

Fiction

A Reverse-Valentine Story

The Good-Timing Pinkhams of Chowder Lane

by John Fritscher

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(written age 24)

They were such a fun couple, those Pinkhams, always good for a laugh in the early days. If their wedding picture had made the society page—and it did not—the effect would have been the same had Frank Sinatra married Mount Rushmore. Brunhilda Pinkham was a boulder of a woman.

For eighteen years they lived alone together. That is, until the day Hilda bought the matched pair of Dandie Dinmont Terriers. Oliver did not like animals. He particularly did not like dogs. He especially did not like Dandie Dinmont Terriers. He put his foot down. Hilda told him to shut-up, that he was disturbing the pups, and that, if he didn't like it, he could lump it or leave.

Oliver lumped it. She was an avalanche of a wife.

For the next ten years Oliver worked to feed the terriers, which multiplied like computers. The market was never large, and out of every litter Brunhilda always found one pup too cute to sell. Oliver found his ego going to the dogs.

In the next eight years Oliver grew older and smaller; Brunhilda grew older and larger; and the terriers saw their children's children's children. Hilda didn't talk to him much anymore. And that left him time to read.

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Now, Oliver was an accountant, and like a good accountant he had a head for figures. Oliver read science books. He read journals. He made long neat rows of figures in greenbound volumes. In fact, since the terriers' advent he had literally filled the root cellar with books and volumes of paper.

One day Oliver stopped at the drugstore. He bought some hemp. He bought some real beeswax. He bought some red coloring. And he bought a small bottle of cyanide. It was very unlike Oliver to buy cyanide. He usually bought a chocolate phosphate. Oliver explained that there were rats in dear Hildy's kennel.

Deep in the root cellar he read the formula he had worked out through long days and longer nights when the barking downstairs kept him awake. Four grams of liquid cyanide absorbed by six ounces of whipped beeswax calculatedly fills thirty-two cubic feet of air with cyanogen. Funny that cyanogen smells like peach blossoms. Hilda would appreciate that subtlety.

By January's end he had the candles made. They were long and tapered and red. He would not light one. He would not light half a one. He did not need to test. His formula was more sure than the atom bomb.

Every evening after he had fed the dogs, he would sit in the root cellar and stare at his secret drawer. Did he dare to use the candles? The old girl hadn't been too bad since the first of the year. She must have made some resolution.

But then, early in February came the straw on his camel's hair coat. Oliver sold one of his hypothetical articles to a science magazine. Hilda was overjoyed. The kennel needed wiring, and she told Oliver that it was for such unexpected necessities that she had permitted him to fiddle-faddle around in the root cellar, and that, after all, he owed support to her and the brace of Dandie Dinmonts.

Oliver did not shout at her. He did not smash her face with a grapefruit half. He did not raise a finger. He simply handed her the magazine's check. Tomorrow evening when he dried the terriers' supper trays, he would push her cabinet-top radio into the dishwasher. That would take care of Hilda.

At the office next day Oliver kept his green shade over his pink-rimmed eyes. He followed more faithfully than ever the ritual he had observed for years. He took his lunch and carefully saved the scraps for the terriers. He put ten cents in the coffee vendor, turned the selector to sugar and double cream.

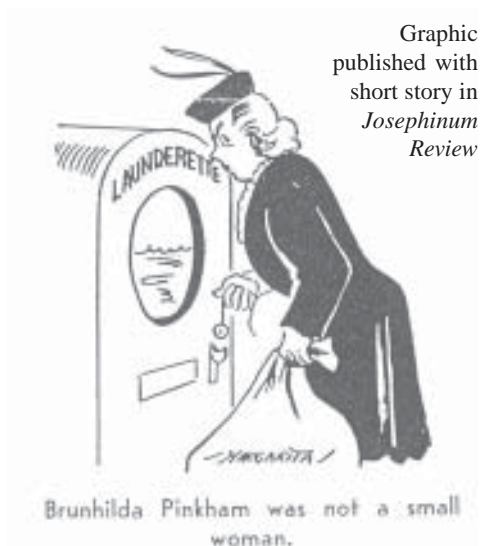
At 12:15 he left the office, descended the narrow stairs, and entered the five and dime store. Every day he'd purchased a snugly, plush toy dog from the same uncurious girl. Outside in the alley he pried up the sewer lid and chucked the dog into the cavern. The day was Wednesday, and Monday's and Tuesday's dogs still floated on the surface. He calculated that it took at least four days for the stuffings to saturate and sink.

Upstairs again he washed as usual. He cleaned his fingernails and manicured his cuticles. He sat down at his place and did not rise until five-thirty.

He missed the first bus when he forgot his umbrella. The next was late. He moved his lips a bit to as close a smile as he'd had since 1945. Let her be angry. She'd be a scream when she tried new liquid Joy on the General Electric.

Once on the porch he dragged his pencil-like lingers through his pale, sparse hair. He breathed in thinly the dark courage of the evening dampness. Tonight was the last night he'd feed the hounds. He had had enough. One way or another he would shed her for good.

Timidly he reconnoitered through the chintz-covered windows. The parlor was dark, but through an archway he caught a faint glow from the dining room. Was it? Yes. Oh yes. There she was, colder than



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a flounder lying in the middle of her evening meal. The guttering stubs of red wax glinted on the silver, showed her to be such a nice pale blue. Wildly he broke out the window glass and smelled unmistakably the trace of peach blossoms. It was a stunning event. An accident! He could really claim an accident.

Overcome, he romped back to the kennel, threw open the gates for the Dandie Dinmont Terriers, and drove them en masse into the street. With sudden recall he raced to the root cellar, scribbled a verse on his clipboard, snagged it up on a nail. He stood looking at it, singsonging it louder than he'd ever heard his voice before.

Here lies my wife; here let her lie.
Now she's at rest and so am I.

Over and over again, and up the stairs for a closer look. There she was, just like herself, spoiling the scene, sprawled in the midst of the linen and china and flowers. The candles had been the perfect romantic touch. He giggled so long that his stomach hurt and caught his breath short. Romanticism had been so unlike her.

Winded but calmer, he went to the kitchen where he found the old girl had really outdone herself with cooking. At the thought he again doubled in laughter till tears of mirth rolled down his cheeks. It was so easy. An accident! He simply had been late coming home. Hilda, dear Hilda, nosing through his desk: she had been so considerate.

Hours later when the inspectors had cleared her off the table and left satisfied, he was giddy with freedom. He put on his pajamas and a new silk smoking jacket, adding the final fling of a neck scarf. Downstairs he lighted a cigar and spitefully threw the match in the sink. He plunged her favorite carving knife into a walloping slice of almond cake. He dropped crumbs purposely while he stuffed his mouth.

As he turned from the refrigerator, he vaguely remembered that cyanide tasted like bitter almonds. Just vaguely, though, so vaguely, in fact, that he did not hear the surprised jug of milk smash on the floor, did not see his empty drugstore bottle in the pantry. They were such a fun couple.

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