

THAT BABY

Written for
The Planet by E. D. ROSS.

Stanley Satellite,
Care Planet,
Chatham, Ont.

Esteemed Sir,—This will introduce to you Master H. C. F. W. Stone, a very young stranger about to visit your town. Any kindnesses you may show him will be regarded as a great favor; if you have no room for him in your establishment kindly pilot him to the Poor House, or the Children's Aid. He has had whooping cough and measles, and I'll send you his certificate of vaccination next week when I send him a clean collar. He has been baptized and if Rev. J. J. Ross wants to bring him into his discussion please don't allow it.

E. D. A.

Ann Amelia's fat face was as pink and moist as a brisk walk on a hot summer morning could make it. She had hurried home from the butcher's, and she tossed her roast of lamb on the kitchen table. She began tugging excitedly at her bonnet strings.

"I must tell somebody!" she said. But she was all alone.

"I never was so surprised in my life!"

By this time she had taken off her white starched collar, limp with perspiration.

"I declare I'm going to tell Susan Vance!"

She could see Susan hanging out her Monday wash. There was only a potato-patch separating their two homes, but the women had not spoken since their quarrel two years before.

To-day Ann Amelia's tongue itched for conversation. She looked across at diligent Susan with longing eyes.

"She's their cousin, too, so she ought to be told. Our quarrel was all Susan's own fault, but I can forgive and forget."

She went. She trudged ponderously with elephantine footsteps across the potato-patch. The once well-worn path was lost in weeds. But she made direct for the apple-tree by Susan's fence, where the two had chatted through many a shady hour in happier days. Susan wore a deep sun-bonnet, and so did not see Ann Amelia who stood hesitating, with crimson face while she eyed the unsuspecting Susan.

"Say, Miss Vance."

Susan whirled, and nearly swallowed the clothes-pin she held between her thin lips. She pushed her sun-bonnet back from her starting eyes, and Ann Amelia blurted out desperately.

"Say, Miss Vance, have you heard about Lindy Bella?"

Poor Susan's thin, swarthy face turned pale as she answered "No. What—what's the matter?"

"I'll tell you. I was down to the butcher's and my man told me Lindy Bella has a baby."

"You don't say!"

"I do say. Never was so surprised in my life. I used to see her and Joe quite often when they were first married, three years ago, but since they began going to the church on the back road I hardly see them at all."

"And who told you man?"

"Your own Uncle Hiram. He drove past there this morning about five o'clock, and Joe stepped out to the fence and asked him if he was going to town. Your Uncle Hiram said he was, and then Joe gave your Uncle Hiram some money and told him to fetch out a cradle, mind you—a cradle! That's the first thing he said. Your Uncle Hiram was awful surprised. Then Joe told him all about the baby. It's a boy. It weighs eight pounds and a half. It's five days old."

"You—don't—say!"

"I do say. Never was so amazed in my life."

"Wonder what they'll call it?"

"Oh, they've named it. Joe told your uncle. They call him Charles Farr Westfield Stone, eh?"

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Let's see. Charles Farr, that's Lindy Bella's uncle. Westfield, that's Gran'maw Stone's maiden name. I'm glad they're all our family names. Wonder who the baby looks like.

"Just the living picture of Joe, your Uncle Hiram says."

"Did Uncle Hiram see the baby?"

"Yes, he—well now, I'm not sure, but I think he did. My man didn't ask many questions—he says your Uncle Hiram's so deaf it's torture to talk to him."

"Yes, he's awful. But I'm anxious to see that baby."

"So 'm I. Well, I must run home and put my roast in the oven."

And they parted, promising to meet again.

Ten minutes later Gran'maw Stone heard her gate slam, and she looked up anxiously from the bottle of cherries she was canning. She stood by the stove where her great, granite kettle was filled with bubbling fruit.

"Forevermore! Here comes Susan Vance who hasn't spoke to me for a year. Her feelings hurt when she heard I said she was a hypocrite."

