

fellow any good with his ribs smashed to splinters."

"We mustn't look too delighted," cautioned Aleck. "Old man Dick may repent when we tell him father will come to see him about Doll."

"No, he won't! He isn't that kind. He's straight as a string, if he is poor. You know pa's said more than once that he wouldn't have been so poor if he hadn't been so straight. He's a good old man, and it's a pity he and old Mrs. Dick 've got to come down to the poorhouse." Don flicked a bit of hay out of Doll's tail. "And even seventy-five dollars won't go far to keep them out very long."

"That's so," replied Aleck; "but I'm glad we've got the chance to get the horse as long as he had to sell her, though I'm sorry for them."

Mr. Dick was looking for the return of the horse, and met them at the gate. The boys said nothing, according to Aleck's suggestion. But the old man betrayed his anxiety.

"Did you speak to your pa about Doll?"

"Oh, yes, Mr. Dick. Father'll be across to see you."

"I wouldn't be in any hurry, only it's all I can depend on for winter," said the old man. "I'd like to get in coal before the price rises, and there's Doctor Smith's bill, - he don't like to wait long, and Mrs. Dick's apt to have to have him any time with her rheumatism, - and some flannels for her, and then the living."

"Father'll let you know before the time's up," answered Aleck.

"Poor old man has got the price whittled down pretty close," observed Don, as he swung the hitching-strap against the gate-post in turning into the street. It was Don's habit to hit things when he was thinking hard.

"He'd cut it still more, I suppose," Aleck rather curtly replied, "but he needs an overcoat."

Nothing more was said. They hurried in to the dinner-table, where the family were already gathered. Eben Dexter was reviewing the horse's fine points and the squire was in a very jubilant mood. Mrs. Dexter, who had smiled indulgently when Don and Aleck had announced the news to her, now sat silently listening.

After dinner she followed the squire into the hall. "Are you going to buy the horse?" she asked, timidly, as she helped him into his ulster.

"I think so."

"But can you afford it?" she ventured, with still more diffidence, for Mrs. Dexter did not often inquire into any of her husband's business.

"Why, you heard Eben," Squire Dexter replied, with a look of surprise. "I can make a good sum. He'll guarantee me a buyer."

"But I thought perhaps you couldn't afford it," she repeated, with gentle in-

sistence, brushing off a bit of mud from the garment and avoiding his eyes.

"H-m," said the squire. He pulled on his gloves and joined his brother.

The boys standing in the door, looked puzzled. They followed their father and uncles down the road to Mr. Dick's, while Uncle Eben kept up a one-sided conversation, not seeming to notice that the others were unusually quiet. They found the old man in the stable.

"Stays about Doll all the time now," observed Aleck, as he and Don stopped at the door while their father went in. Eben Dexter walked up and down outside, smoking his cigar.

The squire chatted a few moments on various topics, noting involuntarily as he did so how rapidly the old man was aging. He felt impelled to say, kindly: "We're all getting on in years, Mr. Dick."

"Yes, sir; yes, sir," said the old man, with assumed cheerfulness and an attempt at a smile. "It's all I am getting on in, squire." Then, quickly, as if fearing his visitor was avoiding the important subject, "The boys told you I wanted to sell Doll?"

"Yes, they said so." The squire's tone was perfectly non-committal.

"I do hope you'll take her, squire." Mr. Dick stopped before the manger with a scant forkful of hay. "The boys want her, and I do need the moucey powerfully just now, squire."

The squire saw the withered hands tremble, and he felt that it was not from the weight they were holding.

"It'd go hard to go to the poorhouse this winter," sighed the old man. "Perhaps my wife and I won't be here to worry about another winter. Don't say you can't afford it!"

"H-m."

The squire wrinkled his brows, turned on his heel and walked to the door. The boys stepped back and watched him. He looked toward the old house beyond. Mrs. Dick, scantily clothed, was emptying a wash-tub of water. She looked up, saw him and bowed.

The squire raised his hat gravely. The gray-haired woman reminded him of his own mother, dead but a few years. His mother had had every comfort, he thought, gladly. It was a shame for old Mrs. Dick to be so poorly provided for as she was. How those two old people would fare and feel in the poorhouse! Then his mind ran to the horse. Could he afford the bargain before him? He understood well what his wife had meant.

"Pshaw!" He uttered the impatient exclamation aloud. "The bargain was Dick's own making," thought the squire. "I'm not bound to tell the old man he is letting his horse go far below its value. Or am I?" The squire grew angry with himself that he should allow such a query to confront him.