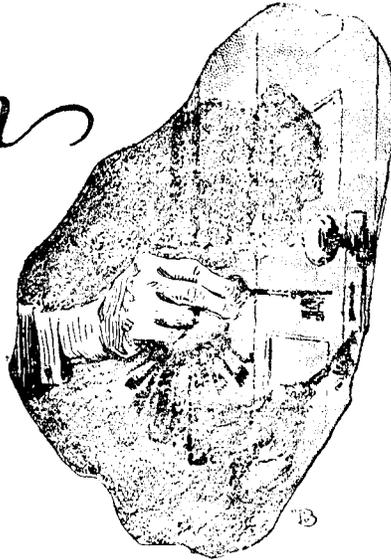


Them Picks

by
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PORGY McGUIRE put down the empty bucket and stared across the kitchen-table at the red-headed woman, who held a napkin firmly beneath her double chin while she scraped her plate. As her head bent forward, the spoonful of beans rose, halted, and then with cautious distrust, completed the journey. Extreme and unprecedented measures, this napkin thing and the hesitating spoon, observed Porgy; extreme and unprecedented, and occasioned no doubt by the new yellow waist¹ that bulged over the table.

Now table etiquette was not exactly a lost art with the McGuires. Indeed, to the best of Porgy's recollection it had never existed in his household. But now he wondered if his wife had always looked like this when she ate. If so, how had he managed to forget the picture when he led her to the altar? It was this reflection that caused his nose to wrinkle and his black-bearded lip to curl, as he watched her putting away the evening meal.

"If yer mout' kin spare a little time, dere's somethin' I wants to ask," he

¹-dress

announced at length.

"Shoot," mumbled Mrs. McGuire, tugging at an ancient roll.

"Well, den, where's dem spuds what I fetched home from the grocery yestiddy?"

The woman tottered in her chair as the roll parted in her fists. "Where d'ye leave 'em?" she asked, with a momentary glance about the cluttered room.

"Dunno. Over by the sink, I reckon."

"Then that's where you'll find 'em," she informed, polishing her plate with the bread.

There was a brief period of silence while Porgy drew out the makings and digested the explanation.

"Tryin' to be funny, ain't, you?" he snarled.

"Why?" she snapped, "Whata you want, anyhow? Good Lord, didn't I heat them beans for you?"

Bewildered by the alibi, Porgy tilted back his chair and slowly twisted his cigarette. "I see where this is gonna be one of dem nice little fam'ly parties," he nodded. "Mebbe it 'll int'rest you to know dere won't be no more pickin's from the grocery. I'm fired!"

His wife took the tobacco sack and shook out the remaining contents.

"Do you git me?" he shouted. "I'm fired, I'm telln' you!"

"I know it," she smiled airily.

"What! You wuz aroun' dere to-night?"

She struck a match under her chair. "No—this noon," she answered between puffs. "First thing when I got up."

His thick brows bent down and met, and the cigarette fell upon his shirt, unheeded. Suddenly he leaped to his feet, hurled back the chair and flew around the table.

"So it wuz you!" he exploded.

The red head nodded calmly in a cloud of smoke. "And why shouldn't I? I couldn't let a perfectly good second-story man keep on drivin' a delivery wagon—fer ten bones a week."

The bosom of Percy's grimy blue shirt rose and fell, while he dug his nails into his palms. What was the use of giving her a beating, anyhow? In the first place it was no mean undertaking; secondly, he'd get thirty days sure, just when he was trying to make headquarters forget him.

"You see somebody's always got to look after you," she said icily, as she moistened the tip of her napkin and rubbed it over a long stain on the new waist. "Why, you've went clean, bughouse lately. What's got into you? Purty soon you'll be poundin' a drum in the Salvashun Army." She looked up long enough to observe that Porgy was pulling on his battered derby, preparatory to quitting her society, then resumed her rubbing. "Be sure to fetch your little wife somethin' to-night," she went on. "Somethin' besides a meanly bunch of potatoes!"

He stepped to the door and flung it open. "An' where do you figger I'll bring it?" he growled.

"Home, of course. An' don't keep me up late!"

"Home?" The question rose shrilly. "Home?" he repeated. "You poor fish, I'm done wit' you fer good!" He braced himself in the doorway and wound up for a parting oration. "Why, the nex' time I sees you, yer bean 'll be a damn sight redder'n it is now. D'ye git me? You'll be on the bunch of coals dey keeps fer stools what crabs a guy when he's tryin' to stay on the level. An' what's more—"

His discourse suddenly was interrupted. The woman had waddled to the door. There was a quick swaying of heavy bodies, an exchange of muttered curses, a shove—and the erstwhile lecturer on the hereafter found himself sprawled on the stairs, while the flushed face of his wife glowered at him.

