

SOUTHERN BELLES AND HOT BISCUIT

by Alice Whitson Norton

WANDERING hand in hand through an ancient rambling house situated in the old French quarter of New Orleans and overlooking the choppy Gulf of Mexico, the McDowell twins, Bonnie and Bonette, who prided themselves on not looking, thinking or acting alike, paused before a faded calendar, studied it for a moment and burst into laughter.

"April, 1930, my dear!" Bonnie exclaimed. "Well, it looks every day of it."

"Yes," Bonette agreed, glancing about the dusty, yet elegantly furnished, room. "Time has stood still here."

"Nothing to show the hands of the clock have moved," interrupted Bonnie, "except cobwebs and dust."

"A little elbow grease will eliminate that," Bonette comforted.

"Oh, no, my dear!" chuckled Bonnie. "A little of anything won't go far in these huge rooms. Look at that ceiling – fourteen feet if it's an inch. And those curtains-three and a half yards, if one. No." the girl went on merrily. "it will take a *lot* of elbow grease to shine things up here."

"MAYBE we'd better just sell it as it stands," Bonette, the blonde, suggested, "and forget it. I – I don't call it much of a heritage, after all, do you?"

Bonnie, the brunette, turned on her sister in surprise. "Not a heritage, Bon! What are you talking about? It's a house, a home, a fortune all bundled up in one and laid in our laps – poof!"

"YOU'RE the silliest one of this team," Bonnie retorted. "Can't you see beyond the length of your cute pug nose! Two weeks ago we were known among the McDowell tribe as the visiting orphans. A week here, a month there-never settled anywhere for any length of time. Now look at us! Sole owners of an antebellum house in beautiful New Orleans, with all sorts of opportunities awaiting us."

"That's what you're saying," Bonette answered. "What we really have is a dilapidated old house in the dilapidated French quarter of New Orleans, overlooking a choppy body of water-and a couple of hundred dollars to run us for the rest of our lives."

"Now see here, my better half-" The brunette always had a way of calling the blonde the better half when some vital matter came up, and always Bonette turned wax in her sister's hands at the expression.

"Go on," Bonette said softly. "I know you're trying to point out a number of great opportunities that you see looming up, and have me seeing them too, with your imaginary eyes, but down in my heart I don't think you are true, and what we thought was a great heritage, my dear, looks mighty like a white elephant – a *white elephant*, do you hear?"

"Even were I deaf, my dear," Bonnie laughed, "I would have heard that. But you are all wrong. The white elephant is going to turn mahogany and bronze under our effort and influence."

"What's your first move?" Bonette asked in a resigned tone.

The sound of an auto horn in front of the old house interrupted the conversation, and immediately Bonnie's eyes were sparkling.

"I have it!" she exclaimed merrily. "That's Walter Baker honking, our one friend in New Orleans. You know he said he'd be around to show us the town this morning. Well," she went on, before Bonette could get in a word, "you run along for a look at the town with Walter and let me think on the matter. By the time you get back, I'll probably have things figured out in a nutshell. Come along," Bonnie urged, as she pushed her twin gently through the wide door into the warm sunlight flooding the outside world.

With a smile on her face, Bonnie stood under the high arch above the front door until the car bearing her twin and friend disappeared around the corner. Then she turned back, and instantly the smile gave way to seriousness.

"Bon's right," she said, eyeing the paintless columns and rusty iron grills that fenced the upped balconies and windows, "The place is dilapidated."

Then suddenly she found her eyes riveted on a quaint old knocker decorating the front door. Snatching a dainty handkerchief from her pocket she began scrubbing a tiny spot vigorously.

"Bronze!" she exclaimed. "Worth its weight in gold right now."

From the knocker her eyes traveled to the fine beveled plate glass in the front door. "Another bit of wealth!" she ejaculated. The spirit that had tumbled began to rise again.

NO, "she cried, darting into the long, dismal hall. "Bon's all wrong. Our coming into this old house is just as it should be. We are the last of the Mcfrowells of New Orleans, and I'm thinking it was a very kind providence that prompted the eccentric Henry McDowell to close the house for a hundred years, and then open it to the nearest of kin.

