

Miss Winkle's Milkmen



by DESMOND STONE

BECAUSE Mrs. Winkle insisted on getting value for her money, she was the terror of the tradespeople. She paid for the best and she saw that she got it. No one ever put anything across her. If the bananas were black inside, they went straight back to the fruiterer, who could throw them away or return them to the islands as he pleased. And if there was so much as a suggestion of palm-prints on the dates, she was on the 'phone at once. As for the meat, she demanded the primest, and always, to make absolutely sure, she sailed around the counter and over past the chopping block to inspect the joints for herself.

But perhaps it was the milkman who suffered most. Back in the days when he lugged his cans to the kitchen door, Mrs. Winkle used to give him beans. One day it was too rich, another too thin, and if it wasn't dirty, it was definitely "off." The milkman copped it hot and strong every morning. He tried arriving early and he tried arriving late, but always Mrs. Winkle was there at the door with a new complaint.

"It's got that taste again," she often used to say.

"It's just the cows, ma'am," the milkman would tell her. "They're on the turnips just now."

"Then why don't you shift them?"

There was no earthly use the poor fellow trying to explain that the cows had to eat turnips or go hungry. He had to shuffle his feet and take it.

All the milkmen knew her, for Mrs. Winkle had sampled every run for miles around. She changed her man almost as often as the Frenchmen changed their government. But fate had something in store for Mrs. Winkle. It arrived with a big bold heading in the paper and an announcement that from such and such a day milkmen would deliver as far as the front gate only. Mrs. Winkle could hardly believe it. She didn't know what the world was coming to. That was democracy for you. People all so busy with equality that you couldn't get service for love nor money. Well, she for one wasn't going to put up with it. No

one would dictate to her. The billy would go at the back door as usual.

If all the neighbours had been made of the same stern stuff, women like Mrs. Winkle might have won the day. Alas, though they grumbled about it, their protests never flared into anger. Long accustomed to conforming, they surrendered abjectly to the milkmen's ultimatum. All except Mrs. Winkle, who put her billy at the door and retired to bed in high expectation.

She heard the milkman's truck turn into the street in the morning and she heard it stopping and starting. But she waited in vain at the door for the clanking cans, newspaper spread ready on the steps lest the milk should be spilt. The truck roared right past the house, and her billy was still empty.

It was a heavy blow to Mrs. Winkle. Too proud to go out and wave to the milkman to return, too independent to go begging with a cup to the house next door, she spent a milkless day with the cat, and it was hard to say which was the more miserable. Mrs. Winkle stayed in the house till dark that night and then crept out to the front gate with the billy. And there she made a compromise between necessity and principle. The flag of freedom gave a last defiant flutter as she placed the billy just a little inside the gate, so that the milkman would be obliged to unlatch it and take a step or two inside.

Mrs. Winkle received her pint regularly after that. But much of the old satisfaction was gone. Before, she had been able to scald milk and milkman both in the same day. Now the man was harder to catch, coming and going like a noise in the night. If the bacon was sizzling in the pan, she missed him altogether. And when she did hear the truck, she had to move fast to get to the gate in time. But there was still the telephone. The milkmen's wives began to hear a good deal from Mrs. Winkle. She didn't believe them, of course, when they said their husbands were out on their rounds. She had a shrewd idea they were sitting with stuffed ears in the kitchen.

"Then you give him this message," she would say. "Tell him Mrs. Winkle's milk

is sour again. And it's no kind of answer to say I ought to have a frig. You tell him I must have another pint as soon as he comes in. And if I don't get it, I'll write to the health people."

So the milkmen were really no better off. All the energy they saved by stopping short at the front gate was expended in extra trips to Mrs. Winkle. Yet they still had a card to play.

Mrs. Winkle first heard it from the grocer, who had it from a man on the council. The town was to have a brand new milk treatment station, with every mod. con, imaginable. The days of the cans and the billies were over. All milk was to be bottled and all dirt and germs excluded. Mrs. Winkle was horrified. She knew it was dangerous to mix drinks, and she thought it worse to mix milk. She could not see how good, bad and indifferent milk from a score of suppliers could come out at the other end as a single stream of uniformly good milk. But the full meaning of the changeover did not strike her until the plant was actually in operation.

Mrs. Winkle had nabbed the milkman as he was stealing back to the truck, and she was telling him what she thought of his milk.

"It's as weak as water," she was saying. "No body in it at all. I have to use twice as much as usual to make a decent cup of tea. And I'm ashamed to ask the cat to drink it."

He was very sorry, but there was really nothing he could do.

"Well, there's something I can do," Mrs. Winkle told him. "Don't leave any bottles in future. I'll try that new man who's started. I believe he's very good."

"You please yourself of course," said the milkman. "But it won't make any difference."

"And why not?"

"It's all the same milk, that's why. It comes from the same factory. If you don't like my milk, you won't like anyone else's."

He was right, of course. Mrs. Winkle had lost her oldest privilege. There was no point any more in changing her milkman. The old order was crumbling fast, and only one choice was left her. She could still choose between raw milk and pasteurised. But it was not long before even this last freedom was withdrawn. Because it was so much safer, it was announced from the treatment station, all milk in future would be pasteurised. Consumers were entitled to protection.

Mrs. Winkle was almost in tears. She never thought it would come to this. Not that she had any objection to pasteurised milk as such. She was prepared to believe what the experts said. But why could she not make her own decision? Why could she not choose for herself? Oh, it was hard. The injustice of it all. Had she not knitted long woollen sox all through the war to help the boys beat the Germans and so preserve their glorious liberties? Was this to be her reward?

A lesser woman would have fallen in and marched in step. But not Mrs. Winkle. She was not descended from the pioneers for nothing. Her mind made up, she hunted out her bank book and went down the town and drew out a quarter of her savings. It's common enough knowledge now what she did with them. Mrs. Winkle bought a cow. She grazed it in a near-by paddock and paid a boy to milk it morn and night. And every Christmas she let the milkmen have a little fresh cream. "Just so's you won't forget what it's like."



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