

encouraged by her sympathy, drew largely upon his imagination in recounting the marvelous possibilities of his new investment. When the dinner bell sounded from the other cabin, Jinnie rose reluctantly. "I 'spect you better spread up yer bed, an' empty out yer wash pan," she advised; "it's awful mussy in here."

"That's right," said Mr. Skittles, approvingly; "Til jes' do that very thing. Jinnie!" he called as she started, "the fus' time you and Bud git a chance you slip around to the woodshed an' take a peek at it."

MEANWHILE Mrs. Skittles, having with great dispatch cleaned and brushed and fed each little Skittles, ordered them into the corner of the kitchen with positive instructions that they were not to come beyond a certain crack in the floor. There was an air of unusual importance about Mrs. Skittles this afternoon. She marched back and forth to the pantry, measuring flour and lard and making frequent references to a much-thumbed cook-book.

Only once did the group in the corner venture an inquiry: "Is it goin' to be punkin or apple, Maw?"

"I ain't a-sayin'," said Mrs. Skittles, loftily; "it never did bring a pie no luck to talk about it beforehand." She rolled the dough with a firm hand, pinching it and spanking it with the skill of one practised in those arts.

"I know," whispered Eddie Jo; "it's sweet pertater."

Mrs. Skittles kneaded and measured and stirred in absorbed silence. "Rhoda Ray," she presently demanded, "reach me that there allspice on the corner of the shelf. The can this way."

Rhoda Ray, glad to be ordered on the scene of action, looked on while her mother liberally sprinkled the contents through the mixture.

"Yours took the blue ribbon at the pie social last year, didn't it, Maw?" she asked, in a conciliatory tone.

"Four years," said Mrs. Skittles, "apple, lemon, mince, an' punkin."

"Who's a-goin' with you to-night?" Rhoda Ray was emboldened to inquire.

Mrs. Skittles held herself erect and spoke with emphasis: "Every single one of you, includin' Teddie. Yer paw, Mr. Jenkins Skittles, ain't a person to be trusted with a blind kitten."

This announcement, that the entire family was to be allowed to engage in the festivities of the pie social in a few hours, threw the light brigade into riotous disorder. Sudden joy is as demoralizing as sudden grief, but Mrs. Skittles did not believe in anticipation.

That evening, about dusk, she charged down the hill with her little company. Carried before her, carefully enveloped in napkins, was the sweet-potato pie, upon which rested the responsibility of sustaining her reputation as the best cook in the county. Behind her came the little Skittleses, rejoicing in the unusual combination of Sunday clothes and week-day manners.

MR. SKITTLES, sitting on the top rail of the fence with his feet hooked under the lower, surveyed the procession with surprise. He waited until Mrs. Skittles was well in advance, then he plucked at Rhoda Ray's dress.

"Say," he whispered with excited interest, "where are you all goin' at?"

Rhoda Ray, following the maternal example, tilted her drab head and stalked disdainfully on. In vain did he seek information from each of the children in turn; even Jinnie was too intent upon her expedition to pause long enough to explain its object.

Mr. Skittles, left alone on the fence, followed the little procession with wistful eyes until the twilight hid it from view. The stick he was whittling dropped from his fingers, his head sank upon his breast; now and then he drew his coat sleeve across his eyes. Deeper and deeper grew the dusk, in a nearby willow a whippoorwill told its troubles to the coming night, still Mr. Skittles, forlorn and deserted, kept silent watch in the lonesome clearing.

Down in the village schoolhouse the merriment

ran high. Forty pies stood on a long table at the head of which the Reverend Mr. Zim acted as auctioneer. Around the table stood the bidders, young men and old, the former arrayed for the most part in negligee shirts, frock coats, and satin neckties. The matrons and maids sat around the wall, each one next to a vacant chair, waiting to share their respective pies with whosoever should buy them.

"Here," cried the Reverend Mr. Zim, balancing a dome of cocoanut on his hand, and eloquently pointing out its merits, "here is a morsel fit for the gods. Look at that filling, as pure and white as the fallen snow. It's enough to wet the mouth with appetite of them as so much as looks upon it! Who'll bid ten cents? Fifteen? Fifteen! I ain't a-saying who baked it, but Sally Woodruff is a-blushing mighty pink over there in the corner. What! Twenty-five? Going, going, gone! at twenty-five cents to Mr. Zack Wilson. Here's your number and you can find your partner and eat your pie."

Zack, with pleased embarrassment, turned con-

"Find yer girl, Jenk," cried several from the rear."



fidently to Sally only to find that old Mrs. Duffy held his number. The company laughed uproariously while Zack shared his pie with his stout companion, the cocoanut turning to sawdust under Sally's scoffing glances.