It's fortunate," she went on excitedly, "that Bon and I happen to be twins, else one of us would be the sole owner instead of our inheriting it together."

Suddenly, all the strange stories that had come to her during the past concerning this miserly relative that had made almost a hermit of himself were of no importance whatever. She only remembered now that she was moving about the old house in which the hermit had lived alone for some twenty years after his wife died – and the son, their only child, had married an Irish lassie against his will, for which he was promptly disinherited.

It was through this marriage, Bonnie also reminded herself, and after a period of a hundred years, that the old place would be reopened again by one of the same name, though born in another era and well versed in the hardships of life.

Inside the old hall Bonnie' paused for a moment at the foot of the graceful winding stairs, and, as her keen eyes followed the smooth mahogany rail guarding the steps, she knew she had spoken the truth. At least, a house and a home bundled up in one package had been laid in the hands of herself and her twin, and the joy of possession enveloped her.

WITH gentle hands she pulled the musty velvet curtains back from the windows, carefully lifted the broad sashes. Immediately, the place was glowing with rich, yellow sunshine; and, in this light, Bonnie realized the furniture even under its covering of dust was a heritage within itself.

As one walking in a trance she moved from room to room, pulling back the heavy curtains, raising the sashes and opening the heavy blinds. It was in the attic, however, among some papers found in a small, hair-covered trunk that Bonnie discovered the true value of their heritage.

Her first thought, of course, was to share the secret of the discovery with her twin. Then suddenly, Bonnie found herself thinking of her twin seriously. How would sudden wealth affect Bonette, the blonde beauty who had resented the shortage of money her whole life. The world, Bonette often declared, owed the McDowells a living without their having to work for it.

Bonnie didn't see things in the same light as her twin. Bonnie felt there was a living, a good living possibly, for everybody on God's green earth. But, she reasoned, one with fair intellect and good health should earn his keep, giving a tenth to the Lord's cause, and spread happiness at every opportunity.

A chance to work or play was at hand. Through the discovery she had made, Bonnie realized Bonette's dream of luxury and ease could be a reality. But she must think of Bonette. Sudden wealth, she sensed, would clothe her twin in arrogance overnight, warp her heart with selfishness, and utterly destroy a fine business sense of which she knew Bonette was really capable of developing.

After a thirty minutes' consultation with herself, Bonnie took three small objects from the old trunk, then relocked it. As she went out she locked the attic door, and carefully hid the keys to both places in a nook under the stairs. This done, she started down the long, winding stairs with a strange new melody in her heart.

Some two hours later, Bonette, flushed and smiling with excitement, entered the house and called her twin.

"Right this way," she heard Bonnie answering from the rear of the house, and a moment later Bonette was gazing at a slim figure perched high on a step ladder before a massive, three-cornered cupboard.

"Get into some working clothes, Bonette," her twin called merrily. We're starting our house-cleaning campaign in the dining-room, and such dishes, my dear, 'and such silverware! It's a wonder thieves haven't ransacked this house years ago."

"Thieves," reminded Bonette, with a sudden touch of pride, "don't ransack so easily houses protected by iron grills and padlocked with heavy doors, my dear."

"And because of that very fact," laughed Bonnie, "I believe that we shall be perfectly safe behind them."

Bonnie saw the color in her sister's face vanish. Bonette was really afraid of her shadow; and living in a house unchaperoned didn't appeal very much to her.

"Don't look so frightened, dear," laughed Bonnie. I've already wired Aunt Lucy to come."

"Without asking me whether I wanted her or not?" Bonette exclaimed.

"Without asking you?" Bonnie repeated. "Didn't I hear you tell Aunt Lucy before we left that, if we found the place livable, we'd send for her? Poor, dear Aunt Lucy," Bonnie went on, "the only mother we've ever known – what's the matter with you?"

