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JULIA THE APOSTATE

By Josephine Daskam

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"You don't think it's too young for me, girls?"

"Young for you—*par exemple!* I should say not," her niece replied, perking the quivering aigrette still more obliquely upon her aunt's head. Carolyn used *par exemple* as a good cook uses onion—a hint of it in everything. There were those who said that she interpolated it in the Litany; but Carolyn, who was born Caroline and a Baptist, was too much impressed by the liturgy of what she called The Church to insert even an uncanonized comma.

"Now don't touch it, Aunt Julia, for it's deliciously chic, and if you had your way you'd flatten it down right straight in the middle—you know you would."

Miss Trueman pursed her lips quizzically.

"I've always thought, Carrie—*lyn*," she added hastily, as her niece scowled, "that they put things askew to make 'em different—for a change, as you might say. Now, if they're *never* in the middle, it's about as tiresome, isn't it?"

Elise, whose napkin-ring bore malignant witness to her loving aunt, Eliza Judd, laughed irrepressibly: she had more sense of humor than her sister. It was she who, though she had assisted in polishing the old copper kettle subsequently utilized as a holder for the tongs and shovel, had refused to consider the yet older wash-boiler in the light of a possible coal-scuttle, greatly to the relief of her aunt, who blushed persistently at any mention of the hearth.

She patted the older woman encouragingly.

"That's right, Aunt Ju-ju, argue it out!" she advised.

Miss Trueman winced. She had never accustomed herself to those senseless monosyllables that parodied her name; nor could she understand the frame of mind that found them preferable to the comfortable "Aunt Jule" of the old days.

"Ju-ju!" Strips of unwholesome flesh-colored paste, sugar-sprinkled, dear to her childish heart but loathed by a maturer palate, rose to her mind. There had been another haunting recollection: for months she had been unable to define it perfectly, though it had always brought a thrill of disgust with its vague appeal. One day she caught it and told them.

"It was that dreadful creature Mr. Barnum exhibited," she declared, "that we didn't allow the children to go to see—Jo-jo, the Dog-faced Boy! You remember?"

Their cold horror, briefly expressed, had shown her that she had trespassed too far on their indulgence, and she spoke of it no more, but the memory rankled.

"It's so strange you don't see how cunning it is," Carolyn complained; "everybody does it now. The whole Chatworth family have those names, Aunt Ju, and it is the dearest thing to hear the old doctor call Captain Arthur 'Ga-ga.' You know that dignified sister with the lovely silvery hair? Well, they all call her 'Looty.' And nobody thinks of Hunter Chatworth's real name—he's always 'Toto.'"

"And he has three children!"

Miss Trueman sighed; the constitution of the modern family amazed her endlessly. Ga-ga, indeed!

"Do the children call him Toto, too?" she demanded, with an attempt at sarcasm, a conversational form to which she was by nature a stranger.

"Oh, I don't know about that," Carolyn answered carelessly. "I suppose not. Though plenty of children do, you know. Mrs. Ranger's little girl always calls her mother Lou."

"Mrs. Ranger—you mean the woman that smokes?"

Miss Trueman's tone brought vividly to the mind a person dangling from disgusted finger-tips a mouse or beetle.

"For heaven's sake, Aunt Jule"—in moments of intense exasperation they reverted unconsciously to the old form—"don't speak of her as if she smoked for a living!"

"I should rather not speak of her at all," said Miss Trueman severely.

They raised their eyebrows helplessly: Carolyn's irritation was so unfeigned that she omitted a justly famous shrug.

For two years they had devoted an appreciable part of their busy hours to modifying Aunt Julia's antique prejudices, developing in her the latent aesthetic sense that their Wednesday art class taught them existed in every one, cajoling her into a tolerance of certain phases of modern literature considered seriously and weekly by the Monday Afternoon Club, and incidentally utilizing her as a chaperon and housekeeper in their modest up-town apartment.

