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Psi Iota Xi
Short Story
Contest Winner
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Virginia Laurence
Central Province
Cambridge City, IN

GRAND WINNER "THE GREATEST LADY"

THE GREATEST LADY

By VIRGINIA LAURENCE

[Virginia Laurence, Cambridge City, winner of first place in the Psi Iota Xi short story contest, judged by Miss Mary Louise Fitton, librarian of Hanover College, Hanover, Ind.]

Janie's teacher, the beautiful Miss Norton, talked to the children about improving themselves so they could be Somebody some day. "You're Somebody now, ain't you?" Janie's Ma demanded. Ma seemed cross and Janie couldn't understand.

Janie wavered, steadied herself, and slowly lifted her hands from the ridge-pole of the Kranz woodshed, and straightened her back. As soon as her head was erect, she imperiled her balance by opening her mouth and emitting a loud yell.

"Hey, Ma! Look, ma!"

Mrs. Thatcher stuck her head out of the kitchen window, and beheld her offspring for one dizzy moment, balanced against the summer sky.

"Janie!" she shrieked. "Come down off there this minute! You'll break your neck." Her mother's response was sufficiently electric to satisfy the thrill-loving little girl. Janie's arms waved wildly for a second, then, as if in obedience to her mother's repeated, hysterical commands, she lost her footing entirely, and went down with a great clatter over the far side.

Mrs. Thatcher rushed from the kitchen, down the uneven board path between patches of weeds, and arrived in the alley just as Janie was picking herself up out of the debris gathered there. Janie smiled, straightened up with an effort, rubbed her elbow gingerly, and declared, "I'm not hurt a bit — not a bit!"

Nevertheless, Mrs. Thatcher relieved her own anxiety by grabbing Janie and spanking her soundly. Janie howled in vain and was set down on firm ground with a good thump.

"I guess you're hurt now," said Mrs. Thatcher grimly. "You keep off the woodshed. I've told you! And look at your legs — and Grandma Kranz lying at death's door, and you making all this rumpus."

Grandma Kranz had been lying at death's door to the dramatic satisfaction of the neighborhood for several weeks, so Janie was unimpressed. But she did look down at her bare legs above shabby old sneakers. Soot off the old shingles of the Kranz woodshed was rubbed in well. Janie's hands were black with it. She wiped them on the pulled-out hem of her dress. Then she and her mother looked at each other. The whole episode had been highly satisfactory and healing to

both of them. For there had been strain and heartburning between Janie and her mother for several days. Now things were normal again. What was the good of having a sturdy, adventurous eight-year-old daughter, if she could not inject some drama into an otherwise drab existence? Their defiant faces relaxed into grins.

"I declare," said Mrs. Thatcher with pride. "You'll be the death of me yet, you young Indian. I wouldn't be surprised to see you on top of the Monument."

"I'm a good climber," Janie admitted.

"Yes, but I can't see as you're so good on getting down," her mother reminded her. "I think I'll go and see if I can help Mrs. Kranz. Doctor said Grandma couldn't live through the day."

"You be good, now, and get yourself some lunch, if I'm still over there. They'll have a sight of work with the funeral and all."

Mrs. Thatcher went through the ramshackle fence, and into the Kranzes' back door, without knocking. To have summoned Mrs. Kranz to the door to admit her would have been plain swank.

Janie, alone, investigated her injuries more thoroughly. Golly, but her elbow hurt, and Ma hadn't noticed about the hem of her dress. Oh, well, she wouldn't notice it likely. Janie looked toward Kranzes', thought of the airs Lizzie Kranz gave herself, on account of her grandmother's fatal illness.

"I'll bet if I had a grandmother she wouldn't take weeks to die," Janie thought enviously. "She'd just give a loud scream and fall with a crash. The Kranzes are all slow anyhow."

