

Liberty and Justice for All

by C M Henley

It was well-known that Devin disliked lentils, and that was putting it mildly. His aversion to the tiny legumes was so great that he had developed the habit of hoarding food from earlier meals, to be eaten when lentils appeared on the dinner table. Dry bread, cold congealed meatballs, rubbery noodle pudding, all were preferable to the dreaded lentils.

Of course, a day finally came when Devin had not anticipated the need for leftovers, and his choices were rapidly narrowing to *'Eat Lentils or Go Hungry.'* With eight-year-old cunning and ingenuity, he began to formulate a plan....

"Vincent!" It was a hissing half-whisper, the tone reserved for Great Adventures.

The almost five-year-old looked up from his book. "What?"

"Put that away," Devin ordered. "This is important."

'Here's a Penny' was carefully bookmarked, closed, and set aside. Vincent assumed an attentive stance.

"What, Devin?"

Devin took the chair opposite Vincent's and rested his elbows on the table. "I just found out something Very Important," he imparted. "You know I don't like lentils."

"Everybody knows that."

"Well," Devin went on. "I knew there was a good reason why I don't eat them, and I just found out What It Is."

He waited for Vincent's reaction.

"What is it?" Vincent asked anxiously, when he realized his brother was waiting for him to ask.

"Lentils," said Devin, "are little creatures from the sea."

"They are?" Little Brother asked tremulously.

"Yes!" Big Brother said emphatically. "They are. And sometimes," he paused dramatically, "one of 'em can come alive in your stomach, and then you die."

"But aren't they boiled?" asked the practical one. "Father says boiling kills germs."

"Well.... usually," Devin said after a pause that was a tad too long for drama. "But.... lentils are hard to kill, y'know. Sometimes one of 'em just isn't really, completely dead, and then it kills you. You just never know."

"Are you sure?" Vincent asked skeptically.

"Sure, I'm sure! Remember Old Vernon? He died only two days after eating lentils. One of those creatures just got him, that's all."

"Father said Old Vernon died from a stroke," Vincent remembered.

"Of course he did," said Devin scornfully. "What do you think causes strokes? Lentils, that's what! They're no good. They came out of the sea, and that's where they belong!"

Vincent was beginning to worry. What if Devin was right? Rose boiled those lentils good and hard, but what if one wasn't quite dead. Father might eat it, and die! Or Mary, or.... anybody!

"There's a big pot of lentils in the kitchen that hasn't been boiled yet," Devin said offhandedly.

"What can we do?" Vincent asked. "Should we tell Father?"

"Father's over at the work site, and you know we're not allowed to go there." Devin cast about for more excuses. "And you know Rose isn't going to listen to us. She *'likes'* lentils. We're going to have to Do Something."

"I know," Vincent suggested, "let's send them back to the sea. Then they'll be home. They'll be happy!"

Devin thought, privately, that the lentils wouldn't be any happier than *'he'* would be. "Okay," he agreed. "But you'll have to carry the pot. You're stronger than me."

While Devin played lookout, Vincent sneaked into the kitchen. It was deserted now, at mid-afternoon, and the big stew pot, full of lentils, sat unattended on the counter. The small boy brought the step stool, climbed up, and carefully climbed back down carrying the pot.

Even though Vincent was very strong for a little boy, the pot was very large, and it took him a long time and many rests to lug the big pot all the way to the Mirror Pool. There, he overturned the pot, dumping all the little lentils into the water.

"Go home," he told them. "Go home, and don't poison any people to death!"

The trip back to the kitchen to return the pot was much quicker. His mission accomplished, Vincent returned to his book. He had to write a book report tomorrow.

Naturally, it didn't take long for Rose to discover the disappearance of the dinner lentils. And it wasn't much after that when she came looking for the culprit.

Vincent confessed instantly. "I set them free," he admitted. "Now they won't kill anyone."

"Saints preserve us!" the woman cried. "What are you talking about, child?"

"I set them free," he repeated, "in the Mirror Pool. Now they can swim back to the sea and go home."

Father happened along at that time, and Rose dragged Vincent by one hand, following Father into his study.

"This blessed child has gone and thrown away our dinner," she said, her rich brogue burring in distress. "Now, what are we going to do, with sixty mouths to feed and more deliveries not due until morning, it is!"

Father was taken aback. "Rose, what is this all about?" he asked briskly.

"A pot," Rose told him, "of lentils. My biggest stew pot, full," she paused, "of lentils, that bein' all we had besides bread for dinner tonight, what with the deliveries not comin' till t'morra. And this child has gone and thrown 'em away! Into the Mirror Pool, he says! Saints and angels, Father, what're we t'do? Hungry men I've got to feed, and little children, and expectin' mothers...."

"Vincent," Father adjusted his glasses to glare at him. "What did you do with the lentils?"

"I liberated them," Vincent announced, proud he'd remembered how to use that big word.

"You... liberated them?"

"Yes, in the Mirror Pool, so they can swim back to the sea. Where they came from," Vincent said innocently.

"Whatever gave you the idea that lentils came from the sea?" Father asked in great puzzlement.

"Devin said lentils are little creatures from the sea," Vincent began, realizing even as he spoke that Devin might indeed have fooled him.

"Vincent," Father said in his Explaining Voice, "lentils are legumes, like peas and beans. They grow in gardens, just like other vegetables. Please bring me volume 'L' of the encyclopedia, and we'll look it up."

Vincent felt terrible. If he had been older, he might have thought of the word '*humiliated*.' He went upstairs to the library to fetch the requested volume.

Father wasn't too hard on Vincent, but he didn't let Devin off easily.

"You are self-centered and irresponsible!" he exclaimed. "Our Helpers are having to take unnecessary risks to bring us food tonight, because you destroyed our dinner!"

"Vincent did it!" Devin retorted.

"At your urging!" Father snapped, wagging a warning finger in the boy's face. "Devin, it's time you learned a lesson about ecology and economy. Tomorrow, you will carry a twenty-pound bag of lentils from Above to the pantry, and for the next month, you will work in Mr. Hollins' garden, helping to grow food for our meals."

Devin hung his head. Vincent, bent over the encyclopedia, wished '*he*' could go to Brooklyn to work in Mr. Hollins' garden.

"And, Vincent," Father turned to him, "you will write for me, one hundred times, '*I will not follow Devin's outrageous stories*'."

Vincent nodded. He almost wished it was true that lentils were little creatures from the sea. It would be much more fun than getting pencil smudges all over his hands. At the very least, Father ought to let him try the inkwell.

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