

Pockets Full of Rocks

by Larry A. Hiller

It started when the boss yelled at him. From then on, things got kind of, well, rocky.

Malcolm Tent was still a young man when he began putting rocks in his pockets. It started one day when his boss, Mr. Gump, got angry at him for something that wasn't his fault. He couldn't yell back at his boss, because he might get fired. In fact, there wasn't anything he could do except be angry inside. "But," he thought, "I'm not going to forget this. No way."

On the way home from the bus stop that night, he thought to himself, "I've got to remember how angry I am. I don't want to forget this in the morning." Suddenly he had an idea. There was a small rock on the sidewalk in front of him. He picked it up and said softly to himself, "I'll keep this rock in my pocket to remind me of how unfair Mr. Gump was."

And that's what he did. That night he put the rock on his dresser with his keys and his comb. The next morning, when he got dressed to go to work, into his pocket went the ugly gray rock.

All that day and the next, the heavy bulge in his pocket reminded him that he should be angry at Mr. Gump. Strangely, Mr. Gump seemed to have forgotten about the whole thing. But not Malcolm Tent. Oh no. In fact, during the next two weeks, Mr. Gump made Malcolm angry several more times, and Malcolm decided he'd better get a rock for each time so he could keep better track of these things.

And so it was that Malcolm Tent's trousers began to look baggy and strange. But at least he remembered not to forgive Mr. Gump or be friendly or anything like that.

Maybe if Malcolm had only collected rocks when he got angry at old Gump, this thing might have died out and been forgotten. But there was the taxi driver who drove right by and left Malcolm standing in the rain. Into his pocket went a shiny, rain-slick pebble from the gutter. (Of course, Malcolm had no idea of the taxi driver's name, but it didn't matter.) Then there was the grocery clerk who short-changed him. And the newspaper delivery boy who threw his paper into the lawn sprinkler. And the neighbor whose dog barked late at night. And ... well, Malcolm discovered that there were all kinds of people and things in the world that can bother you.

Speaking of discoveries, Malcolm also discovered that when all of your pockets are full of rocks, a plain old belt won't hold up your pants. (He discovered that fact while his arms were full of grocery sacks.) So he made himself a sturdy pair of leather suspenders to help hold up his pants.

But soon the time came when he didn't have enough pockets in his pants, so he had to wear a jacket everywhere he went—the kind of jacket with lots of pockets. And it wasn't long before the jacket looked as funny as his trousers. And smelled just as dusty. And got even heavier because it had more pockets.

Anyone else might have given up at this point, but not Malcolm. He bought one of those big sturdy briefcases like salesmen use. After all, when you start to look for them, there are all kinds of things in life that can bother you. And when you are always tired from lugging so many rocks around, you get angry even easier.

Years went by, and Malcolm's collection of reminder rocks spilled out of his pockets and briefcase and all over his house. He had rocks on the kitchen sink, and in his closets, and all over the floors. A few times he even put a rock in his bed so he could remember to be angry during the night. Let's face it. Malcolm had become a strange, unpleasant man. And most people avoided him when they could, which made him even touchier. Rocks are not very good company. They are hard and dusty, and in the winter they are very cold.

Now, Malcolm might have gone on to become a mean old man completely buried in rocks. But one day he received a phone call from a geology professor at the university. Dr. Igneous had heard of Malcolm's large rock collection (who hadn't?), and he wanted to bring his geology class on a field trip to see it.

"Well," thought Malcolm, "at last here is someone who appreciates my rocks. Wait until they see all of these reminders of how often people have wronged me." An appointment was made for the next Saturday, and Malcolm spent the next few evenings dusting and arranging.

At last Saturday came, and at two o'clock in the afternoon the doorbell rang. There, on the porch, stood Professor Igneous and seven of his best students, all dressed in their best field-trip outdoor clothing. Several had rock hammers dangling from their belts, and one or two carried cameras. And everyone carried a notebook and pencil. Professor Igneous himself looked rather ordinary. But he had a ready smile. And his face was deeply tanned from spending years out of doors. As a matter of fact, there was something about his eyes, too. They looked deep and dark, but they had a sparkle that said he enjoyed life. And when he looked at you, it was the same look he gave mountains and rock formations—as though he were trying to peer inside. This was a scientist who liked people at least as much as he liked rocks.

As the professor and students stepped into the rock-filled living room, Malcolm expected to hear oohs and aahs. You know, like you hear at a fireworks show. Instead, there was an uncomfortable silence. The group just stood there looking around, nudging a few of the rocks with their toes. Then the students looked at their professor, waiting for him to say something. After all, this was not the collection of beautiful gems and minerals they had expected. These were ordinary hunks of limestone and sandstone and quartzite. Why, there were even chunks of broken asphalt and concrete!

