

John MacNeal's Worst Enemy

'There, Nell, it's come at last!' John MacNeal banged his dinner pail upon the kitchen table, though it was only eight o'clock in the morning, and he did not usually come home until half-past six at night.

'Why, John! what has happened? Has the mill shut down, or is the supply of wool short?'

'Neither. I've quit.'

'What do you mean?'

'What I say. Sheldon Darrow came in to the spinning room this morning, as big and pompous as you please, but before he could open his lips I steps up to him and says: "Oh, you needn't trouble yourself to discharge me; I always intended that when you stepped into your father's shoes, I'd shake the dust of Darrow's mills off mine." So I puts on my hat, and off I walks.'

'What did he say?'

'Oh, he was as smooth and soft as butter; tried to make me think he didn't intend to discharge me, but I knew better; he and I have been enemies ever since we were little fellows at school.'

'What made you enemies?'

'Well,' thoughtfully, 'I guess it started the day that he missed a word in spelling; I remember it all so well, even the way our feet looked as we toed the crack in the floor; he wore fine kid shoes, while my feet were bare; but I spelled the word that he missed, and I couldn't keep from laughing when I went above him. Then, after school, he pitched into me.'

'Because you got above him?'

'Of course! Though his excuse was that I acted mean about it. He was large for his age—is yet, you know—while I was always small, and of course he gave me a licking.'

'I don't remember that we ever had another regular pitched battle, though we were always quarrelling, until we were each of us about sixteen. His father had given him a driving horse—a handsome thoroughbred, and my father had, at that time, an old roan that had been a famous race-horse, and could even then trot pretty lively for a few rods.'

'One day Sheldon was out driving with his dandy rig, and I drove up behind him. Just for fun, I told him to give me the right o' way. He touched his whip to his horse and turned out enough to let me by if I could. I put the whip to Old Roan and we were in for a race. My! how old Roan's feet did fly! He kept creeping by, creeping by, until Sheldon could look into old Roan's eye, then into mine; then the old horse's age began to tell on him, and I could see that we were going to lose the race, so I reined in, as if I was going to run into Sheldon's wheel. He sang out, "Take care!" and held up his horse, while I whipped by just as easy.'

'Then he got mad; called me a cheat and said I was always mean. I wouldn't stand that, so we out of our buggies and had another tussle. He licked me again—and I haven't forgotten it any more than he has. Catch me working for him!'

'But, John, what will you do? You have never done any work except in the spinning-room in Darrow's mills.' Nell Mac-

Neal took Bonnie, the baby, from the cradle and held her close, as if to shield her from coming danger.

'Don't be afraid, Nell, I guess I can support you and Bonnie and Ned without having to knuckle to Sheldon Darrow. If worse comes to worst, there's something in the bank that's good for a rainy day. Put Bonnie's little cloak and hood on her now and I'll take her out; it's a long time since I had a holiday.'

It proved harder to get work, however, than John had expected; the little town was almost wholly composed of mill workmen and their families, and they hired no work done. Day after day he walked the streets in a vain search for work, and by the time Bonnie could walk, the little hoard in the bank had been drawn upon many times, and before her second summer had been passed there were no savings left, and all the days were 'rainy.'

Then Ned, the eight-year-old boy, had a long illness, and they were forced to go into debt so deeply that none of the merchants would trust them longer. As hardships multiplied, John's hatred of Sheldon Darrow increased, a hatred that was not shared by his little daughter, Bonnie, who embraced every chance that came to her to run away to the 'big house,' as she called Sheldon Darrow's home.

One evening, when John was returning from a fruitless search for work, he saw Bonnie upon Sheldon Darrow's beautiful lawn. He was picking flowers for her and she had her arms and apron full, and was chattering gaily with him.

'Bonnie! Bonnie MacNeil!' John called angrily, 'come here this minute.'

She ran, obediently, to her father, but not until she had lifted her little face to Sheldon's for a kiss.

'See, papa, pitty f'owers, dood man div 'em to Bonnie.'

'He's a bad, bad, man, Bonnie!' And John snatched the flowers, threw them into the street, and took Bonnie into his arms so forcibly that she shrieked with fright.

After this they watched her more carefully, but sometimes she would slip over there, and always returned with her arms full of flowers, and prattling about the 'Dood man.'

That winter times were harder than ever before, for John MacNeal and his family. Bonnie could not go out of doors—her clothes were too thin, and Ned could not go to school for want of clothes.

Once Nell had ventured to suggest that John should try to get employment in the mill, and he had answered angrily:

'Never! I'd rather starve than be beholden to Sheldon Darrow for a crust of bread!'

'It will not be a gift, if you earn it, John.'

'I wouldn't take money from him, not even as wages; he wouldn't hire me anyhow, we're enemies, and always have been.'

'They are so short of hands that they are advertising for them,' persisted Nell.

'He won't get me by advertising, or any other dodge.'

And not even when want entered his door, and they suffered from hunger and cold, would he go to Sheldon Darrow and ask for the work he had thrown away.

'If I don't get work to-day, I'm going to ask the town for help,' John told his wife one morning before he started out.

'John MacNeal! would you rather ask the town for help than Sheldon Darrow for work?'

'Yes, a thousand times rather!' He went out, slamming the door after him; in a moment he stepped back with a large bundle in his hands.

'See, Nell; this was on the doorstep, and it is addressed to Bonnie MacNeal. What can it be?'

They took off the wrapper and found a warm, red cloak, hood, mittens, shoes, stockings and underwear, and pinned to the mittens, a ten-dollar bill, but no clue to the giver.

'You won't have to ask the town for any help to-day!' exclaimed Nell, with thankful tears.

'Nor Sheldon Darrow, either!' John added. 'Dress Bonnie up in the fine clothes. I'll take her with me, and we'll go by Sheldon Darrow's and let him see her. I don't want him to suspect that we are so hard up.'

In a few days another bundle was left upon John's doorstep. This time there were clothes for Ned, and another bill pinned upon his cap.

'Now it's your turn to let Sheldon see you,' were John's first words; but Nell's were:

'I wish I knew who it is that is so good to us.'

That wish was repeated many times that winter, for many bundles were left upon John's doorstep, and though he and Nell watched they could never catch a glimpse of the friend who left them.

Toward spring Bonnie was taken ill, and even while they were talking about sending for the doctor, he came.

'I don't know when I can pay you, doctor, but Bonnie must have medicine or she will die.' John choked over the first trouble that brought a lump to his throat.

'I was paid before I came,' said the doctor, as he seated himself by Bonnie's bed.

'Who paid you, doctor?'

'The one who sent me.'

'Yes; but who? Oh, tell us, Doctor,' pleaded Nell. 'Someone has been so good to us all winter. We would have starved if it had not been for his kindness; it must be the same one who sent you.'

'Tell us, Doctor, and let us have the chance to say we are grateful,' John urged with unwonted eagerness.

'I promised not to tell; but I did not say that you shouldn't guess for yourselves, and I think you ought to know,' the doctor hinted.

'We can't guess. Who would be likely to do as much for us?' asked John.

'In a case of this kind think of the most unlikely person,' suggested the doctor.

'Sheldon Darrow's the most unlikely to do me a good turn, and I don't want him to, either.' The angry light that the mention of Sheldon Darrow's name always brought, came into John's eyes.

'Now we will attend to little Bonnie,' the doctor quietly proceeded, taking the small, hot hand in his.

'Not Sheldon Darrow! The worst enemy that I ever had in my life! Don't tell me that I'm indebted to him for food.'