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The Making Over of Pinch.

By Elliott Walker.

I.

"If you'll move them ontidy legs of yours out of this dooryard an' through the gate, there's a sign just down the road that will point ye straight for Coppersville an' a police station. It's none too low down a hotel for such boarders as you be, I'm thinkin'. I've fed ye, an' let ye snooze on the bench, an' I hope the Lord ain't disgusted with me for allowin' my feelin's to make me a fool! Go on now, you ongrateful little rascal. Askin' to stay to supper and spend the night? I ain't cookin' meals an' makin' beds for your sort. Git along!"

The ragged object, lounging on the green settee by the back door, grinned stolidly and did not move, although Mrs. Wardwell's high voice was charged with both wrath and menace.

"Ah, now," he said, ingratiatingly. "Ah, now, kind lady!"

"I'm through with the kindness act," snapped the farmer's wife, with a sudden gruff lowering of tone. "There's a bulldog in the barn, an' my husband right over in the meadow. One toot on the horn will fetch him runnin', an' you'll be swep' off that seat like a dandelion puff an' rode out on the end of the biggest an' hardest boot in Lull County. Shall I blow for him?"

"His name's Tewksbury Wardell, ain't it?" inquired the disreputable lingerer, with no show of trepidation. "Yes?" "Well, toot yer whistle. I want see him."

"You—want—see—him!" The woman's black eyes gleamed under her lifted brows. "Well, you shall! I'm wore out with ye, but I ain't the only one that'll be worn out!" Turning, she hesitated. "One more chance I'll give ye, bein' as you're only a boy. Now, then! Start!"

Something in the hard face—a gleam of amusement, an indescribable expression of confidence—made her pause, curious and uncertain.

"I've news for that man," said the boy easily. "I'm bettin' it means more grub an' a lodgin'. Thought I'd wait till he come home to eat, as I'm willing to spend the afternoon here; but seein' as you're gettin' excited, I s'pose I'll have to disturb him."

"I guess yer news won't keep ye long." Her voice changed, though, and she came nearer. "Say, air ye lyin' to me? Tewk's got enemies. Tain't possible you've heard anything?"

The rough-looking lad settled back comfortably.

"If ye warn't such a jumpin', excitable critter, I might let on to ye," he said, teasingly. "Enemies! Lord! I guess you'll be glad enough to have me in yer shanty to-night. Goin' ter have me kicked into the road, eh? Goin' ter set the dogs on me—a poor, well-meanin' feller, tryin' to do ye a good turn, an' keepin' my mouth shut so's not to scare a lady!"

"Well, how did I know?" Mrs. Wardell stood anxiously before him. "Such an awful-lookin' boy I never see, an' so sassy! Come, let's have it. I ain't scary, only high-strung. Who be ye? Where do ye come from? What's yer name? H-yah! Don't set no closer," as her companion edged up to the end of the bench where her angular form was now poised in expectancy.

"Hold on!" He had a thick, harsh, unboyish voice, and he leaned toward her earnestly. "I'm takin' risks on this thing. Can ye pass me yer word to see me out of trouble if I open up the whole show-case? I'm past bein' shamed. Just as lief tell as not. Better to, I guess, looks to me as if you folks might have to cover me up, after to-night, till I can slide out. I'm known to know."

"Know what?" Mrs. Wardell felt a vague fear. This creature was

developing a personality fraught with import. "Yes, I'll stan' by ye if trouble comes on account of us. Go ahead!"

"I'm a bad one," said the boy coolly. "Tough as they make 'em. Just two months out of school—reform school," he chuckled, as the woman shrank. "Only fifteen, too, but I'm grown up in tricks. Put yer penny on that, lady. Slick Eddie, the gang calls me. Some calls me Pinch; or Stony, 'cause I don't scare easy. Them's names enough. I ain't a mean cuss, though, an' I won't stand for no barn-burnin' or robbin' folks just on account of a farmer's complainin' of a Dago for blowin' up his brook. That's why I stopped here for dinner. Even if you'd give me nothin' I'd have warned ye—I come to do it. Tain't none of my crowd," he went on, pulling a leaf from the overhanging lilac bush and biting at it reflectively. "These are men. Last evening I was in a saloon, over in Tarryburgh. Had a beer an' two sandwiches in a little back room, an' I shut the door an' turned out the gas to take a nap. No one noticed. But I didn't get no sleep for the fellers in the next coop. I heard 'em plain as you hear me, lady. Two was Dagoes, an' one I couldn't make out. They planned it lovely. I got the house like a map, but no name."

"By an' by they goes out. So does I—careful. Two short fellers an' a big, tall one. But I was a fool; I says to the barkeep, a gettin' another beer—which took the last of my quarter I got for an old gent's specs what he'd laid down to wipe the dust off his face—I throwed the dust, too—I says, 'Barkeep, I'm lookin' for a job farmin'. I'm a farmer's boy,' says I, 'an' I've got a chance, too—a nice place over near Coppersville, red barn an' brown house t'other side of a trout brook, but I've forgot the man's name. Know him?"

"Tewksbury Wardwell. He'll work yer to death," says the barkeep, an' by hokey, I turns 'round an' one of them Dagoes had come back an' was glarin' at me for fair. He was talkin' to the barkeep when I slid. I'm spotted—see?"

Salome Wardwell was breathing hard. Forgetting the soiled garments, her fingers were clutching this unkempt narrator's sleeve.

"Bout one o'clock," was the calm reply. "Gee! We'll put it all over 'em. Has your old man a gun?"

"Yes, a shotgun."

"An' I've got this." He thrust one grimy paw in his trousers, and dragged out a short, ugly-looking revolver. "Fraid of the dog, hey?" he smiled sarcastically. "How about bein' kicked, hey?"

Salome shivered. Was this a boy, this cool, grim thing beside her? He seemed to harden up into something only half human as his claws carressed the pistol before replacing it.

"I'm—we're much obliged," she quavered. "I believe every word. It's what I've been fearin'. Tewk's been after these fellows for two years. They dynamited our brook. It's the three he's had fined. The big man is a Hungarian—a dreadful brute!"

"There you go!" complained the boy. "Brace up! I'll set here an' nap it. Last night I slep' in the woods, or tried to, so I'm needin' rest. Go tell the boss, if you want. Seems to me a drink of milk wouldn't go bad."

Salome procured the beverage and watched him sip it. He winked at her, smiled broadly, wiped his mouth on his sleeve, and the mask fell from him. Suddenly he was alert, with a fresh, boyish face, sparkling eyes, and high, quick words.

"We're in it, Pardners, ye know!" he cried. "I'm with ye—see?"

The woman nodded, stepped for-