The first six months of her sojourn had been almost entirely occupied with accustoming herself to the absence of an attic and a cellar; long days of depression they learned, finally, to trace to this incredible source. Later she dealt with the problem of subsisting from eight till one on two rolls and a cup of coffee; successfully, in the ultimate issue, as surreptitious bits of fried ham and buckwheat cakes, with suspicious odors, winked at discreetly by her nieces, witnessed. It would have been unkind, as Elise suggested, to criticise Aunt Ju-ju's performances at the ungodly hour of seven in the morning, when their own correctly Continental repast, flanked by a chrysanthemum in a tall vase, not only tallied so accurately with their digestive and aesthetic necessities, but appeared, moreover, with such gratifying regularity one hour later.

Both Carolyn and her sister had inherited from their mother, Miss True-man's older sister, a real gift for teaching, and this, rather than their respective abilities in art and music, enabled them to impart very successfully the elements of these necessary branches to the young ladies of a fashionable boarding-school just outside the city.

It was politely regretted by their friends that they were unable to give themselves unreservedly to the exercise of their art without the cramping necessity for teaching; but it is probable that both the girls estimated their not too extraordinary talents very sensibly, though far from displeased by a more flattering judgment.

Miss Trueman, who possessed the characteristic veneration of the bred and born New Englander for his native or imported school-ma'am, resented persistently their somewhat patronizing attitude toward the profession second only to the ministry in her stanch respect. A little of the simple grandeur of those childhood days when "the teacher boarded with them" clung with the ineradicable force of habit to her mind, and she could not understand their restive attitude at "the fine positions as teachers Hattie's girls have got."

"I'm sure you make more money than that Miss Seymour that gets her own meals in her room—she said so herself."

"Oh, well, there are other things to be considered, Aunt Ju; and, anyway, she's a real bohemian, Polly Seymour. There's a fascination in it."

"There's no fascination in being hungry that I can see, and she admitted that, L—Elise," Miss Trueman insisted severely. "I don't understand how she could have done it—I would have died first. And she seemed to think it was a great joke to have her friends give her a dinner—I think it was terrible."

"Why, Aunt Jule, how ridiculous! We were delighted to do it—it was perfectly dear of her to let us, too. And think of the people we met there—Rawlins and Mr. Ware! You don't mind being poor if such men will come just out of interest in you, I tell you. Do you remember, Elise, how Mr. Rawlins called her 'little girl'? Mr. Ware lets her use his models whenever she likes, too," Carolyn added respectfully.

"Oh, she's bound to arrive!" Elise agreed.

Aunt Ju-ju sniffed uncontrolledly.

"I should hope she'd arrive at the point where she could buy her own dinners," she remarked. "To be beholden for your bread"...

Here were two points of view as little likely to coincide as the parallel lines of science, and at some such stage as this the discussions were wont to cease.

To-day the apartment was swept and garnished for a social function long planned by the nieces. Carnations leaned from tall glass vases, intricate little cakes jostled carefully piled sandwiches, and a huge brass samovar, borrowed for the occasion, gave dignity to the small parlor. Miss Trueman had learned by now the unwritten law that prevented the various objects in the once proudly segregated "drawing-room set" from association with each other, and made no attempt to correct their intentional isolation. The samovar she refused utterly to meddle with, assuring them that she would as soon think of running a locomotive.

As the guests began to arrive Miss Trueman found herself regarding them even more critically than usual; an argumentative spirit rose in her, and her calm contradiction of Mrs. Ranger, who discussed with great subtlety the notable advantages—even from the artistic point of view—of the approaching spring when experienced in the city, in comparison with that be-rhymed season's vaunted country beauties, startled more than one person.

"Just because they're more delicate, just because you must look harder to discover them, just because you must get as much from a pot of hyacinths on the Avenue as from a whole field of primroses in the backwoods, you know," she concluded, and the little circle nodded sagely and congratulated themselves on an unpublished paragraph.

