

ward, put her hand under his chin, tilted his head, and gazed.
"Pinch," she said, "I'm going to call you that. Why, you're a real boy, after all!"
Then she went across the foot-bridge into the long meadow.

II.

Tewksbury Wardell received the news with stoicism, pulling his ear, stroking his nose, or patting a belligerent chin, according to points calling for unusual attention, for reflection, or for a stirring of the rather volcanic temper which lay beneath his calm exterior. He was not a man to be meek under the goad. On the contrary, violent measures appealed to him, he being high-shouldered and powerful of limb. As Salome had said, he had enemies. This he knew, and was not displeased, considering a few foes necessary to an independent spirit.

"Don't surprise me none, 'ceptin' about the kid," he commented, when his wife had poured forth her tale. "Same trick as was played on John Sparks over to Bung Holler two year ago. Fired his barn, an' when the family run to put it out, stole his house poor an' sot fire to that, too. Never ketched 'em. Wonder could it be the same gang?"

"Will you get a policeman from Coppersville so as to nab 'em?" asked his spouse, who had much faith in the law, and little in the shotgun. "No, marm, I won't. I'll do the nabbin'." Policeman! Shucks! Any chap I could get from there would want a lantern an' a dinner-bell to let 'em know he was comin'. You run home now, an' see that yer pious young friend ain't swiped the settee. Hows'ever, I'm obliged to him for lettin' us know. A hard one, ye say?"

"Fraid he is, but he's softened up some. I kinder like him, Tewk." "Watch the cuss," warned the farmer, turning to his work. "I'll see him at supper-time."

Salome shook some grass-seed from her heel-trodden shoe, and went back.

"Tewk'll hardly trust such a dirty scamp," she thought, "an' somehow I want 'em friendly. Mebbe I can fix him up a mite."

The informant was sitting on the bench in a collapse of slumber as she tiptoed up the tiny path leading from the bridge. Drowsy songs of brooks and insect, chiming away the hot hours of the summer afternoon, had combined with a full stomach to drift the wayfarer into unconsciousness so deep that Mrs. Wardwell's sharp "Hello!" failed to elicit any response.

His legs stretched aimlessly, his hand clasped, with the battered hat fallen to the ground, and his head resting against the upper rail, he seemed very helpless and small to the woman, just returned from contemplation of her six-foot protector.

"Poor little feller!" she whispered. "I'll let him sleep. My, but he's a sight for dirt! I've a mind—yes, sir—I don't believe he'll wake under a mild scrubbin'." "I'll try it!"

Hunching her thin shoulders with a nervous giggle, the severe gray head bobbed into the kitchen. It was a tin basin of warm water she brought out, with a tiny sponge and a soft towel.

"How mad he'd be!" was her inward smirk as she began a cautious series of gentle dabs. "Bein' washed like a baby! Dear me, it carries me back to Henry!"

The boy never stirred. Over and over the silent visage the long fingers stole to eliminate every removable speck. Salome's dark eyes were glistening with a strange excitement. As she afterwards expressed it, "his face come out."

Hardly breathing, she moved back and surveyed her handiwork with immense approval.

"He's nice lookin'," came the repressed whisper. "He's real nice lookin'! I'm goin' to trim his hair. If he tries to wake up, I'll—I'll reform him!"

Her face was strangely eager when she reappeared with her comb

and shears. In her brain thoughts leaped and followed one another like waves striving for a distant shore. Back, back to the long-ago days of nestling baby heads which would not keep still, of soft, pink skins growing pinker under loving rubbings. On the brown, curly mat her finger tips pressed tenderly.

"It's soft!" she almost screamed. "It's soft, like Henry's! He mustn't wake. Oh, he mustn't!"

He didn't. Unmindful of yet unwashed dishes, of undone household duties, Salome clipped and clipped, and the wavy bits fell upon the towel. At last she paused, gathered up her implements, moved from behind the bench, and looked wonderingly upon the subject of her manipulations. A mist was in her black eyes, a quiver on the thin lips.

"That done me good," she murmured. "I wouldn't know him."

A few minutes later she was in the spare room upstairs, to unlock a great cedar chest. Henry had grown up and gone, but Salome had clung to those old clothes.

"This ought to fit, and this, and this!" she cried. "I'll do the whole job. I'll make him over!"

III.

"Pinch!" said a joyful voice.

"Pinch, wake up!"

The aroused one blinked.

"What t'ell!" he ejaculated, starting.

"Ho, only you! Thought I was abed."

"Now you go right up-stairs," said Salome eagerly.

"I'll show yer, Pinch. I've laid out some clothes for ye—some my son had when he was your age—and you dress and look in the glass to see you're all right to meet Mr. Wardwell. He's awful particular about strangers, an' I'm sot on his likin' ye. This way, my boy!"

Her tone was so motherly, so unlike her former voice, that the lad stared.

"What's struck ye?" he inquired.

"It's the same lady, ain't it? Togs? New togs? Am I dreamin'? What's got inter ye ter be like this all ter wunst?"

"Nothin'. Only a notion," returned his hostess hastily.

"Come, I can't wait to see ye fixed up!"

Wardwell put in an earlier appearance than usual. "Let's have some grub, and then I'll talk to yer visitor," he commanded.

"What's he? Ain't you burnt yer cheeks over the stove, Salome? Or air ye skeered yet? No need on't."

"He's comin'," exclaimed his better half, turning to the inner door.

See, Tewk! He's better lookin' than I made out."

Surely, the lad standing on the threshold was not what Mr. Wardwell had expected to see. This was a clean-looking, well-dressed youth, with an expression of countenance bordering on the imbecile.

His features were working strangely. Disregarding the astonished farmer, he walked over to Salome and put out his hand.

"I'll—be—" he stammered, and gave vent to a most unmanly sniff.

"Be you the boy?" blurted Tewksbury.

"Naw!" burst out Pinch, recognizing him with a glare. "I ain't!"

"He was," said Salome beaming.

"I fixed him up a trifle, Tewk. Set down, Pinch, an' tell him just what you told me. We're goin' to have supper d'reckly."

"You never was in no saloon," said the man. "Have you be'n a lyin' ter my wife?"

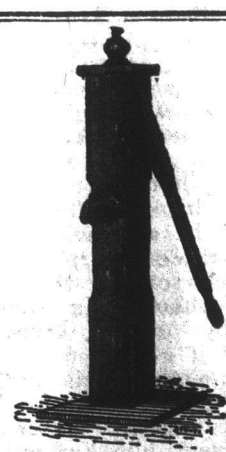
Pinch recovered himself.

"Grateful old guy you be!" he commenced, and the farmer laughed.

"I guess you was all she made out," he chuckled. "Go ahead, son," and as the boy talked he ate with a darkening scowl.

IV.

Faintly the light from the westering moon shed a soft lustre on the countryside, silvering the shingles on an old red barn, and dancing on the brook behind the Wardwell farmhouse. Still, calm, and beautiful, no sound betokened the stealthy ap-



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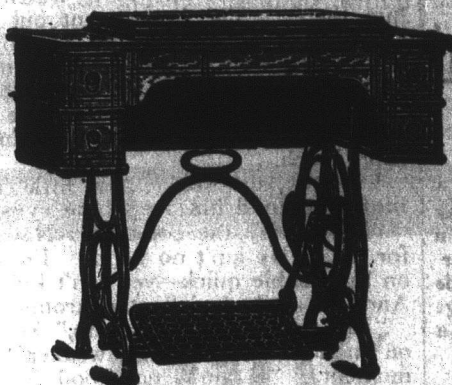
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