a comfortable chair in the living room. He bustled in cheerily.

"Darling, how'd the day go?" he asked.

"Orin," I said smugly, "what happened to my coat?"

There was a moment's long silence. Then he said, in a much too loud voice, I thought: "I knew you'd go down there. Just because I told you not to! You had to go, didn't you?"

"Of course I had to go. How could I help it? Did you want me to sit upstairs all day wondering why you had said three times, 'Don't go to the basement.' Well, what about it? How about the coat?"

His face dropped and then he looked at me like a small boy who had been caught fishing when he should have been at school.

"I--I washed it. I threw it in the wash machine. You said you wanted it clean. I don't know. I just thought it would wash---come out nice and fluffy like--well, like little muskrats after a rain and then lots of sunshine---"

"Nice and fluffy! It certainly did!"

There was a pause. All at once I began to laugh. Then Orin began, to laugh. We laughed and laughed. I told him, in short wild rasps, about my trip downstairs, how I had opened the store room door, how the corpse of the coat swung out to smack me in the face, and how I almost thought I was having a nightmare. We laughed till we felt weak.

And, mingled with all this laughter was a glorious feeling of relief on my part, relief at being rid, once and for all, of the old muskrat coat. It was useless at last, done for, kaput!

"Orin," I cried gleefully, "I can't ever wear it again! I'll have to have a new coat! Isn't it wonderful!"

He wiped the tears from his eyes and held up his hand. There was a devilish look in his face.

"Wait, darling, I have an idea. Remember the book we read aloud----ARCTIC ADVENTURE? This winter I'll start chewing it, like the Eskimos. May take all year and it will probably wear my teeth down to the gums but I'll do it for you. It'll be as good as new next year, you'll see!"

"Oh, Orin, you're wonderful!"

Olga Stepanek