"I don't agree with you, Mrs. Ranger," said Aunt Ju-ju flatly, to the absolute amazement of her nieces and the tolerant amusement of the assembly. "I guess you haven't lived in the country much, or you wouldn't talk so. And primroses don't grow in fields here, anyway. If you could see my hyacinths and crocuses in round beds at home, you wouldn't mention those poor little stalks in the pots."

Mrs. Ranger laughed, and directed her searching, level glance at the older woman, who combined in her comely, undisguised middle age something at once more matronly and more childish than the analytic authoress could ever find in her own mirror.

"Aha!" she cried, "then you are no friend of dear old Horace, after all, Miss Trueman! He and I, you see—"

The relation of these two urbanites was revealed no further, for a bustle in the little hall drew attention to a newcomer unknown not only to the guests but evidently to the hostesses, who rose, smiling uncertainly, as a portly, broad-shouldered man with iron-gray hair made his way through the group about the samovar.

"I'll have to introduce myself, I see," he began, not precisely with what an exigent society calls ease of manner, but with a certain practical self-possession quite as effective.

"I didn't expect the girls to remember me, but I thought perhaps you might, Julia."

Miss Trueman peered out from the shaded five-o'clock gloom so dear to Carolyn's soul.

"I don't seem—it's not—why, Cousin Lorando Bean, it's not you?"

"That's it," he said heartily, "that's just exactly it. And he's mighty glad to see some of his relations again, I can tell you. And these are Carrie and Lizzie, I suppose. Well, well, fifteen years is a long time, even to an old fellow like me, and you girls were just beginning to be young ladies when I left Connecticut. How are you all?"

If this simple greeting came like a breath of her native air to Miss True-man, it cannot be said to have had a similar effect on her nieces. Courtesy prevented a full expression of their feelings, but they affected no undue delight at the presence of their new-found relative—whom they had very sincerely forgotten, along with many other details of a somewhat inartistic youth—and turned to their other guests with a frank relief when they had established him, with a cup of tea, a sandwich, and Aunt Julia, in the near-by dining-room.

"A third or fourth cousin, I believe, who has lived a long time in the West," they explained. The company, some of whom doubtless possessed third or fourth cousins from the West, nodded comprehensively, and the interrupted function flowed smoothly on again.

Cousin Lorando Bean balanced his cup on his broad palm and gazed about appreciatively at the casts and water-colors on the dull green walls.

"Very snug little quarters, these," he volunteered, "but, do you know, Cousin Jule, I suppose it's all right for ladies, but I don't seem to breathe extra well in these little rooms, somehow! I've been in two or three of them like this, more or less, since I came to New York—people I used to know that I've been hunting up—and, by George, I began to feel as if I was getting red in the face, if you see what I mean."

"Yes, indeed, Cousin Lorando, I do," returned Miss Trueman eagerly, "I see exactly. And not having any cellar—you've no idea! Nor any attic, either. And often and often we have the gas lighted all through breakfast. Of course there are a great many conveniences," she added loyally, "and there's no doubt it saves steps. But I almost think I'd rather take 'em."

He nodded.

"What's become of the old place, Cousin Jule? I judge you've been out of it some time?"

"Two years, Cousin Lorando. The girls had been boarding up to then, and when Aunt Martha died they got up this plan for me to come down and live with them, for they couldn't afford it quite, alone, and then I could chaperon them."

Aunt Julia delivered herself of this phrase with a certain complacency. Mr. Bean looked up sharply.

"That means that nobody gets a show to abduct 'em while you're around, I take it?" he inquired.

"We-ell, not exactly," she demurred.

"But that's the idea? I thought so. Yes. How old is Lizzie now? Thirty?"

"Oh, no, Cousin Lorando; L— Elise isn't twenty-nine yet. Carolyn is about thirty."

"I don't seem to recall any one chaperoning you and Hattie when you were thirty," he suggested thoughtfully.

She laughed involuntarily.

"Oh, Hattie was married, Cousin Lorando, and the children were ten years old! And, anyway, it was different then."

"The girls were just as pretty, I guess," he insisted. "And there were plenty of buggies, if anybody had designs."

There was a pause, and the buzz of voices from the other room rose loudly.

