

Phoebe plumb sick to be up nights. Meeny Harness has given out she'd tak her and be tickled, unly her old man hes put his foot down and won't hear to it for a minute---jaws her scandalous. Quare, too, Harness bein' as fierce as a wet rabbit, most times! Huldy Sawyer comes out flat-foot, sayin' she ain't runnin' an infirmatory for invaleeds, an' not bein' as nigh kin to Aunt Nabby as the balance, don't 'low to come to the gatherin' at all."

"It's pizen mean," Priscilla declared, indignantly. "I see Aunt Nabby sitting on the porch step; I'm going up to speak to her."

She went forward and Uncle Billy followed. Several members of Mrs. Gunn's council were coming out of the house when Priscilla reached it. Aunt Nabby contemplated them with a sour expression. She was a wisp of an old woman, with myriad dry wrinkles all focusing toward her mouth. Her gray hair, wound up in a "biscuit," had become loosened and the end hung down behind one ear, twining itself into a thin curl.

From the open door of the entry way issued Mrs. Gunn's strong, carrying voice:

"No use lookin' for kin folks to tote their share; I reckon we'll have to go on keepin' her."

"Up rose Aunt Nabby's tall, stiff, straight form.

"No, you won't, Keziah Gunn," she declared with shrill determination. "No, you won't. I'm through bein' kep'---like some stray critter. The ain't a one of these folks I'd go live off'n, now."

Uncle Billy gave Priscilla's arm a sly jog.

"Yonder comes Sammy Sawyer cuttin' sticks through the orchard," he whispered. "I reckon Huldy kep' him charin' long as she could, so he wouldn't get yere till meetin' was over!"

The autumn sun glowed warmly and the young man had walked so rapidly his face was red and glistening and his brownish light hair looked limp with moisture. Aunt Nabby's last words had reached his ear, and he grew a shade redder as he stepped in among the gathered relatives.

"Folks---ladies and gentlemen---and ---and so forth," he began, in some embarrassment. "I came here a-purpose to ask Aunt Nabby if she'll come and jine me and Huldy in the hill-cabin for good-and-all---and welcome?"

Aunt Nabby slipped on her glasses and peered keenly up into his face.

"Did Huldy say for me to come?"

"Uh---er," Sam began to stammer, his face fairly blazing. "Huldy---she's a little quare in her ways, and don't mean things---you come; it's all right. Anyhow, she ain't runnin' everything at the shanty, as I know of; I got as much say as she has---and I want you to come, Aunt Nabby---honestly, now---"

"Sammy," the old woman interrupted his embarrassed protestations, "you're a good boy; I'd come without waitin' to draw breath, if you was all the crew the' was on deck. But I know Huldy of old, and no three-roomed cabin was ever built big enough to hold her and me both. No, no, Sammy, I couldn't stomach it. Nor I won't stay here, nyther. The old Spooner cabin's got four walls and a top, and I've got ten fingers, thank the Lord (countin' thumbs), and a spinnin' wheel. I kin spin and I kin knit; and socks always brings cash or groceries. I'm goin' to live on the Spooner place, and nary one of you needn't try to stop me."

Priscilla was at the old woman's side a twinkle.

"You and me ain't kin, Aunt Nabby," she said, "and I haven't a home to offer you, but if you'll say the word I'll come and live with you---and be bettering myself, too. While you're spinnin' and knittin' I can be raisin' chickens and mebbly a little truck garden. Will you take for a partner, Aunt Nabby?"

Aunt Nabby silently reached forth, wrapped her lank arms about Priscilla's neck and gave her a kiss that smacked out clear and loud.

"Whist I'd dast do that," murmured

Sam, enviously, under his hay-colored moustache.

"I've got some dishes," Priscilla resumed her topic, cuddling Aunt Nabby close to her, "that Grandma left me, and three chairs, and some bedding."

"We're fixed," then, slick as a whistle," the old woman chirped, "cuz if you've got the beddin', I've got the stid. And 'sides that, I got a chist o' draw's and a cookstove and a hit-and-miss rag carpit that ain't never been enrolled since it came outter the loom."

II.
The old Spooner cabin sat low on the slant of a hill, almost in the lap of the hollow. Below it a half stagnant stream dawdled through a snarl of rank grasses and water plantains. With the retreat of the afternoon sun clammy airs fanned up from its banks and the hollow beyond, thick with odors of spearmint and dock and wet bracken.

"A malarial old nest," Sam Sawyer declared to Priscilla, as he set a cedar bucket of fresh spring water upon a bench and hung the dripping gourd on a peg above. "It'll set you and Aunt Nabby chillin' as sure as guinea eggs."

Sam had pirated his sister's broom and brushed out the cabin before the arrival of its tenants. He had also made a pyramid of oak limbs and brushwood in the wide-mouthed fire place, ready for the vanquishing of twilight damps.

The rail fence about the cabin was askew with age and decay, and the rough gate sagged and limped and groaned on its one hinge.

"It's got rheumatism, seems like," Sam said, as he essayed with hammer and nails to improve its condition.

Priscilla come down the weed-cumbered walk with springing feet. She had a stiff green sunbonnet pulled far over her dark brown braided hair. She watched Sam as he whacked away at the hinge until his face was crimson. He stood up at last, pitching his hammer over the fence.

"It's a slanderations outrage," he exploded, "that you and Aunt Nabby have to burrow in this shack like a couple of gophers. The Craggitt outfit!"

Lightness of heart was in Priscilla's laugh.

"Aunt Nabby feels as independent as a blue jay in cherry time," said she. "And I---why, it's saved me from wrinkles and gray hair."

"Tain't fittin' for two lone women," Sam persisted. "See here, Priscilla, I reckon I'm consid'able of a pickle, but if you'll say the word and take me, slap-dab---"

Sam's eyes were large and dark and gray, the kind of eyes that pursue and hold and haunt one; he was sun-tanned to swarthinness, and his well-turned chin held a softening dimple. Priscilla peeped up at him out of the deep bonnet and laughed again, but not so joyously.

"Sam, don't you see that we're foot-fast?" she asked, "tied and haltered and hobbled, so we can't even look across one another's fence? You have Miss Huldy to take care of. She doesn't think a great sight of me, and she and Aunt Nabby would have their backs hooped up and be spitting at one another like cats the b' used time. How could you fence them apart in your three rooms? And I've got Aunt Nabby under my wing for good. She can't be slung away like a ball of darning cotton, any more."

"No," Sam acquiesced, dejectedly, "I don't want you to turn her off; but---Jinkins take the luck, I wish things was different. Would you take me if they were, Priscilla?"

With eyes and smile she sparkled suddenly at him from the deep green sunbonnet. And Sam knew.

III.

At the fading of a still autumn day, when the flames of sunset were burning down to a long line of dim crimson embers, Sam Sawyer came down the forest path, wheeling a barrow-load of stove-wood to Aunt Nabby's kitchen door.

Priscilla heard him unloading and peeped out.

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