In the midst of the uproar a head was thrust in at the door. It was a shaggy head, and the ragged body that followed it was out of keeping with the gala attire of the rest of the company. But a chorus of welcoming shouts arose nevertheless.

"Hello, Jenk Skittles! Where did you come from?"

"Did you blow down from yer roost, Jenk?"

"Come right along in and git in the game."

Mr. Skittles, smiling apologetically and trying to smooth down his flying locks, edged forward. A hurried glance had failed to reveal Mrs. Skittles, sitting bolt upright in solemn state at the far end of the room.

"Bid one on a pie, Jenk!" cried some one in the crowd. "Put up a good one, Zim, and we'll make him buy it."

Mr. Skittles, laughing and weakly protesting, was pushed to the front.

"Started at ten," called the Reverend Zim, "as fine a pie as ever seen the oven. Ten! ten. Who ever'll make it fifteen? Why, I'm 'shamed to name that sum in the hearing of that pie! Twenty-five? Going at twenty-five! Thirty? Good! Who'll bid thirty-five?"

Mr. Skittles, urged onward by the shouting men, continued to raise it, oblivious to the fact that he was bidding against himself.

"Knocked down to Mr. Jenkins Skittles at forty-five cents, the highest price of the evening," said the Reverend Zim, as he handed down the pie and the number.

"Find yer girl, Jenk," cried several from the rear, and Mr. Skittles started on his romantic quest, a flutter of expectancy in his heart and the pie in his hand. Down the line he passed, eagerly scanning the numbers on the chairs. Suddenly he paused. He had found his number. In the accompanying chair sat Mrs. Skittles, rigid and unwinking.

The hilarity escaped from the company as promptly as the gas from a pricked balloon. The village respected, if it did not admire, Mrs. Skittles, and it realized that the situation was serious. So did Mr. Skittles. It was only the sudden weakness of his knees that prevented him taking refuge in ignominious flight. But the incident, tragic though it was, was of too personal a nature to interfere permanently with the success of the evening. After a brief pause the bidding proceeded briskly, and soon the fun was once more at high tide.

BUT the light had failed for Mr. Skittles. He twisted his legs nervously about the legs of the chair, apparently seeking to gain strength therefrom, as he cast panic-stricken glances in every direction. Presently his eyes fell on the pie still clasped in his hands. A new question presented itself, a question of such overwhelming significance that it caused him to groan in spirit. Should he eat the pie? Years of experience had taught him that no greater insult could be offered his worthier half than to fail to appreciate her cookery. With this past knowledge he felt it incumbent upon him to eat the pie, though his spirit was crushed and his appetite languid. So ardently did he desire to ingratiate himself with Mrs. Skittles and to prove his utter contrition for having broken in upon her evening's pleasure, that he ate slice after slice with heroic fortitude. Fortunately Eddie Jo and Jinnie came to his assistance, and by the end of the evening the truth of the maxim that "the proof of a pudding is in the eating," had been amply verified, and Mrs. Skittles could find no ground for complaint.

But, the first link in the chain of disaster having been forged, others followed swiftly. On the homeward march Eddie Jo was taken violently ill. Mr. Skittles carried him nearly to the clearing, when he was seized with an indisposition himself. Mrs. Skittles, overtaking them, ordered a halt. She glanced at the other children shrewdly.

"Well," she said, shortly, "Rhoda Ray, I s'pose you've got the backache, and Bud the headache, and somebody else the toothache! A person would think it was Sunday morning!"

The children stoutly disclaimed these ailments, all except Jinnie and Eddie Jo—they pleaded guilty to them all. Mrs. Skittles, never one to encourage ailments, took the limp and dejected Jinnie by the hand and, leaving Mr. Skittles to bring the little boy, hurried on to the cabin.

Mr. Skittles, a few moments later, obediently deposited his burden on the doorstep and started away. To his surprise his knees began to wobble, and before he knew it he, too, was reposing on Mrs. Skittles's front steps. That worthy person, bustling about within, was becoming seriously alarmed about Jinnie. The child was alternating between paroxysms of pain and heavy stupors from which nothing could arouse her.

"Git the mustard, quick!" called her mother to Rhoda Ray, who had just climbed over the prostrate forms in the doorway.

RHODA RAY, with an unsuccessful effort to collect her chronically scattered wits, took a tin can from the end of the shelf.

"This here is the allspice!" thundered Mrs. Skittles; "ain't you got more sense—" She stopped short and sniffed the can suspiciously. "Why this ain't spice at all!"

"It's mustard," urged Rhoda Ray, feebly.

"It ain't!" cried Mrs. Skittles, in piercing tones; "it's insect powder, and I put it in the pie!"

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