"They've neither of them got their mother's looks," he observed; and then, with apparent irrelevance: "When will they be considered safe to go about alone?"

"I don't know exactly what you mean," she began a little coldly, but his laugh reassured her.

"Oh, yes, you do," he contradicted, "and don't you be getting cross at your Cousin Lorando Bean! You know I always loved to tease you; it made your eyes snap—and it does now."

"How can you?" She looked reproachfully at him.

"And I tell you this, Cousin Jule: neither of those girls will ever get up a color like that!"

She shook her head, but she was not displeased. He took out a fat chocolate-colored cigar and fingered it wistfully.

"I suppose I mustn't smoke?" he queried.

Her quick answer surprised herself.

"I should hope you could, if that woman can!"

"Which one?"

"That Mrs. Ranger, the one near the samovar—that big brass thing. Liz—Elise didn't introduce her to you. They don't introduce people the way they do at home, Cousin Lorando—I hope you didn't mind. They think it's awkward."

"Oh, Lord, no, I don't mind. I can spare her, anyway. She's checked up too high for me. But she can look you through pretty thoroughly, can't she?"

"She writes books," Miss Trueman returned, the finality of her tone indicating that she had explained any possible idiosyncrasy of the lady in question.

"Oh, I see. And the little red-haired one, does she write books, too?"

"No; she's an artist. She smokes too, though. Not cigars, like yours, but cigarettes. She's supposed to be a very good painter, but she doesn't make what Carrie—lyn makes. The girls have very good positions in Miss Abrams' school."

"Um, what do they get, now?"

Miss Trueman mentioned the modest sum with pride.

"And then with my money and what we get from the rent of the place—the girls and I each have a third, you know—we do very nicely."

"So you rented the place?"

"Yes, Cousin Lorando, though I hated to. But I wouldn't sell it, though they wanted me to. I just couldn't."

"I know."

He lighted his cigar and puffed at it in meditative silence for a moment, while the babble from the parlor floated in with the odor of the Ceylon tea and cigarettes.

"That's what I came about, Cousin Jule—the old place. You may think it's queer, for I never lived there but two years once, when father and your Uncle Joe farmed it on shares; but those two years just made it home to me. Of course Uncle Joe wasn't any real relation of mine, and you-all weren't my real cousins, but it was the only family I ever had, so to say, and I loved every one of you. Then we moved back into town; but you know I came in every week or so, and Aunt Martha used to have my room in the attic ready for me, just the same."

"Yes, I know; Aunt Martha never forgot you, Cousin Lorando."

"Well, it's fifteen years since I saw the old place, and a lot's happened since then, I tell you. First place, I'm a rich man, Cousin Jule."

"Oh, I don't mean one of these multi-millionaires you have about here, for I haven't even seven figures opposite my name; but short of that I did very well for myself out West there, and I earned it all fair, too—though I was pretty lucky, and that counts."

"Anyhow, never mind about that. Only I've got enough to have anything I want, and to give my friends something, too. So as soon as I got back. East I went straight down to the farm. But it was all shut up and a kind of green hedge where the fence used to be, and I judged it was sold, and I felt pretty sore about it, so I came right away."

"They only come there in June," Miss Trueman explained, "and they go back before Thanksgiving."

"Yes. Well, I didn't know that."

He waited again for a few seconds, and Miss Trueman sat in respectful silence till he should continue.

"You see, I'd been East once before, eight years ago, but I didn't see the farm then," he said finally.

"I got married while I was West."

His audience of one started slightly.

"She's dead now," he added abruptly.

"Oh, Cousin Lorando—"

"You needn't bother about the sympathy, my dear, for there's none needed. I hadn't been with her for a good while. I saw her in a concert-hall out there, and she had curly hair and a kind of taking way with her, and so I married her. I'd just made a big hit, and she wanted to come to New York, and we came. We went to a big hotel, and it was dress-suits for me and diamonds for her, and we drove in a carriage in the park in the afternoon. She liked it, but I soon got enough. I don't care much for that sort of thing. She wanted to go to the theatre and see the girls that she'd been one of, you see, from the other side of the curtain. And she saw a man there she used to know, and—well, it turned out she liked him better, that's all."

