

## Little Miss Spuds.

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It was during the war. The United States steamship *Kearnaarje*, new then and unknown to fame, awaited the return of her captain. Steam was up, the anchor catted and fished, boats hoisted, guns secured for sea, and everything in readiness to leave Port-au-Prince forever, as every one hoped.

The morning was hot, moist, and stifling; heavy with odors of lush vegetation like the air of a greenhouse.

Mickey Murphy, landsman, with the Geneva cross of the sick list on his left arm, and a black eye, broken nose, and swelled mouth in explanation thereof, stood at the small port hole in the sick bay. Below him a negro woman sat in the bow of a bum-boat, with a naked babe astride her hip. The warm rain dripped down the creases of its fat brown legs.

"Here, ye black laythen! Coover oop yer pickaninny," he called, after rummaging in his ditty box and finding a piece of black oil-cloth such as protects paymuster's flannel from the worm which dieth not. He pointed to the cloth and then to the baby to explain his words.

The woman lifted her face, brutish like that of a cowed dog, and a glad light came in her eyes, from which before had looked but the gloom and despair of her ancestors held in bondage. She spoke a few words in barbaric French to the man at the paddle.

With a stroke whose easy grace had cost many a sore muscle he sent the light craft directly under the port, and the oil-cloth dropped into the woman's outstretched hand.

She at once folded it up and carefully sat on it to keep it dry!

Mickey pointed vigorously at the naked babe and then at the gift, with, "Put it on the kid! put it on the kid!" and sundry other remarks as unprintable as they were forcible.

This vigor of language and pantomime was not without its effect. Soon a look of almost human intelligence beamed on her face. Rising and balancing skilfully in the boat, she handed the babe up to Mickey.

He took it in his great hard hands, fearful lest the soft, tender thing might fall apart, and lifting it carefully through the narrow port, he rolled it on a flannel shirt. Then he wiped off the rain-drops, oil, and dirt that formed the babe's only covering.

The baby kicked up its heels, squirmed and wriggled, waved its arms and said, "Goo, goo," like any Christian child. Mickey smiled so expansively at its antics that he hurt his sore mouth. This made him conscious of his battered face, and he shrank instinctively from the baby eyes with the fathomless mystery of knowledge in their direct gaze. Heretofore he had been proud of these evidences of a good time ashore, but now he wanted to hide them.

"Shure, the tin commandments luks out av thim oyes o' yourn, Miss, but there's pity in 'em as well as blame. Bedad, it's a sharp tongue ye'll have wan av these days if it kapes oop wid yer oyes. Shure, now," as the baby wonderingly investigated the bruises with a hand like thistle down, "thot's a soft little hand to cure oop the hurts made by a hard wan."

Mickey put up his hand and the tiny fingers closed confidently around his thumb. Then the feeble, uncertain muscles tried to draw this new treasure up to an analytic mouth, failing which, the accommodating mouth moved down to meet the hand. The next moment the babe was sucking away contentedly at Murphy's thumb. He felt the pressure of two little teeth and the soft gum.

"Ye poor little kid! They ain't nothin' to ate there! Ye must git roight back to yer mammy," and with a feeling of tenderness to which he had long been a stranger, he went to call the boat. It was not there! He ran on deck;—yes, it was surely gone! There it was, half way ashore. The ship was moving, too! He ran below again.

"Of all the domn'd haythen tricks, thot's the most divilish. Well, Miss, ye belongs to me now fer better or fer worse. Shure, Oi niver t'ought, whin Oi shipped in the navy, that Oi'd be a slave owner."

To conceal his prize until the ship got well out to sea, he made a soft nest in the drawer of the apothecary's writing desk, lowered her carefully into it, and closed the drawer, — all but a little crack through which he peeped in now and then. The child soon went to sleep, and with every stolen look Mickey's heart yearned toward her — which is according to nature. When the Lord clothes a soul in clay he mingles with the clay a certain soft need of loving. An old maid with her pampered pets is not ridiculous, — neither is a sailor cheated, by his unnatural life, of the joy of watching his little ones grow up around him. The store of love is there — whence we see wasted on dumb brutes the tender caresses meant to bless little children.

For Mickey the knowledge of that helpless bit of humanity in the desk made the hour of waiting for the apothecary's appearance one of almost paternal anxiety, and his heart executed a most extraordinary jump and tumble when the newcomer's facetious greeting was interrupted by a faint wail. "Must be some one's been playing a trick on the cat," said the dispenser of drugs, fumbling at first one drawer and then another. "Fine doings, shutting her up —" and then for a minute he sat as though stupefied at the small brown apparition that kicked up its heels, and waved its chubby arms, and screamed shrilly from the drawer of his desk. When finally he recovered voice and the use of his members it was to rush out on deck, uttering ejaculations that Mickey remarked were ill-mannered in the presence of a lady.