"The next trip I makes will be down to headquarters!" she panted. "You might jest as well be up river fer all the good you're doin' me. An' remember," she added, as Porgy rose and retreated, "we're gonna move up-town purty soon, so watch your step, an' bring home the stake!"

Down on lower Broadway, later that evening, a dapper little man in shepherd plaid gazed longingly at the rack of umbrellas, just inside the door of a furnishing store. The sign tacked thereon read: "Your Choice, 50 Cents." Why didn't these boobs keep open evenings? He would gladly thrown in half a bone and draw one. So he remarked to the stout, gray-haired gentleman in the Palm Beach suit and Panama hat, who looked out speculatively at the rain. A few minutes before the street had been hot and dusty. The little man had stepped in with the first moist warning of the coming shower; the stout one had loped over from an open street-car.

Porgy, crouching in the corner, had watched the arrival of the two with indifference. A man of few words—except at home—our friend vouchsafed no reply to the empty platitudes concerning the nasty

evening. Of course it was bad weather for anybody who had to be out, so why consume energy discussing the obvious.

This may or may not have been Porgy's philosophy, perhaps his mind was too full of his recent battle. In any event, the rain might keep right on for all of him.

His sojourn in the doorway meant merely the killing of a little time, for no one was likely to show up before eleven at the only place he expected to visit that evening. And should occasion demand that he move on, a little thing like getting wet would be no cause for disquietude. In fact the dark clothes which hung loosely on his huge, skulking frame, apparently had weathered wintry storms as well as other summer showers.

After all, the wife's double-crossing had given him a good hunch. He never expected to see her again—that was final. She'd keep right on until she put him back in Sing Sing. But even Billy Sunday couldn't expect a guy to trot down the path of righteousness without stopping for wind. A neat little trick some place would make her shut up and keep off his trail while he landed a good job.

"Rode down on the surface," the stout man was saying, as Porgy came out of his reverie. "Subway's terribly hot to-day." The speaker turned to look again at the umbrellas. "Wish to the Lord I had one of those! I've just got to get to Brooklyn by nine!"

The little man rattled the latch. "It'd be a joke if this gink hadn't locked the door."

"It sure would," the stout man concurred. "We could go in, select three umbrellas, and each leave half a dollar on the rack." He turned to Porgy, as if expecting confirmation. But if bromides bored Porgy, hypotheses positively disgusted him. He moved back with a shrug that eloquently indicated: "Yes. I would—like hell!" An umbrella was about as essential to Porgy as a golf stick.

"If I could only get this door open," resumed the little man, "we could lock up again, an' the guy that runs this joint wouldn't have no kick comin'."

Now for the first time somebody was talking sense, observed Porgy. Opening a locked door, when a cash-drawer and pocketable spoils were to be found within—why, what guy wouldn't be interested, especially when his accustomed ingress was *via* a precarious coal-hole?

The stout man's Panama bobbed approval of the little one's remark. "No chance. I'm afraid," he grinned.

"Oh, I don't know," said the little man. "My keys might fit. I'll try, anyway." He whipped out a bunch of keys and fingered several in quick succession. Singling out one, he gave it a momentary inspection and pushed it into the lock, holding in his hand the remainder of those on the ring. Then, as if he were in the habit of opening this particular store every morning, he gave a slight shove, swung the door open, stepped in and beckoned to his companions.

The stout man, with a nervous laugh, looked up and down the street, then followed. But Porgy didn't budge.

Quick as the little man had been in opening the door, the eyes of Porgy had been even quicker, and now they flashed with a strange light, which might have meant astonishment, avarice, or the sudden making of a plan.

He had never seen that bunch of keys before, nor their owner; but surely there could be no mistake. The assurance with which the man had chosen the key and his precaution in covering up the others that they might not be seen by two apparently ignorant boobs, had not escaped Porgy, either.

The keys must be the famous *picks*, known by vague description to every brainy crook in New York! And rumor had it that they could unlock anything, from a school-

boy's play-box to Hindenburg's heart!

Lingering doubt vanished, as Porgy watched the proceedings within. The little man lifted out an umbrella and placed a coin on the rack. The stout one, after making his selection, fumbled in his wallet and laid out a bill. He picked up the coin for change and gave his umbrella a further inspection, from time to time glancing apprehensively at the door. While he was thus occupied, the little man deftly pocketed the bill, and with a laugh pushed the other one out of the store.