"Oh, Cousin Lorando, how terrible—for her!"

"Um, yes. She didn't think it was specially terrible, I guess, though. She just packed up and went."

"Went?"

"Yes—with him, you see. Diamonds and all. I got a divorce, of course. And she wasn't such a bad lot, after all, for he hadn't any money to speak of, compared to me. It was the man she wanted. Well, she got him."

"How awful!" Miss Trueman murmured.

"Oh, yes, I felt pretty sick for a while. But we hadn't been any too happy before she saw him, you see. It was a big mistake. She wasn't exactly the kind of woman you'd be apt to know, you see. So perhaps I got off easier than I deserved. But I never would have married while she was alive. Not but what I had a right to, you understand, but I guess I'm old-fashioned more ways than one. I read about her death a year or so ago. I don't believe she had any too good a time herself. She had an awful temper. But she certainly did have pretty hair," he concluded thoughtfully.

Miss Trueman gasped.

"So I didn't want to see New York again; I just hated the place. And this time I only came because I found out you and the girls were here, and you were about all there was left. People die so. And I wanted to find out about the old place. I wanted to buy it, if I could, when I thought it was sold."

"But, Cousin Lorando, I couldn't sell it!"

"Oh, no, I s'pose not. Still, I might buy out the girls' thirds and rent yours, couldn't I? I'd pay you as much and more than anybody else would, I guess. And you could keep your interest. And keep half of the house, for that matter, to use when you wanted—it's big enough."

"Why, yes, I don't see why I couldn't do that," she said thoughtfully. "That would be nice."

"You see, I'm willing to make any arrangement, Cousin Jule. It's about all there is that I'm fond of now, that old place. I haven't any folks of my own, and not a chick nor child, and I love every stick and stone of that farm. I love the country, and I love Connecticut country best of all, I don't care if it is rocky. You can't make farming pay in New England any more. But I don't need to make it pay; I'm willing to pay for the pleasure of it. And I want to do something for the town, too. I want 'em to be glad I came to settle there. Who's got the keys?"

"I have, right here," she answered. "The furniture is all ours, you see; they haven't brought much, only they've changed things all around. I haven't renewed the lease yet for this year."

"Well, now, look here, Jule," Mr. Bean cried eagerly, dropping the end of his cigar into a bonbon-dish on the little side-table, "why don't you run right up there with me to-night, and we'll look it all over and sort of plan it out? We can go up on the six-thirty, and get there by half-past ten, and stop at the hotel, and be there all ready to look it over to-morrow. Now, how's that?"

"Why, but, Cousin Lorando—I—there isn't time—I hadn't planned—"

"Lord, neither had I, but what's the difference? If you want a thing done, go and do it yourself. Wouldn't you like to go? It's lovely up there; the spring's coming on fast, you know. I got lots of pussy-willow, and some little fellows told me there were May-flowers somewhere. You'll see more grass in a minute there than you can hunt up here in a week. Come on, Cousin Jule!"

"I believe I will!" said Miss True-man, with conviction.

"Just pack up a bag for your aunt, Carrie, while I get a cab," said Mr. Bean from the doorway. "We're going up to the old place—I'm thinking of buying it. I expect we'll be back tomorrow."

"Your cousin appears to be a person of decision," Mrs. Ranger suggested to the still dazed Elise, as the cab rolled away.

"I don't understand Aunt Ju-ju at all," Carolyn interpolated crossly. She had not been in the habit of packing her aunt's bag. "She usually makes such a fuss about starting to go anywhere—days ahead, in fact. And now at fifteen minutes' notice! And her best gown!"

"It makes a difference, having a man to run it," said the novelist sagely.