Well, I never said it, though 'twas no lie if I had. I did say she was a "whitened sepulchre," and I told her so. Says she "that means the same as hypocrite," says I "if the shoe fits, put it on." What on earth does she want now?

Susan was at the open door. "Good morning, Gran'maw, how lovely your cherries smell."

"Yes. Walk in, Susan, and take a chair. Folks all well?"

"All well, thanks, but I can't sit—I dropped my washing to run over and tell you about Joe's baby."

"His—what?"

"His baby. Five days old."

"Forevermore!" And Gran'maw sat down by her guest, leaving the cherries to their peril. "Why, Susan, can it be possible?"

"Not only possible but actually so. Joe himself told Uncle Hiram. He told Ann Amelia's husband and she told me. So, you see, we've got it straight."

"Forevermore!"

"Yes, Uncle Hiram passed their place this morning about five o'clock, Ann Amelia says, and Joe ran out and asked him was he going to town. Uncle Hiram said he was, then Joe gave Uncle Hiram some money and told him to buy him a cradle. Uncle Hiram saw the baby. It's just a lovely boy, weighs eight pounds and a half, and just the very picture of Joe."

"Name it Joe, I suppose?"

"Yes, he's given it a string of our family names. Charles Farr, after Uncle, and Westfield, which you'll like, your own maiden name."

"Charles Farr Westfield Stone. Yes, the name's first-rate. Still, I think—"

"Yes, I think so too. They might have considered your feelings as great grandmother and sent you word before now. Me, I came and told you as soon as I heard," said Susan dutifully.

"That's right, Susan. I hope you'll often run in again."

"I will. Is Gladys Blair here yet?"

"Yes, and she's a lovely young one, too. Great company."

"Yes, well, I must go home and finish my wash. And she left. Florrie Fish was sewing as fast as fingers could fly, for she had promised to finish a blue cashmere dress that day. She was the dressmaker, and in her shop Lindy Bella had sewed until she married Joe. In her meagre, old-maidish way, Florrie was devoted to her late apprentice, and she re-threaded her needle she glanced at the clock to see if it was time to put her two or three potatoes to roast. Near the clock hung a looking-glass, and Florrie saw the fleeting reflection of a woman hurrying out the walk.

"There's old Gran'maw Stone! Come to grumble and snarl. I suppose. Said she'd never speak to me again, but here she comes, bodily, her old tongue all whetted for the occasion. Sent me her old black silk that she wouldn't chew, and expected me to make it look respectable. When I got it cobbled into shape as well as any mortal could, she crawled into it. Oh my day! I'll never forget it—she looked down at the dress and then at me. Then she took a long, long look in the glass, and finally she says, kind of sad and far-away like, 'Well, well, Florrie, I may be old and very poor, but, thank to heaven, I'm not a cripple.' Then, behold, she tore it off, and lifted the stove-lid and thrust the whole concern in the fire. Says I 'Miss Stone, I can't make a silk purse out of an old sow's ear.' Says she, 'Florrie Fish, I'll never pay you.' Says I 'Don't, then,' and came home. Here she is. Maybe her conscience pricks her to pay me."

"Morning, Florrie; awful hot day. See you're busy."

"Yes, always busy. No rest for the wicked, you know. Also, Satan will find mischief still for idle hands to do."

"Forevermore, how you quote Scripture. Heard from Lindy Bella lately?"

"Yes, she writes every few weeks if I don't see her. I've not seen her since Easter, but last week she sent me two pounds of butter and a basket of plums, just for a present. She's so good-hearted."

"Pity her baby wasn't a girl so she could of named it for you," observed Gran'maw with jealous sarcasm.

"What. What did you say?"

"Oh, are you hard of hearing, Florrie? But then, I'm not surprised. You've lived a lone, neglected life, Florrie, and you're no longer young, so, and I often tell folks, it's no wonder you're so loose in your faculties."

Florrie's homely face flushed with honest resentment, she held her tongue. Gran'maw talked on.

"I suppose with Lindy Bella writing to you every few days you weren't so surprised as the rest of us?"