Having thus disposed of Lizzie's claim to attention, Janie decided that she was too dirty to go to the "liberry" this morning. All her gang would be there, faces unnaturally clean, sitting on little red chairs in an embarrassed circle, listening to the beautiful Miss Norton, as she read to them and told them stories. Neither Janie nor the others thought highly of the beautiful stories, but they were spell-bound by Miss Norton herself.

That was really, Janie deduced shrewdly, why Ma was so cranky. The local branch of the city public library was a poor one. But lately this beautiful woman had been reading to the children two hours each week. And Janie had talked too much about her at home. She had talked about her beautiful hands, and

shiny pink fingernails, and Ma had said, with a bitter mouth, "Fine chance I've got for pink fingernails, with scrubbing three times a week."

And Janie had talked about Miss Norton's clothes, and about her soft brown hair with the little curls on her neck, and had wished, bleakly, that she, herself, had a couple of curls. Miss Norton had talked to them about washing well before they came to the library, about keeping their houses clean, and learning "manners," and improving themselves, so they could be Somebody.

"I guess you're Somebody now, ain't you?" Ma demanded, when Janie told her all this. Ma's heart was sore with a wounding Janie could not comprehend. "I guess you're stuck on her." Ma added accusingly. "I guess you think she's better than your own folks. She's a swell, that's what she is. She makes you unsatisfied. That's all she'll do for you!"

"She says people should be discontented, until they have the best," answered Janie.

"A lot she knows about it." Ma had begun to bang the pots and pans about. She was boiling mad, now. Yet when Janie, acting instinctively, said she wouldn't go to the "liberry" any more, she didn't like Miss Norton, anyhow, Ma had turned on her fiercely.

"You go. Do you hear me? And you mind every word she says. I guess I want you to learn something, don't I?"

There was no understanding Ma some days. Janie had fled the kitchen, climbed the woodshed, and got a spanking, and here she was.

Since she was too dirty to go and sit at the feet of the beautiful Miss Norton, another idea, fallen from Ma's careless words, took root in her mind. Free to roam the city streets at will, Janie cut down the alley, went across several city blocks and came out on Broad Street which led right into the heart of the city. There she stood on the edge of the pavement and looked far, through the haze and smoke and sunlight toward the distant monument. Janie wondered, with a scientific curiosity, if she could climb the monument. Distantly, beautifully, the spire of stone rose into the center of the city, with the figure of Victory on its top.

"How far is it to the Monument?" she asked a man standing on the walk.

"Oh, two-three miles," he said.

Janie considered. The long lovely day lay before her. Without more ado she set off down the wide thoroughfare, which rapidly improved in quality as she progressed toward the center of the city.

All the while she walked and stared, thoughts of Miss Norton and of Ma went in and out of her mind like troubled shadows.

Why was Ma cross, when Miss Norton was the way everyone wanted to be, Janie wondered. Miss Norton was just like they hammered at you to be, in school, at the Mission, in church and everywhere. Miss Norton was clean. She was smart. She was rich. She was beautiful. She was proud. She had manners. Not just anybody, but Somebody.

It was high noon and Janie was aware of the warning pangs of hunger before she came to the heart of the city. Here, with one eye on the traffic officer, she crossed the busy street, went down a short parkway and came up on the beauty of the circle plaza.

Janie had never been here before and she stood on the edge of the walk staring with great eyes at the elegance before her. All around the circle beautiful buildings arose, built of the finest stone, rising delicate, poised, with thousands of glittering plate glass windows. In the center within the winding circle of traffic was the Monument itself, and Janie was overpowered by its size. First lay the broad encircling white walk, and from it shallow steps led up and to wide landings and more steps.

Not wanting to miss anything, the child turned her attention back to the outer circle and walked slowly, absorbing all she saw with a tremendous capacity. There was an office building with street front stores so restrained that only one thing, a diamond necklace or a fur wrap, was displayed in each window. Two theaters, a hotel—everything was grand and gorgeous, everything was elegant, like Miss Norton.