Finally, Professor Igneous spoke: "Ahem," he cleared his throat. "Perhaps you would be so good as to explain your collection to us, Mr. Tent. I can honestly say we've never seen another collection quite like it." In the background, his students nodded in agreement.

"Well," Malcolm began nervously, "I, uh, well ... that is ..." It had been a long time since he had said much of anything to anyone.

Professor Igneous could see how nervous Malcolm was. The poor man kept swallowing so hard his Adam's apple was bobbing up and down. (Some of the students thought he was trying to swallow one of his rocks.)

Trying to help, the professor said, "Why not begin by telling us why you chose these rocks." He picked up an ordinary gray rock that looked like most of the others. "Why did you choose this particular piece of limestone for your collection?"

"Oh, is *that* what it is?" Well, I think that's the one I picked up when the laundry didn't have my shirts ready on time. Wait! No, I think that's for the time my favorite TV show got canceled. Or was it the time I ran inside to answer the phone, and the caller had the wrong number? Or ..." Here he paused to search his memory. There were so many rocks! And they were so much alike—gray, hard, cold, dusty. Suddenly, Malcolm realized that that was all Professor Igneous and his students could see. To everyone else these were just plain old everyday rocks. Malcolm had to explain, to make them see.

"There's more to these rocks than you might think. Every one of these rocks represents a time somebody made me mad or hurt my feelings. I picked up these rocks as reminders."

Now the professor and his students were really amazed. They all began to speak at once: "I never heard of such a thing." "How long have you been doing this?" "Can I take a picture of you with your rocks?" "Some field trip!"

Professor Igneous spoke again, and everyone became quiet. "Well, Mr. Tent," he began slowly, "I must admit you're the first person I ever met who collected rocks for that reason." He paused and looked around. "You've been very kind to invite us into your home. And we don't want to take up too much of your time. But do you suppose that while we are here we might see your other collection?"

A blank look came over Malcolm's face. "I don't have any other collection."

"Oh, I see. I just thought you might have collected something to remind you of the nice things people have done and said. But, well, never mind. Perhaps we ought to be going now. Thank you so much for allowing us to come into your home. I think my students have learned something important."

He gathered his students around him, and they moved toward the door. Then, turning to Malcolm once more the professor said, "We still have some time left this afternoon. Could you perhaps direct us to some of the other people with similar collections?"

Once more Malcolm was caught off balance. "I don't know of any other collections like mine."

"Oh. I just thought that perhaps some of the people you know would have collected something when you ... I mean ... if you ever ... uh ... annoyed them." Then, quickly, he added, "Yes, well, good-bye, and thanks again."

Without waiting, the professor and his students turned and marched off down the sidewalk.

Long after they were gone, Malcolm stood there, looking just like one of his rocks—cold and gray and very still. Within him, the professor’s words echoed. Around him, the house was silent. Too silent. He suddenly realized how pleasant the students’ friendly chatter had been. How long since he had had a friendly talk with anyone? Come to think of it, did he even have any friends anymore?

Then, before he could stop it, the thought came into his mind: “I’m becoming just like my rocks.” As Malcolm sat alone in the dark, he finally realized what unpleasant companions rocks are. And how unpleasant he ... Well, some thoughts are hard enough to think without actually saying them.

For several days, for hours at a time, Malcolm sat still as a rock, thinking rock-hard thoughts. You might have thought he had finally become petrified. But deep inside him, something was waking up and beginning to grow, like a seed in the spring soil.

If you think it’s hard to find a home for kittens or gerbils or such, you should try finding someone who wants a bunch of very ordinary, dusty, gray rocks. In fact, just try gathering them up when they are scattered all over. Malcolm tried to hire cleaning ladies. They all told him the same thing: “I don’t do windows, and I don’t pick up rocks!” A “Free Rocks” sign in his window brought no results. Finally he realized that this was something he would have to do himself.

The neighbors still talk about the time Malcolm backed a rented trailer up to his front porch, and about the tremendous cloud of dust that rose as the rocks flew out into the trailer. They also talk about how much better Malcolm looks, how his clothes fit so much better (has he lost weight?), and how he actually smiles now.

Malcolm’s neighbors also point with pride to his attractive yard, with trees and flowers and bushes planted everywhere. They don’t have any explanation for his sudden interest in gardening. But one neighbor, Mrs. Kratz, did notice that after she had taken a piece of cake to him, Malcolm went out to the flower bed and planted a single seed.