"But who said we found the place livable," Bonette asked, "and who said we were going to stay? I've been talking to Walter, and he thinks maybe his father would buy the place *in toto*, pay us cash for it, and we could clear out and forget it. Think what it would mean," Bonette went on, seeing the surprise in her sister's face. "We could have new clothes, go places, see things, be somebody. Please, Bon, let's sell it and wash our hands of the deal."

"I dare say Mr. Baker would buy the place and pay cash for it," Bonnie snapped, "but he wouldn't pay half enough for it."

"You're going to bury me in this hole! I can see it right now," Bonette murmured, "and I hate you for it."

BONNIE felt the rag drop out of her hands, and just for a moment she was tempted to share the joy vibrating in her heart with her sorely dissatisfied twin. But only for a second did she waver; she knew Bonette wasn't yet ready for the wealth that lay ahead.

"No, darling," she said softly, "I'm not going to bury you here. You're going to wake up and live as you've never done. You're going to be so busy that you're going to find the days turning into nights, and the nights turning back into days before you realize what's going on."

Heedless of the dust, Bonette sank down on a hand-carved chair and sighed.

"How and when," she asked hopelessly, "are we going to start?"

"I've already started," Bonnie answered. "And just as soon as you get into some working clothes, I'll tell you all about it."

"I won't move a step," Bonette argued, until I've heard what you have in mind for us to undertake."

"Really, Bonette," the girl on the ladder chuckled, "this old china closet with its store of gorgeous dishes is responsible for the bright idea revolving in my head at the present moment, and once the idea was there it grew in leaps and – here's how –" Slipping off the ladder as agile as a kitten, the brunette twin dropped down beside the lovely blonde, and an arm stole around her slender waist. "Don't be surprised," she whispered, "but I have it all figured out. See those two marvelous big rooms in front?"

Bonette nodded.

"See these dishes?"

The blonde nodded.

See that box over in the corner?"

Again Bonette nodded.

"That's silverware," said Bonnie, "and with these three assets, can't you guess what I have in mind?"

"I can think of nothing except turning them into money," Bonette answered, "and shaking the sand of this place from my feet."

"Then think again," Bonnie advised, "for what is really going to take place is an antebellum dining-hall in this old house, with Aunt Lucy's matronly figure lending dignity, and you and I in the loveliest of antebellum costumes playing hostess. Our waitresses," Bonnie went on, before the astonished twin could get in a word, "will also wear uniforms in keeping with the style of 1830, and – why, can't you see," she exclaimed excitedly,

"the place will prove a gold mine! The folks touring the famous old French quarter of New Orleans will swamp us for lunch -"

AND I suppose you'll be serving quail on toast and pumpkin pie as per our wealthy ancestors?"

"No," laughed Bonnie. "We're going to make our reputation on hot biscuits and corn syrup. Oh, I almost forgot," she exclaimed suddenly, "the real reason for that. I've already named the dining-hall!"

"You don't say?" Bonette answered sarcastically.

"But I do say," the brunette laughed. "It's going to be the Southern Belles and Hot Biscuit Dining-room. Get the idea?"

"If there was any wherewith to start on for setting the place in order and getting authentic costumes, the idea wouldn't be utterly distasteful to me," Bonette answered, "but –"

"The costumes are already waiting," Bonnie answered. "In fact, I've already tried one on to see that you and I happen to be the size of our great-great-grandmother, and believe me, twin o' mine, that girl had some clothes!"

"You mean you found a stock of them on hand?" Bonette questioned with interest glowing in her face.

"Stock is right," Bonnie laughed; "three trunksful, and bolt after bolt of gorgeous material ready for making up when the present supply runs out."

"Let me see them," Bonette begged eagerly. "You know, I have a keen taste for fancy clothes."

A violent peal of the doorbell echoed through the house, and Bonnie rushed to answer it.

"Look!" she cried excitedly. "A wire from Aunt Lucy. She will be here at 7:00 tonight – she's flying down."

"Flying down?" exclaimed Bonette. "What does she think we've found down here – a gold mine?"