"Well, of all the pikers!" gasped Porgy. "If I had dem picks, the first dump I made would be the mint." He looked up as the stout man, brushing by, opened up his purchase and hustled off into the rain.

"Wanta get in on this?" asked the little man, tucking his umbrella under his arm, while he prepared to close the door.

Porgy turned away with a grunt. Once the man had stepped out, however, Porgy steamed into action. He tried the door and found it locked. Then he pulled down his hat and buttoned up his coat. In a moment he slid out to the sidewalk and keeping close to the windows, trailed the bobbing umbrella down Broadway and into a side street.

Striding through the puddles which the man ahead gingerly avoided, Porgy gained on him at every step. The man seemed to sense something unusual in the footsteps pattering behind, for he stopped short as Porgy overtook him by the large wooden door of a wholesale house.

The street was dark and deserted—just made to order—and Porgy, with a well-timed lunge, caught the fellow by both wrists. Back and forth they rocked, the little man still clutching the umbrella.

"Come on!" grunted Porgy. "Gimme dem picks!"

"Picks?" panted the other.

"Sure—the picks! Hurry up! Come across wit' 'em!"

The man sputtered and fumed. "What th' hell—well, if it ain't the guy that was pipin' us off at that store!"

"Never mind!" snarled Porgy. "Come on wit' 'em; all right, den I'll have to take 'em!"

The umbrella went tumbling into the doorway as Porgy took the wrists in one hand and made a quick thrust into the pocket which he knew contained the keys. The man, however, was not without fight, for he kicked and squirmed and bit at his assailant—but to no avail. The keys came out, along with several coins and the dollar bill—all of which Porgy forthwith appropriated.

"I been hep to you fer a long time, bucko!" puffed Porgy. "Now I got the evidence, an' you can't double-cross me. Come along, an' come quiet! I won't put the darbies on if you act nice!"

The man straightened his collar. "A plain-clothes bull!" he sneered. "But why the Old King Brady make-up?"

"Don't git funny!" snapped Porgy. "Come along, I tell you!"

In a sudden gust of wind the umbrella came wobbling upon them, just as Porgy readjusted his hold. Quick to embrace the opportunity thus offered, the little man caught the rod, and with a violent jerk pulled the umbrella over the burly one's shoulders, hurling him to the sidewalk, then fled incontinently down the street.

Porgy extricated himself deliberately and rose from the puddle. A small cataract fell from the seat of his pants. For a moment he grinned at the retreating figure; then began to retrace his steps, enjoying for the first time within his memory the exhilarating dignity which pervades the affluent one who travels under an umbrella.

Although eleven or thereabouts was the time Porgy was wont to visit the saloon on the Bowery, when business called him there, to-night certain unanticipated happenings had

hastened his steps thither.

Shortly after nine, with the umbrella under his arm, he strode into Dugan's. Streams of water were running off the rim of his derby and dripping from his coattails. At every step, his oozing shoes left a muddy trail on the tiled floor.

The bartender, apparently observing a standing order, began to draw a big one.

"If carryin' an embrell' gits you as wet as all that, Porgy, I'd take it right back to the gent what owns it," he remarked.

Ignoring the satiric thrust, Porgy took the schooner and, raising it right on past his mouth, stared into it at close range.

"Awful windy night," he said solemnly, "but I didn't think it 'd kick up a foam like dis." He lowered the glass to the bar and peered into it again, while the water from his derby trickled down on the mahogany. Then, as if struck by a sudden thought, he left the schooner untouched and encircling several loungers, stared around at the tables.

The bartender pulled down the glass and recharged the dying foam with slowly drawn solid beer.

"Here y' are, Mr. McGuire," he called, and sent the schooner sliding down the wet bar. "If I didn't know you wuz one of our most prominent porch-climbers, I'd think mebbe you wuz one of dem weights and measures guys."

Porgy, stepping back, caught the handle and carried the schooner to an empty table, where he seated himself, and slowly quaffed. From time to time his eyes traveled expectantly to the door, while he stirred the beer by circling the glass.

A smile spread over his face. Maybe he could sell the picks!

Yes, that would be best, provided he could find a liberal purchaser. In that event, he reflected, his good resolutions would remain intact, for of course it was no concern of his

what use the buyer might make of the keys.

So engrossed was he in his calculations that he took no further heed of the arrivals. Beer followed beer, as he sat and thought. An hour sped by, and another, before he looked up, to see approaching him the tall, sallow young man for whom he had been waiting. The newcomer slid into a chair and with a puzzled expression studied the grinning face before him.

"What's the matter, Porgy?" he inquired. "Wife dead?"

