

The Rockwood Review.

could not dispel the vivid imagination that had contrived to grow up with it through fifty years of monotonous, hum-drum life. In another setting Waitstill Slade's imagination might have made a poet of her. In the setting of treeless fields and rock-studded pastures and a lonely, childless life, it made her only a beautiful, cheery woman with a hungry spot in her heart. The things she could not have she "made believe," as little children make believe in their play.

"And," said Waitstill Slade, sturdily, "it don't hurt anybody a mite, not a mite."

That was how she came slowly to making believe, in the spare room, with her sewing-work in her lap.

One night at supper, a few weeks later, Elton laid down his knife and fork in sudden remembrance of something.

"Why, if 'tain't to-morrow! I declare if I didn't come next door to forgetting it altogether! Don't you want to come with me, Waitstill? You'd enjoy it—you couldn't help it."

"Well, if I knew what it 'twas," laughed Waitstill. "Is it a camp meeting or a funeral or—Elton Slade, you don't say it's another auction?"

"I say it. It's Jim Bill's auction—Jim Bill Baker, you know, the little one-armed chap that drove the Five Corners stage. He lost his wife a week or ten days ago, and he's going to pull up stakes. It pretty nearly broke him all up."

"Oh, I didn't know—the poor man! And hasn't he got quite a lot of little children, Elton?"

"Eight, counting the smallest of the lot, and I don't know's he's big enough to count. Don't believe he's more'n three months old, if he's that. Jude Perry says it's a real pitiful case. He says Jim Bill goes round lugging the smallest chick on his one arm, and the tears rolling down his face."

The next morning Elton went to the auction. He was not to be back until nearly night. He jogged

along slowly, thinking about poor Jim Bill and all those eight little young ones. The usual auction zest was gone out of the trip.

When he jogged homeward in the late afternoon, he was still thinking of Jim Bill's babies, or one of them at least. It lay across his knees in a long, limp bundle. With one hand Elton steadied it, and with the other he drove. His honest, homely face was a study of self-disapproval and helpless dismay, and of shy enjoyment. He kept looking down at the long bundle with the pink dot of a face at one end, on his knees.

"Well, I guess I've done it this time," he muttered. "I don't know what Waitstill'll say now. She'll be watching for me and saying, 'My grief! I wonder what Elton bought to this auction?'"

Here the bundle stirred. The big browned hand slid along its length with soothing intent. On its return trip it ran across a tiny moist fist that clutched its forefinger tightly and forbade any further progress. For the rest of the ride Elton Slade's finger was a prisoner in close confinement.

Waitstill was evidently not at home and Elton breathed a sigh of temporary relief.

"She'd be out to the door if she was to home," he thought, "and I should have to tell her what I have done right off. It'll give me time to think. Sho! I don't know what Waitstill'll say, but I had to do it. I had to."

He laid the long, limp bundle on the seat and got out. Then he tried to lift it down, but there was a good deal of real difficulty in manipulating it under those circumstances. Elton grew warm and nervous.

"There's such a terrible waste o' cloth—how's a man going to tell where the little chick ends? And he's so mighty slippery! Sho!"

When the perilous decent was finally contrived with a measure of success, Elton carried the baby into the house. The kitchen was empty, but the tea kettle on the stove sent forth a long, curling