Janie lingered on the curb, watching, unselfconscious. A car driven by a chauffeur drew up to the curb and stopped, and a woman and two beautifully dressed little girls descended to the pavement. For an instant Janie thought it was Miss Norton, and called her name. The woman turned and looked at Janie. Janie shrank back, although the look was kindly. It was not Miss Norton at all, but someone older, different.

But in that instant, in the midst of her adventure, Janie was stripped. She grew small, aware of how dirty she was, cruelly aware of difference. She knew all at once the soot of Kranzes' woodshed was on her unwashed legs and hands. Her glory departed abruptly.

Janie held herself rigidly. A sturdy self-respect staggered up from the blow. She made a face.

"Stuck-up!" she yelled.

The woman bit her lip faintly at the impertinent figure with the blazing blue eyes and, turning without a word, she drew the surprised little girls along with her.

Janie did not linger but darted out

into the traffic amid the scream of suddenly applied brakes and, like a fleet young doe, she reached the inner curbing which encircled the monument proper.

The pavement was empty of passers-by. Her small stout legs lifted her up the west tier of steps. Janie came, so, to the base of the spire and stood staring at the figures there.

She stood rooted in astonishment. For there facing her in stone, was Ma. Janie was transfixed with amazement. She did not know what she had expected, but certainly never Ma! Yet there she was, in her long, old-fashioned plain dress, with her bare arms and work-worn coarse hands, with her neck thin where the cords showed, and her worn kind face, and her hair combed back in a little knot on her neck. Ma it was, and Janie was too amazed to look at the other figures in the group for a long enchanted minute.

She knew, from school, that this was the monument commemorating the Civil War. She knew that the city was intensely proud of this place, that it was a thing of great beauty.

She did not know what she expected to find. But, if any woman should be there on the monument, she would be like Miss Norton, of course.

Yet here was Ma facing her, tired, long thin limbs showing faintly under the droop of the long plain dress, no curls, no beads, no pretty clothes. Certainly it could be nobody else.

Slowly she took in the others. The man behind Ma, sitting on the handles of a plow, in creased work-pants and a shirt open at the throat, was not so exactly like Pa as the woman was like Ma, but still he was like him. His clothes were like Pa's, not like a successful man, like Somebody, at all. He was just a farmer, as Pa was a wiper. And the young man, the soldier bending toward the woman, must be her son — that was Mike to the life, with his soldier's cap and uniform. He had the same hard face, the same strong mouth, the same strict look Mike had. Janie circled cautiously, a little dazed at what she was beholding, and stood rooted again, for there in the middle of the group was Big Joe, a Negro. He had his head lifted as he knelt there, and he held his hands, and a broken chain dangled from each wrist. Yet he was exactly like Big Joe, Li'l Joe's father, his very forehead and his big mouth.

She turned, confused, and looked back from the top of the long flight of steps at the very busy street, at the encircling riches. Here they were, in the middle of the city, at the base of the stone tower, in the great place, the place of her pride — her own people!

Yes, she had expected these figures to be grand. She had thought that was what everyone wanted to be, what everyone admired — grandeur and riches.

And here was no grandeur at all. She sat down on the top step, a little faint with her long walk and hunger and astonishment, and thought about this, and as she thought a coal of fire burned in her breast, which glowed and became a great pride. Miss Norton vanished forever from her place on the pedestal in Janie's heart. Or rather, she was relegated to her proper place as one of the forces of the child's life. But to Janie now it could mean one thing — that her own people were the greatest of all. Ma and Pa and Mike. The workers! They were here, with the whole city built around them. They were the ones the great people were proud of, loved best of all. This was a great man that made this monument, and had he taken a business man, or an actor in a top hat and spats? Had he put Somebody here? No sir. It was a man with a plow and a woman that scrubbed and cooked. The poor people, the everyday ones, that she had been dimly wanting to grow away from.