The grin vanished. "What's the idee 'bout the wife?" scowled Porgy. "That ain't no joke, Sliver, an' you knows it!"

"Course I do," returned the other, leaning back to escape a left swing should it come his way. "Only I ain't never seen you so tickled, an' I thought—"

"Never mind what you t'ot!" snapped Porgy. "Now you've went an' spoiled the party! I'd clean forgot about her!"

Mrs. McGuire was indeed no joke. In fact Porgy frequently had declared to his cronies that his stretches in stir had been without regret, for the walls that kept him in also kept her out. The mere mention of her was at times sufficient to provoke Porgy to wrath—wrath that unlimbered his sturdy arms. And Sliver, apparently fearful that one of these occasions was at hand, still hung back.

The blow, however, was not forthcoming. Instead, Porgy leaned over and glanced furtively at the occupants of the nearby tables.

"Come on away from this bunch of rum-hounds," he whispered. "I got somethin' to show you. We'll go in the back room."

When the door had sprung shut behind them the two seated themselves and their heads slowly came together.

"Well, spring it!" urged Sliver.

Porgy gulped. He seemed to realize that his utterance would be historic.

"Sliver," he croaked, "me an' you otta

be lendin' money to Rockyfeller in a few days."

Mis companion grinned incredulously. "I hear he needs all the financial help he kin git now'days—but what have I gotta say to git the answer?"

Porgy stepped to the door and pushing it out slightly peered through the crack, In a moment he hurried back. Fishing in his pocket, he pulled out the picks and held them under the long nose of his astonished pal.

For several seconds Sliver stared at the dangling keys, like one in a daze, before he ventured to take them in his hand.

"Where d'ye git 'em?" he gasped.

Porgy briefly narrated the story of the conquest.

"No wonder yer mug wuz lit up like a church," said Sliver. "I know'd it wuz somethin' big the minute I piped you!" Again he lingered the keys, inspecting each bit of steel and brass with crafty appraisal. "Why, bo, we'll jest go up one side an' down the other won't miss a flat!"

Porgy shook his head and his face grew solemn as he slipped the keys back into his pocket. "No, that ain't the game. I've been thinkin' it all over. Why, say, d'ye know why you ain't saw me 'round here lately?"

"Been home, I reckon," ventured Sliver, plainly alarmed at Porgy's sudden, unaccountable change.

"Home, hell! I been workin'."

"Git out!"

"On the level! An' that's what I'm gonna go back to. But first, for bizness reasons, I gotta make a little stake—jest one haul." His voice lowered to a whisper. "Den *you* makes one. It's up to you what you does den. I ain't runnin' no mission. Anyhow, when you gits yourn, we sells the picks an' splits."

Sliver's jaw had dropped during this extraordinary announcement. Now he snapped it shut, and shoved his hand across the table.

They clasped in silent understanding.

"I ain't askin' no questions, Porgy," said Sliver after a long pause. "only I'd like to know when I'm gonna git 'em."

"Drop aroun' dis time to-morro'. If I ain't made it den—well, I turns 'em over the nex' night."

The two rose and started for the bar. But at that moment there bounded into the room, through the family entrance, a large, panting woman with flushed cheeks and streaming red hair. Evidently she had dressed in haste, for her purple turban was awry, her waist was unbuttoned at the neck, and a soiled white garment which Porgy recognized as her nightgown trailed from under her striped skirt.

"So here you are!" she screamed.

Sliver dived through the swinging door, but Porgy, flabbergasted, peered about with indecision. The delay was fatal. With a clumsy leap, the woman clutched his arm.

"They got the front door locked!" she yelled. "I was comin' that way to grab you, you big bum, but they made me gumshoe aroun' here! It's lucky I did!"

"Fer God's sake shut up!" he snarled. "What d'ye want, anyhow?"

"You knows what I'm after. What d'ye mean, keepin' me up this time o' night? Have you got it? No, of course not!"

The door to the saloon swung back and the bartender's head bobbed in.

"You'll have to cut this." he growled. His face lit up as he recognized the couple. "At it again, eh? Well, beat it—both of you!"

"Leave it to me, Bill!" begged Porgy. "Jest keep the gang out, will you?"

The man disappeared. The woman started another yell, but it suddenly was smothered, as Porgy clasped his hand over her mouth.

"Now, go on home!" he pleaded. "Ain't you got no sense left in that fat head o' yourn? To-morro' I'll come aroun' an' fix you up. On the level, I will!"

Her teeth closed on his fingers, and he pulled his hand away with a sharp cry of pain.