That the apothecary had gone straight to report to the captain the presence of this youthful stowaway, its foster father was certain; so he carefully picked up his neckerchief with the baby in it, knotted the four corners to make a sling, and proceeded with as good grace as was possible to meet his irate commander. With his hat off, bandaged face, red cross, and awkwardly carried sling from which peeped the baby, awed into temporary quiet by its strange surroundings, he made a picture not likely to conciliate his superior officer.

"What do you mean by stealing a helpless child and bringing it aboard ship to starve?" thundered the captain.

"Oi didn't, sorr," returned Mickey. "She was shoved on to me t'rough the air poort, and the unfalin' haythen wouldn't take

her back, sorr, though I begged on me binded knees. Whatever I'm to do to fade the kid, Oi dunno. It's a gal, an' they can't ate salt horse, loike boys."

While Murphy was busy with explanations which did not explain, the baby stared at the captain with democratic freedom, kicked her chubby feet about, sucked her thumb, reached out for the trumpet of the officer of the day, and in general comported herself in a fearless fashion befitting so adventurous a young woman.

As the upshot of the whole matter, Murphy got five days in the brig on reduced rations, which sentence was to be executed as soon as he came off the sick list. The baby, called Little Miss Spuds after her foster father,— Murphy and spuds are sailor synonyms for potatoes,— was to be turned over to the doctor's care, and many were the tales told in the wardroom, apropos of the doctor's amazed incredulity upon being called upon to attend to a newly arrived infant. On board a man-of-war the sudden and unheralded appearance of a baby seems naturally little short of miraculous.

Little Miss Spuds took very kindly to ship life. Since the medical stores did not include such an article as a nursing bottle, she was fed with a spoon; and great was the interest excited among the crew by the funny noises she made when eating, and her trick of occasionally blowing a spoonful in Mickey's face. He never fed her without an admiring and critical audience that showered all kinds of questions and advice on him.

"Say, Spuds," an interested bystander would ask, "arrowroot's good for babies, ain't it?"

"Yis, and so's a wit nurse," returns Mickey, "but the Navy Department don't supply ayther wan on rquisition."

"How old is she, Spuds?"

"She ain't ould at all, she's young."

"Well, how young, then?"

"Wan year," says Mickey.

"How do you know?"

"By her teeth, ye Gowk. Ye till a baby's age same as a harse's."

"But suppose she ain't got none?"

"Thin ye wait till they grow, and count back'ards,"

"Lord, ain't she a kicker! Worse 'n a sopranny singer."

"She ought to be a sopranny singer, she's so much at home on the high 'Sea,'" punned one of the listeners.

"You ought to call her 'Flora McFlimsy,' cause she ain't got nothin' to wear."

Thus it went on, the little black baby being the cause of countless witticisms. Even in the wardroom the marine officer propounded the conundrum, "Why is she called Miss Spuds?"

And when it was given up, replied triumphantly, "Because Murphy is her 'Potative' father."

In a few days Mickey was sufficiently healed of his bruises to work off his sentence of five days in the brig. Miss Spuds went with him, not as *particeps criminis*, but merely because he begged so earnestly that no one else be given the care of her. So she shared his degradation and made his punishment seem naught, thus early and unconsciously fulfilling the law of her sex, which shares the disgrace of those they love and makes sorrow put on the face of joy.

Eventually the captain gave up all idea of sending her ashore. What was a nigger baby more or less, anyhow?

She soon had a wardrobe as extensive as any queen, but of a quality and cut that would have made a mother smile, had she not wept, to see Murphy subduing the giant strength of his clumsy fingers to the gentle task for which her deft touch was given to woman. Every man, whether he knew anything of the mystery of baby clothes or not, felt called upon to make her something. Wonderfully ingenious were some of the things she wore before the ship touched at Trinidad. There, not a liberty man came back, drunk or sober, who did not turn in some store baby clothes or toys.

Old John Anderson, captain of the hold, came reeling aboard with a bottle of rum which clumsily dropped out of his trouser-leg at the gangway and broke on the iron bunker plate. This was a court-martial offense; but in consideration of the fact that he held in his hand one wheel of a baby carriage, and tried to explain with his thick tongue how he had started with the whole thing, and the rest of it had disappeared during an argument he had with a policeman on the dock, he was let off with a warning.

Some practical joker ordered a thousand toothpicks, which came aboard the next day duly addressed, "Miss Spuds."

She slept in a dainty little silk cot swung like a hammock and woven by hand. It had high sides so she couldn't fall out, for she was beginning to climb around recklessly.

Her hammock number was a zero, elaborately gilded by the ship's painter, and though she drew no ration, she was an honored guest in everybody's mess.