She saw, staring again, that these figures were grouped all 'round the base of the monument. The stone tower seemed to rest upon them, leaping and springing high into the summer air, from them. They beheld it! She was unconscious of any need or desire to belittle the Somebodies. But the tremendous importance, the immortal quality of her own people was stamped on her soul.

The noon sun had inclined a little to the west. The heat grew more intense. The weaving, winding circle of traffic, the open space, the cleanliness, all seemed to hypnotize her. She had never known there was a place so clean in the city. And a sense of the beauty of order and cleanliness in itself, and not as an asset for getting on in the world, came to her. She seemed to float midway between the steps and the stone tower, and something sweet and good filled her heart, a pride of place and ancestry — that Ma should be here. Her own mother. Hers!

What were they always hollering about — getting on in the world, and speaking proper and having manners? Did any of them get stuck on a monument, made so tall and kind like Ma? Not they! There wasn't, then, anywhere any woman greater than Ma, that was poor and worked hard.

The pangs of hunger brought her to herself. She rose and shook her little body like a puppy half awake. Once more on her feet, she took thought as to what she would do next. She at once became practical. It was a long way home. She

had to have something to eat. She darted across in the traffic and presented herself to a resplendent police officer.

"I'm lost," she announced to him simply and without delay. It was hardly true. She might have found her way home without trouble. But he looked down at her with apprehension.

"My father's a wiper for the bus company," she said, "If I could get over there to him, he'd send me home."

The policeman signaled to the officer across the street, pointed briefly down to Janie and made a signal. He stooped and took her hand in his.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"My name's Janie Thatcher. I live near the South Side car barns."

"It's not far to the bus station," he said, "I'll take you over there and see if your father is there."

Proudly Janie walked, with her hand in the policeman's, threading through the crowds that moved in the streets, hoping intensely that everyone would think she had been arrested, picturing briefly her mother's agony if only she had been. It gave her delicate pleasure.

"My father was arrested once," she told him, and asked, "Do old ladies ever let out a loud scream and fall with a crash?" This was better, and they shared harrowing conjectures of sudden death, and came, so, to the bus station.

They went down a long flight of stairs to the basement where Pa washed the great buses. Janie spied her father and called to him gaily.

"Yoo-hoo!" she waved her hand.

He looked up, frightened and disconcerted to see her with a policeman. "What've you been doing?" he asked harshly. Janie knew he was scared.

"I was just looking at the Monument," she answered innocently, "and I'm hungry."

"You're always hungry," said her father.

"They are, aren't they?" agreed the policeman.

"I'll send her out with Mike," said Mr. Thatcher. "His bus leaves in half an hour or so. Thanks for steering her over."

"I enjoyed the walk. And she's been telling me all about your past." The two men looked at each other and grinned.

"She's a great one to brag," Pa admitted. He gave his hose to one of the workmen, took Janie upstairs, found two dimes in his trousers pocket, and bought her a sandwich and a bottle of pop, and turned her over to Mike.

"Hi, Young-timer!"

All adventures that ended with Mike were gorgeous adventures. Mike put her on his shiny bus, and got into the driver's seat himself. While they waited, in place, for the gradual accumulation of passengers and the moment when the bus was due to leave, Janie leaned on the back of the driver's seat, and told Mike her story.

When she finished she said in astonishment, "Mike, I was going to climb the tower. I just now remembered, and I forgot all about it. I wouldn't now anyhow. It's too purty to climb. And it's ours."

"You're right at that, Janie." Mike was always understanding.

"And here she was—my Ma! It just goes through me and through me."

Mike closed the door and set the heavy bus in motion. Janie sat down respectfully and affected a grown-up manner, patronizing a little the other passengers who weren't friends of Mike's. She felt within herself the strong claim to place and power, felt an unexpected hunger to be with mother again. Mike spoke to her softly, turning his head a little, the words coming over his shoulder.

"Never forget it, Janie," he said. "She's the greatest lady of them all!"