When two days had passed and their aunt had not yet appeared, her nieces were not unnecessarily alarmed, for her attachment to her old home was great, and it required no unusual degree of imagination to picture her delighted lingering over the old things, her purposely prolonged transaction of business details. But four days of unexplained absence had its effect upon their own little ménage; and when a week's visit had been accomplished and their beseeching letters had elicited only vague postal cards explaining nothing, but suggesting their presence at the farm, they became convinced of the necessity for action on their part, and went, more or less in the presumable spirit of the mountain in search of the fractious Prophet.

Tired and cross after four hours' travel on an incredibly hot 1st of April, they walked sternly up the board walk that led to the old-style porch, to be greeted by their cousin, who sat in snowy shirtsleeves, tilted back in his chair against the house, smoking his fat, dark cigar.

"Welcome home, girls—glad to see you!" he called cheerily. "Here they are, Jule! Now don't be afraid, but come right out and see them!"

"Why, bless your heart, Lorando, I'm not afraid," a familiar voice answered; and Aunt Julia appeared before them, cool in blue checked gingham, with an enveloping white apron and familiarly floury hands.

"I'm just beating up some biscuit for tea," she explained, "but I guess you can shake hands with me, girls "; and as she extended both arms hospitably they saw upon her floured left hand an unmistakable shining gold band.

"Aunt Jule!" they gasped together. "Are you—is it—"

"That's it exactly," said Cousin Lorando Bean. "She is. And I hope you'll congratulate her, girls, though nobody knows better than I what a good housekeeper you've lost! I'll tell you the facts of the matter, and you can judge for yourself. If ever two people were made for each other, those two are your Aunt Jule and me. We love the country, and we love this farm, and what's very important, we love the same way of living."

"That's quite true, Carrie—lyn," Aunt Julia interposed, the tears in her eyes, but a new decision in her voice.

"I like my tea at night, and so does your Cousin Lorando. And I should have wanted gravy on my potato if I lived to be a hundred. And, Carrie, I *could not live* without a cellar!"

"And if you knew how nervous I got when that old dumb-waiter in the kitchen used to whistle for the things to be put on it! I used to hate it so—sometimes I'd wake up in the night and think I heard it! Once I lost my temper at it, and I answered it back: 'I haven't anything to go down, and I wouldn't give it to you if I had!'"

"Why, Aunt Jule!" they cried.

"And I tell you, Carrie, when you have cleaned house regularly, spring and fall, for forty years, ever since you were born, it makes an awful break to give it up! And I do love a good crayon portrait."

They looked at each other in silence.

"And when you have a set of furniture, it makes me nervous not to have it set together," Aunt Julia went on determinedly.

"And I will *not* have a woman smoking in my house!

"And oh, Carrie, if you knew how I suffered with that dirty darky girl!"

"But—but, Aunt Jule, why didn't you—"

"You see, Carrie and Lizzie, it was this way," said Mr. Bean soothingly.

"Your aunt and I got talking old times, and we found that we both felt about the same. And after we'd looked the old house over together a day or two, she couldn't seem to leave it, somehow, and she couldn't live in it alone, and I always wanted it.

"So I said, 'If you'll just step over to the parson's, across the street, with me, we'll fix this all right in about ten minutes. You've known me ever since I was a boy, and I've known you, and it's nobody's business but ours if we want to finish up together.' I may have said a few other things, too, but that's neither here nor there. And when she said what would the girls do, I told her that what with the full price of their interest in the farm, and her third that she could add to it—for a sort of wedding-present, you see—I didn't see but what you could well afford to take a trip to Europe and stay about as long as you liked—she said you wanted to do that more than anything; though why I don't know—Connecticut ought to be good enough for anybody!"

They sank upon the porch steps, sincerely overcome.

"I knew you'd like it when you came to know it all," said Aunt Julia placidly. "He's the kindest man—"

And to their excited eyes the very tidies on the geometrically arranged chairs, the bright rag rugs on the floor, the biscuits and preserves consecrated to their New England tea, yes, even the insistent shirt-sleeves of Cousin Lorando Bean, were lighted by a halo of content.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK JULIA THE APOSTATE ***

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