This was really Florrie's first intimation, but she sized the chance to tease the old lady by a pretended familiarity with the topic. "Lindy Bella has a baby, has she?" asked the dressmaker in an indulgent drawl which suggested I-know-all-about-it-but-I-like-to-hear-you—tongue-rattle. This was so provoking to Gran'maw that after a few more efforts to draw Florrie out, she said spitefully "Oh yes; some gossiping dress-



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makers always know lots besides their prayers. Good-day, Florrie!" and she left with a bad taste in her mouth.

Poor Florrie! She was too busy to call on a neighbor, but she resolved to dispense with dinner so she might see instead, then early in the afternoon she could hurry down and see that baby herself.

And the news spread. By noon there were not three women in town who had not heard of that baby.

Early in the afternoon of the same hot day, two old women and a little girl were seen walking down to Joe Stone's farm five miles away. The heat was fiercely oppressive, and the trio rested in the shade of every way-side tree.

The little girl was Gladys Blair, and she held fast to the hand of her grandmother in spite of the heat. The other woman was old Mrs. Maroon, Gran'maw's dearest crony. She is very old; her hands are gnarled with rheumatism, and her soft, mild face has huge wrinkles of little wrinkles before her eyes, and half the time resting above her forehead. Even in summer she carries a Paisley shawl.

At last they rested under a tree beside Joe's fence. Old Mrs. Maroon dared not sit on the ground for fear of rheumatism—and snakes, so they leaned against the rail fence. They could see Joe at work across the field, slowly piling up rotting stumps to be hauled away by his team.

His grandmother says "What ambitious folks do have for their children! Just look at Joe now. See what him he puts into every lick as he thinks of that baby!"

"He does, indeed. He toils in perfect frenzy to accumulate wealth for his offspring. Well, well, human nature, I suppose."

They moved slowly on. They saw Joe's house half-drawn among the cool green maples at the end of the lane. It was an old log house, and a huge trumpet-vine climbed across the front with hummingbirds stealing honey from its scarlet blossoms. And that was the house where Lindy Bella had been born, and where there is a baby always takes on a look of its own—seems cheery and inviting."

"It does so," assented Old Mrs. Maroon.

"Now can you just feel that baby's presence when you look at the house?"

"I can so. It never had such a welcoming aspect before. And that old Mrs. Maroon, and they prattled on till they reached the kitchen door. They pecked in with their heads twisted sparrow-wise.

"Lindy Bella Stone! What are you doing?"

Blackening the stove! Forevermore! Sure enough, Lindy Bella, with her strong right hand in one of Joe's old mittens, was polishing her stove vigorously. When she heard Gran'maw's voice she rose to greet her. She was a plump, pretty girl dressed in a fancy green muslin, once her best. The skirt was very short. Her round pleasant face was crowned with a mop of flaxen hair. She smiled merrily at her visitors.

"Why yes, Gran'maw, I am. Anything wicked about that? Don't you ever black yours?"

"Of course I do. But you are downright foolish."

"Yes, that's what everybody said when I married your grandson," laughed Lindy Bella. "Lay off your hats and I'll put them away."

Evidently she intended to take no advice from her elders, so the old ladies sat down and sulkily began knitting. She sat down, too, and inquired after her old-time friends in town.

Voices were heard outside. Ann Amelia was coming, with Susan Vance behind her. They had come from the back lane while Gran'maw and company canned down the front. Ann Amelia strode in and gave Lindy Bella a resounding kiss. Susan did the same, only with less ostentation. Both spoke in whispers.

"Here, Lindy Bella, is some saffron and arrowroot I've brought you. It's good," murmured Susan.

"They tell me," said Ann Amelia in the same breath, "that it looks like Joe."

Lindy Bella beamed with pride. "So it does, Ann Amelia, just the very picture of him." She laid hold of their hats and carried them off somewhere. They believed she would bring the baby back to the kitchen with her.

A passing load of hay stopped at Joe's lane. A dusty woman slipped off and rushed to the house. It was Florrie Fish. She entered grandly, majestically, and asked no questions. The assemblage most politely, and everybody was impressed that she knew all particulars. She hid her ignorance by getting to work at some button-holes in the blue cashmere.

