

NEB.

BY ELLA S. ATKINSON.

"It's good to smell the spring, Maudy—seems as if a person's lungs get starved in the winter-time; I could 'most eat that air."

"Yes, it's sweet blown over the orchard, but it settles in my throat to-night. It's got muggish since sundown,—Neb's out in it, too—and it is a bad time for colds."

The woman who had just spoken was tall and spare, her shoulders were bent, her hair was grizzled above her low brow and about her temples, but black in the knob at her neck. She stepped about the kitchen floor preparing the evening meal, while the old man, her father, stood in the doorway refreshing himself with a glimpse of his little garden.

"Whereabouts is Neb?" he turned to say, after a moment.

"Down by the track," the mother made answer, "but there he is coming up now." She crossed to the door and they stood together watching a little hunchy figure coming towards them. It was a halting gait, for he came on crutches. The woman's face was pale as she bent forward. Presently the lad stopped. Her eyes startled, and she spread out her fingers nervously.

"He's tired," she said, anxiously. The old man waved his hand, and the distorted form with its uneven limbs began to move on again.

"He never used to get tired just coming from the corner," sighed the mother. And then she plucked the old man's sleeve. "Do you think he looks as well as he did in the winter?" she queried.

"Mebbe he's peaked some," was the answer. "But spring-time is hard on everybody. I guess a tonic would fix him up."

Mrs. Slater turned away. She

swallowed hard a couple of times, and then reached down the tea pot and set the tea to brew. Little Neb was her only child. She did not know if her husband was dead or alive, and since he went away she had supported herself and her boy by tailoring at a shop in town, and lived on in her girlhood's home with her old father. He was baggageman at the railway station, and their house was a brown cottage near the track.

After supper, Mrs. Slater watched the road anxiously, and when a light gig came down the concession she sped out to the gate crying, "Would you hold up, sir. It's about Neb," she began, resting her bare red arms upon the fence. "Folks plague me so about sending him to school, and somehow I can't bear to start him. He don't seem up to it."

Dr. Bell looked down at the anxious-faced woman, and then he looked across the orchard. "Does he keep pretty well?" he asked.

"Not very, sir. He looks thinner, and I believe his back's crooked."

She lowered her voice at the last, for a soft padding sound on the path had warned her that Neb was coming.

"Hello, youngster," called out the doctor.

Neb's big eyes lit his face with their smile. His cheeks were covered with freckles. His red hair ended in front in two matted spikes that dangled in his eyes with every movement.

"So they think you ought to go to school, eh?" began the doctor.

"Yes, sir,"

"Do you want to go?"

"I think I would rather learn of mother. The boys plague me so."

There was silence for a moment, and Dr. Bell said, "I wouldn't send him,