“Why, you simp, you’re comin’ right along with me now!” She lowered her voice. “Listen! A Mame was in. She gives me a swell tip on a place up on the Drive. You gotta make it before mornin’, an’ it’s one now so hustle!”

He pushed her before him, and pulled open the street door. “Nothin’ doin’ wit’ dat stuff. I tells you I’ll do somethin’ big fer you to-morro’. Now git out, or I t’rows you out!”

“You throw me out!” she sneered. “Where d’ye get that? You’re comin’ with me,” and suiting the deed to the word, she grasped his arm again and dragged him out to the street.

But Porgy was firm, and pulled just as violently in the opposite direction, while a series of furious blows crashed into his face. He tugged himself free—but the woman, now with two hands at her disposal, renewed the pummeling with good measure. And while their cries and curses rose on the night air, a curious, motley, jeering crowd assembled, offering strategic suggestions to the combatants.

Sympathy appeared to be evenly divided. No one ventured to interfere, but all with wild ecstasy watched the battle rage. Indeed, neither spectators nor belligerents saw the approach of two blue-clad preservers of the peace, and before Mr. and Mrs. McGuire realized what had happened, they found themselves in handcuffed custody, while one of the officers spoke decisively over the telephone in the box. A few minutes later, amid the clang of gong and the parting cries of the assemblage fast disappearing from view, they sped on their way to the station.

“Drunk and disorderly” seemed to cover the case succinctly and justly, and the sergeant, after a survey of his latest callers, was about to make the entry on his blotter when he paused to salute an inspector who

had just strolled in.

“What’s this?” the inspector asked sharply, as he came behind the desk. “Man and wife been at it?”

“I should say not!” yelled Porgy. “Hones’ to God, I ain’t never seen this woman before. First time I seen her wuz when she came at me to-night. I wus jest comin’ out from havin’ me beer, after a hard day’s work. She trots up an’ braces me fer car fare. I know’d she wuz a panhandler the minute I sees her, an’ tells her to lay off, an’ right away she wallops me like I—”

“He’s a liar!” screamed the woman. “He’s my husband, an’ I can prove it. Why, the big—”

“Isn’t that Porgy McGuire?” asked the inspector, tugging at his mustache.

“Don’t know him, inspector,” answered the sergeant.

“Maybe you don’t!” snapped his superior. “That’s why you’re still on the desk. Why, this guy’s got a record as long as a drunkard’s dream! And this woman used to turn quite a few nifties herself. Have you frisked ’em?”

“Was just gettin’ at it,” explained the sergeant.

The inspector turned on his heel and stalked into the office beyond.

“Take her in, Sweeney, and let Mrs. Clancy fan her!” ordered the sergeant, glowering down at Mrs. McGuire and the officer who held her in tow. He watched the stormy exit, then turned to Porgy and his guardian. “Now for this gink! Get busy, Billings!”

“But it ain’t no use, yer honor!” wailed Porgy. Relieved of the bracelets he pushed the policeman away. “On the level, I ain’t got nothin’ on me! Why, the dip what goes through me will come out in debt!”

“That’s fer me to find out, you big stooge!” bellowed the giant at his side, who forthwith began the search without ceremony.

A twisted roll of cigarette papers came forth then a nubbin of chewing tobacco. Matches and a few coins followed. And now, with all the pockets turned out, the officer began a systematic massage of the mud-spattered garments.

“Hey, sarg, pipe these here things!”

The late keeper of Mrs. McGuire had burst into the room, dangling a bunch of keys.

“Mrs. Clancy found ’em on that big dame!” he beamed, as he deposited the fruits of the search on the desk. “She had ’em in her waist!”

The sergeant look up the keys, fingered one after another and gave a long whistle. “The picks!” His eyes traveled to the door of the matron’s room. “Sweeney, stay right by that bird!” He motioned for Porgy to step up. “Guess we don’t need you. G’wan!”

Porgy gulped twice. Then the thrill of freedom rushed through his veins—freedom that meant more than a discharge from the station. He wheeled about and stepped lightly out of the room. In the hall he paused a moment as the sergeant’s voice rang out:

“Get this, Billings! You and Sweeney grabbed this dame tryin’ to make a door on Canal Street. You picked her up on suspicion. We frisked her an’ find the picks. This looks like the party that’s been making monkeys out of us for six months—us thinkin’ all the time that it was a man. She’ll get ten years, sure!”

Porgy strained his ears and pinched his thigh. Yes, he was awake, all right.

“Now, fix it up with Sweeney,” the sergeant went on, “and mind you two guys don’t fall down in front of the judge tomorrow.”