She was beginning to talk, too, and one of her first speeches was a choice bit of sailor profanity. Mickey's guardian angel must have smiled to hear the serious talk he gave Miss Spuds on this occasion. After that there was no more swearing in her presence by anybody. Mickey's "Oi ain't goin' to have her learn nothin' like that" was enough.

When she began to creep around the deck, the carpenter built a small portable fence that could be secured in a safe place, and she was put in the enclosure to play with her toys.

She soon made friends with the parrots, macaws, and ship's cat, and could carelessly seize them by any convenient projecting limb without danger.

She was rather slow about learning to walk, possibly on account of the rolling of the ship, so it was a proud day for all her friends when she took her first step. She gayly fell into one pair of the many hands outstretched to receive her after this great feat, and laughed out, "Mickey, Spuds can do."

As she grew more confident, her little feet went pattering around all day, and she picked up words with marvelous ease. Soon they invented a sort of mental hide-and-seek game for her. Drawing her into his lap some sailor would say, "Now I am hiding, see if you can find me." Then she would begin questioning him, looking into his face with her big brown eyes.

"Are you behind the galley?"

He would gravely reply, "No."

"Down in the hold?"

"No."

"In the fire-room?"

"No."

"In the wardroom?"

"No, indeed."

And so she would name all the parts of the ship that she knew, until he finally said "yes," and then she would laugh merrily and clap her hands, and ask him to "do it again."

One evening she leaned against Murphy's knee as he smoked his pipe. She pursed up her little mouth and began blowing up into the darkness.

"Whot are ye tryin' ter do, Miss?" he asked respectfully.

"Tryin' to make the stars shine brighter," she answered.

"Be aisy, or ye'll blow 'em all out," he replied, with a happy smile. Unwittingly to him and to her, Miss Spuds was daily making the stars that shone on him brighten their shining. Mickey was a good-conduct man now. For good or evil in the human heart is a hidden slow growth, not a sudden upheaval; the result of gentle, long-continued tendency rather than a volcanic rending of old habits and rebuilding of new. It is not to be measured but as one measures the slow moving of a glacier.

It was in June, 1864. The *Kearsarge* lay at Flushing, when important news was brought aboard, and a few hours later she steamed over to Cherbourg. There the *Alabama* swung peacefully at anchor, the first ship to teach the nations of the earth the value of commerce destroying reduced to a science.

What followed every one knows. On a beautiful Sunday morning, June 19, for something over an hour the two ships circled around each other, busy punctuating the page of history with heavy periods. The *Alabama* put a fitting end to her career by joining her many victims at the bottom of the sea.

During the fight Miss Spuds occupied a cozy little hammock, which was swung away aft in the shaft alley, far beneath the water line. She was securely lashed in so she couldn't get out, and given a big armful of toys to beguile the time, but she didn't need them, for she was interested in her strange surroundings.

Under her turned the big shaft, so fascinatingly mysterious that she strained her neck and eyes watching it. And the bell signals were jangling out beyond there in the engine room, and the big guns booming so up on deck. It was great fun, and she laughed and talked to herself, and evidently thought that the whole thing was got up for her sole amusement by her sailor friends.

When the oiler came around to look at the thrust bearing beneath her, she laughed aloud, for she knew he would tell her other friends, and she wanted them to know she was enjoying the new game.

He patted her head kindly as he started forward again, and just then there was a louder and funnier noise than all the others. It nearly upset her hammock, and was such fun she hoped it would be repeated. She wanted to *encore* it, but she didn't know how.

She never knew that this noise was caused by a hundred-pound shell from the Blakely rifle of the *Alabama*, which struck the stern post of the *Kearsarge*, about ten feet from Miss Spuds, and, failing to explode, harmlessly buried itself in the wood. The section of the stern post containing the shell was afterwards cut out and exhibited as a relic at Washington, where it can be seen to this day.

When the oiler reappeared, she said, "Make it go BOOM again," to show him how pleased she was with this crowning effort of her friends.

He told of it afterwards, and the superstitious friends of Miss Spuds said she had saved the ship. It was plain to them that, had she not been there, the shell would have exploded and disabled both the rudder and propeller; and every man on board from the cook to the commander contemplated with pride the honors she, as one of the survivors of the victory, would share with them.

But it was not to be. She fell sick soon after the homeward-bound pennant flung its long length to the breeze, and the tiny spark of life flickered and went out in spite of medical skill and careful nursing.

No more pathetic sight was ever seen than when her tender body, sewed up in such a pitiful little bit of canvas, went sliding off a grating into the sea, while officers and crew stood around with bared heads. The sound of that splash as the salt waves closed forever over her was never forgotten by one man on board. He never knew any other love, and so now, thirty years after the sea took her body, she still lives in his memory as a prattling, mischievous, baby girl, blessed with the eternal youth that death alone can give.