

## Milk Of Human Kindness

By George J. Condon

Jeff Turner groaned as he read the latest list of food inventory figures. Disgusted, he tossed the tally sheets onto his desk and ran long fingers through his dark curly hair. Damn it all! Stocks at The Good Shepherd Food Bank had dwindled steadily over the past six months and fewer people than ever were donating groceries. Unless things improved very soon, the warehouse shelves would be bare by Thanksgiving. If that wasn't bad enough, he had to interview a criminal this morning.

Jeff liked to think of himself as a compassionate person, ready to give anyone a second chance. Still, he might have made a mistake by agreeing to put Maureen O'Neil onto his staff, even though she would work for free. Jeff hadn't met O'Neil yet, but her parole officer had told him about the woman's history with the courts.

Jeff's boyish face was solemn as he reached into the pocket of his flannel shirt and fumbled around for a cigarette. He scowled as he remembered quitting smoking a month earlier. For the first time, his shabby little office depressed him with its cheap, worn out furniture. Was he wasting his life here at The Good Shepherd? What on Earth could he do to get more food onto the shelves? Just then, Jeff heard a knock at his office door.

"Come in," he said.

A slim young woman wearing a burgundy cardigan and a black skirt walked into the room. She stopped in front of Jeff's desk and smiled at him.

"Good morning, Mister Turner," she said. "I'm Maureen O'Neil. "Did my probation officer not tell you that I was coming over this morning?"

Jeff tried to hide his surprise. He'd expected someone older and tougher looking. This young woman appeared to be no more than twenty-five. She had short dark hair, the face of an angel and startling blue eyes. Her voice carried an odd lilt that Jeff guessed was an Irish accent. Feeling awkward, he stood up and pulled a spare chair over until it was in front of his desk.

"Please sit down, Ms. O'Neil," he said.

The young woman sat down on the chair, folded her hands in her lap and then looked at Jeff expectantly. He cleared his throat.

“Mrs. Foster tells me you've just served a sentence at Brookside Women's Detention Center, Ms. O'Neil. I have to ask why you want to work here at The Good Shepherd.”

“Well, as part of the terms of my parole, I have to perform two months of community service. Helping to feed hungry people seems a good way to do that. Would you not agree?”

“I see. I have to be blunt, Ms. O'Neil ...”

“Please call me Maureen.”

“Maureen, I understand that you've been convicted three times for confidence fraud and twice for passing bad cheques. Am I going to have problems if I let you work here?”

Maureen's lower lip trembled and her blue eyes welled up with tears.

“I'm not proud of my past, Mr. Turner. Being in prison gave me a lot of time to think. I want to turn my life around and become a better person. If you can find it in your heart to give me a chance, I'll be very grateful.”

Jeff felt as though he had been caught stomping on puppies. Worse, he found himself staring at Maureen's slim but shapely legs. Embarrassed, he pulled his gaze away.

“Well, I don't want to be harsh,” he said hastily. “We can certainly use your help here. Could you start tomorrow?”

Maureen gave him a smile that would melt the heart of a stone gargoyle.

“Of course. Thank you so much, Mister Turner. I promise I won't let you down.”

During the next two weeks, Jeff had to admit he was pleased by Maureen's behavior. Every morning, she arrived on time at the food storage warehouse and did whatever chores she was assigned without complaining. Whether stacking cans, sweeping floors or just helping needy families fill up their grocery bags, Maureen was always cheerful and friendly. The people who came to the food bank adored her. When Jeff heard her joking and laughing with the other workers, he had a strange feeling. Jealousy? No, that was silly.

Maureen was working out so well that Jeff hated the bad news that he had to deliver. He put things off as long as he could, then realized one morning that he'd have to bite the bullet and tell her. When he called Maureen into his office, she walked in and gave him one of her beatific smiles.

“Good morning, Boss,” she said. “Isn't it a lovely day?”

“Please don't call me 'Boss'. My name's Jeff.”

“Jeff. Well, isn't that a beautiful name then. You're wife must love it.”

“I'm not married.”

“Really? Well, your girlfriend then.”

“No girlfriend either.”

“I find that hard to believe, Jeff. A handsome man like you. You're not...”

“Gay? Of course not. I was planning to be married until three months ago.”

“What happened?” Maureen asked.

Jeff hesitated. He never talked about his personal life with his staff, but Maureen was different somehow.