"Don't be mad, Bonette," Bonnie answered. "I wired her money to fly on."

Bonette's lips began to quiver.

"Don't worry, now," Bonnie cautioned. "You know I'm the financial caretaker of this establishment and, honey, I just couldn't wait for the train to bring Aunt Lucy. She'll go wild with joy over this place."

With the arrival of the aunt, things began to happen fast and excitedly.

Aunt Lucy, being an exceptionally good manager, knew how to get the most out of the hired help that Bonnie called in to set the place ill order; therefore, in a very short time, the old house was shining like a new pin from cellar to attic door.

Beyond that door no one except Bonnie had ventured.

"Well," Bonette said, as she eyed the place with an air of satisfaction, "there's no doubt about it's carrying the atmosphere of the old South; and really, Sis, with the proper clothes, we could easily fancy ourselves Southern belles from the old school."

"All this reminds me," Bonnie interrupted, "you haven't seen the Southern belle costume yet. Come upstairs with me."

On eager feet, Bonette headed up the winding stairs, in her sister's footsteps, until Bonnie turned in at her own bedroom instead of proceeding to the attic as Bonette had expected.

"Oh, no, darling!" Bonnie exclaimed, as she saw the disappointed look on her twin's face. "They're not in the attic, but all ready and waiting for us."

Little squeals of delight burst from Bonette's lips when she beheld the gorgeous garments covering the bed. Dainty hoop-skirt affairs they were, with hand-hemmed ruffles and soft bows of velvet ribbon.

"Take your choice," Bonnie murmured. "The one you leave will satisfy me."

BONETTE examined the garments, and her heart swelled with pride.

"They are so lovely, Bonnie," she whispered. "I seem unable to choose between them. But, if you don't mind, I believe I'll take the one with ruffles over the shoulders."

"That's the one I wanted you to have, Bon," the brunette answered. "It's daintier than the puffed sleeves, and, too, there's a quaint old locket that goes with it. This will be most becoming to your style of beauty."

Breathless with excitement, the girls donned the beautiful old-fashioned gowns and began strutting about the room. Then, suddenly, seemingly from nowhere – to Bonette's eyes – her twin dropped down on the gorgeous sofa filling one side of their bedroom and produced a couple of bolts of beautifully printed taffeta.

"These, Bonette," she explained airily, "will furnish gowns for the hostesses of the Southern Belle and Hot Biscuit Dining-room, when the old ones wear out."

"Oh, Bonnie, Bonnie," the lovely blonde murmured, dropping down beside her, "you're a wonderful girl!" "I know we'll make a success of our dining-room venture, and – and Bonnie, I've been thinking how nice it would be if every once in a while we might invite the less fortunate people residing in our midst for a feed! You know," she went on, "a sort of *thank you, Lord, for our blessings supper.*"

"Great idea, Bonette!" the brunette exclaimed. "A great idea! And I've a feeling with that sort of generosity in our hearts we can not fail."

How successful the undertaking would prove to be, neither of the girls surmised, for even today in the old French quarters of New Orleans, the Southern Belles and Hot Biscuit Dining-room is in existence. The same girls, though some ten years older, move about the place in the quaint old garments of their maternal kinswoman, dispensing courtesy and kindness on every hand, and, strange to say, it is the lovely blonde who bears the nickname of Sweet Charity. But it was not until her twin knew for a certainty that Bonette could accept wealth in the right attitude did she let her know the source of their fortune came not from the Southern Belles and Hot Biscuit Dining-room as Bonette thought, but from a group of rare old stamps she had found on letters and documents in the hair-covered trunk in the attic.

"You did exactly right," Bonette agreed, when she learned the truth. "I couldn't have borne sudden wealth without show of selfishness. But now – now, Bonnie, now that I've learned true worth comes from the inner soul and that labor is an honor, I – I think I can be a wise spender."

"As well as a true Southern belle, in every sense of the word," Bonnie added.

Originally published in:
Childhood Days Newspaper
June 15, 1941, Page 1