Ann Amelia and Susan, Old Mrs. Maroon and Gran'maw, there they sat; they longed to ask questions, but it would not do to expose their ignorance before Florrie; and they would leave her well as they could. No matter; if she knew everything, so did they—or anyhow they would make her believe they did. They would fool her, these four, by scheme agreed upon, not by spoken word but by private system of telepathy antedating Maconi.

Anyhow, it was mean of Lindy Bella not to show them the baby at once. Ann Amelia, too, she would reserve; it wasn't like her to be so reserved; then, let her; they wouldn't gratify her by asking another word about the young one till she let them see it. She was probably asleep and she would show it to them when it woke. So they thought about it and talked about everything else until five o'clock, when Miss Holland came. She boarded with Lindy Bella, and she taught school. She wore a neutral appearance with that good, strong, plain face that the world reverences because it reverences itself; it is the face that missionaries carry with them into heathen lands, and she was a very good woman. These four, who were twelve veteran school-ma'ams were gathered together.

They soon left the kitchen, for Lindy Bella led them to the parlor, where she wished them to get into the blue cashmere. The log house was not small, and a hallway ran straight from front door to back. On one side an arched door was cut in the parlor. On the other side of the hall were two doors, one for a bedroom, one for upstairs. Back of the log house a kitchen of lumber and comfortableness with its rag carpet, home-made rugs and rocking-chairs. A pretty lamp and a photograph album graced the small centre table; several pictures hung on the wall; one was a portrait, very new, and to it Linda Bella pointed with pride.

"There," said she, "is Joe's new picture that was brought home yesterday; but you've heard about it already, for, as Ann Amelia was saying, it's just exactly like him."

They departed, leaving them to be entertained by Miss Holland, who showed them the photograph album, likewise some Battenburg lace she and Lindy Bella were making, and by a dainty device she strove to please them—and failed. Every visitor was disappointed. "Perhaps," whispered Old Mrs. Maroon to Gran'maw, "perhaps the child is blinder crippled, or something unbecoming, that Lindy Bella is ashamed to have us see."

"Like enough!" replied Gran'maw enthusiastically. "Why, I knew a family of Petersen's who hid their girl for years because she had a pig's nose in place of her nose!" This whisper was passed on to Ann Amelia and Susan. It cheered them but they wouldn't repeat it to Florrie Fish; she knew too much already. She sat smiling as persistently as if a photograph were begging her to look pleasant, please.

A sigh of relief went up when supper was ready. They filed out primly and sat around the table, hating the clatter of dishes would wake the mother and make him howl till his mother would be forced to acknowledge him.

Joe Stone, father of the alleged infant, came in to eat his supper. He was young, and a good-looking fellow, though his sad, sanctified countenance looked better fitted for presiding over either pulpit or hearth. He was always so; even in boyhood he had been sad and silent. But on this day due to his sad, sanctified countenance he wore a faint smile of his concealed pride. It was very faint indeed—but the women noticed it.

Soberly, the supper was a failure. Joe had never uttered ten consecutive words in his life, so nobody expected him to become entertaining now. Lindy Bella and Miss Holland introduced several good topics for talkable discourse, but each proposed conversation died young in the shell. These guests came to talk at all women's promptings. They came to

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see, and were visibly annoyed at their failure, though both hostesses strove to create an atmosphere of cheery hospitality.

The tiresome supper was almost ended. They heard the gate slam, and heavy boots came clumping up the path. Uncle Hiram marched in, and proudly set that baby's cradle, fit for a little king, beside Joe's chair.

"Here, Joe, I've brought the cradle. It took all the money you give me, and five dollars more—but I don't begrudge that, so don't mention it. And here's another little present. I've brought, too, and Uncle Hiram fumbled open a parcel, exhibiting three sticks of peppermint candy and a little pair of copper-toed boots. He set them down beside Joe's plate with much gusto. Then he glanced around the

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FOR

Sap Buckets,

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