“Carol broke off our engagement,” he said. “She didn't want to marry a man who was wasting his life in a food bank when he could have a real career in finance.”

Maureen nodded solemnly.

“Of course she couldn't know how satisfying you find it. I mean doing a job that makes a real difference in people's lives.”

“Thank you, Maureen. Very few people understand that.”

Maureen looked into Jeff's eyes and then leaned closer to him.

“Has anyone ever told you how perfect your jaw is?” she asked.

“Uh, thanks. Look, Maureen, there's something I need to tell you. You won't be able to finish your probation period here at The Good Shepherd. I'm going to have to let you go.”

The temperature in the room seemed to drop by several degrees.

“Am I not doing a good enough job to please you?” Maureen asked.

“You've been wonderful, Maureen. This isn't about you. I'm going to have to let all of the staff go. We're running out of food to distribute and we'll have to shut down. I have a very small advertising budget, but I've tried appeals in the newspapers and on radio when I can afford them. People are still not giving us much. I guess they just don't care any more.”

Maureen's attitude thawed slightly.

“I've noticed how little we have on the shelves,” she said. “What do we need the most?”

“Everything, but I guess our biggest requirement right now is for powdered milk. Many of our poor families have young children and their kids really need the calcium. When Jack Higgins ran Diamond Dairies, he'd send over loads of milk powder that he couldn't sell because it was stale dated. A few months ago, Jack had a stroke and his son Frank took over the business. Instead of sending the milk powder to us, Frank sells it to a company that makes dog biscuits. It's the same with several other food processing

companies we depend on. They've all found a way to make a profit with what used to be discarded product and we're left out of the loop."

Maureen looked thoughtful for a moment, then she touched Jeff's arm and smiled.

"Sometimes, I'm really good at persuading people, Jeff. Why don't you give me a list of the names and phone numbers of managers of those companies? I'll call them up and see what I can do. It can't hurt to try."

"It's no use," Jeff said. "I've practically begged all of them for food and they've turned me down flat. Still, you're welcome to try if you like. I've got a list of their names and numbers here in my desk somewhere. Here it is. Good luck, Maureen."

After Maureen left Jeff's office, she opened her purse to take out a small address book and a cellphone. She flipped through the address book until she found the number she wanted, then tapped it into her phone.

"Hello. Is this Liam Nolan? Liam, Darling, it's Maureen O'Neil. Yes, I know it's been a long time. What? Of course I remember the old days in Belfast. Those were the times, weren't they, Darling? Liam, Sweets, I wouldn't bother you, but I'm in a bit of a spot and I need your help. Will you meet me at Dunn's Bar this evening to have a pint of Guinness and talk things over? You will? God love you, Liam. I'll see you at seven. Bye."

Two weeks later, Jeff was sitting in his office when Maureen walked in. She startled him by sitting on top of his desk and crossing her legs. He tried not to look at how her short skirt was riding up and showing off her thighs.

"How is your food collecting coming along?" Maureen asked.

Jeff was unable to suppress a grin.

"Somehow, you've worked a miracle, Maureen. Frank Higgins came in here just last week and apologized for not sending us any powdered milk. He promised to give us a shipment every month, from now on."

"That's wonderful, Jeff. I knew things would work out for you."

"One thing puzzles me. Frank was limping when he came in here. I asked him about what happened to his leg and he looked terrified. He mumbled something about not wanting any trouble. I wonder what that was about."

"I couldn't guess, Jeff."

"We got Frank's first shipment of milk powder today. The packing slip said there should be twenty cases, but we got only twelve."

"I'm sure somebody just made a mistake in the counting," Maureen said. "I wouldn't be goin' to trouble Mr. Higgins about it."

“I won't. That's not all, Maureen. Managers from several other companies have been calling to promise food shipments too. It's weird, but they all sound so nervous. What have you been saying to those people when you phone them?”

Maureen reached out and touched Jeff's arm.

“Jeff, I've always believed that most people are good at heart. Sometimes, they just lose sight of what's really important in life. I've been explaining to them how great your need is, here at the food bank. They've seen that helping you out is the right thing for them to do, that's all.”

“Well, you've certainly been working wonders,” Jeff said. “If you have any other ideas, please let me hear them.”

Maureen looked at Jeff like a cat watching a plate of fresh salmon. She reached out and stroked his face with her slim fingers.

“Jeff,” she said. “Let's have dinner at my apartment tonight. I can show you some ideas that will simply amaze you.”

The End