

THE VOW OF SILENCE

By ALICE HEGAN RICE

UP from the banks of Kentucky River, Gray Knob rose rugged and uncouth. Two lonesome cabins stood upon the clearing on its summit, stood and glared at each other in fair weather and foul, as if determined to stare each other out of countenance. The larger cabin was evidently getting the advantage of it; it stood forth clean, firm, and aggressive, while the smaller one leaned shiftlessly against the hillside, apparently indifferent as to what supported it, the flowers on the dilapidated sill as impertinent as a posy in the buttonhole of a beggar.

In these dwellings lived the Skittleses, Mrs. Skittles in the self-respecting cabin, and Mr. Skittles in the shiftless one, and between them lay fifty feet of hillside and an ominous vow of silence.

One blustery day Mrs. Skittles was carrying on a vigorous cleaning campaign; she charged down the middle of the kitchen floor with her broom, then made a left oblique, and a right oblique, coming to a position of rest at the cabin door. She was large and imposing, with a figure that had made no concessions to forty years of hard work. She was a veteran in the army of labor, but not from the ranks; Mrs. Skittles had ever been in command. Her communications to the world were still issued in the form of orders, and she marched through life on schedule time, wanting to court-martial all who failed to follow instructions.

In her small encampment upon the clearing, there was but one deserter. Two years ago Mr. Skittles had found the marital life too strenuous, and, failing in his duties, had been condemned to solitary confinement in the cabin adjoining that of his superior officer. For a living he stripped tobacco, for a diversion he chewed it. He still accepted his rations daily, in a tin bucket, which was carried to him from the mess-room by one of the little Skittles, in return for which he was expected to render obedience to Mrs. Skittles, who, though no word was spoken, used a code of signals at once coercive and harassing.

AS she stood at the door of the cabin, she shaded her eyes with her hand and looked up the river:

"It must be gittin' on to twelve o'clock," she said; "I heard the Little Sandy whistle four times since breakfast. Rhoda Ray," she called over her shoulder, "have you seen the children comin' home from the village?"

Rhoda Ray, long and lank, emerged from the bedroom. She had drab skin and weak little drab eyes that looked patiently out from under a mop of drab hair. Her calico dress was cut at the exact slant to display to the worst advantage a pair of knocked knees. Her mother's question seemed to strike her dumb with confusion, not that her lips were sealed; it was a marked characteristic of Rhoda Ray that

she never closed her mouth when it was possible to keep it open. After a moment's hesitation she stammered:

"I seen 'em comin' up 'bout a hour ago."

Mrs. Skittles tossed her head angrily. "No use to say no more, Rhoda Ray; I know where they are at."

Throwing a shawl about her shoulders she stalked across the strip of land that divided the two cabins. Before she reached the door she heard shrieks of merriment from within, which served as fuel to the fire of her wrath. On the threshold she paused, an avenging deity about to descend upon the unconscious revelers.

The interior of the room presented an aspect of startling contrasts. In the corner was an unmade cot, covered by an old piece of rag carpet, while beside it stood an imposing self-rocker, upholstered in crimson plush. On the plain wooden walls hung two multicolored chromos, resplendent in wide gold frames, while beneath them stood a stove decrepit with age and general debility.

Mrs. Skittles viewed these objects with increasing ire, for Mr. Skittles, be it known, was a chronic victim of the instalment plan, and his utter inability to withstand the allurements of traveling agents had been the rock upon which their conjugal felicity had been wrecked.

As she stood there wrathfully recalling the past, five ecstatic shrieks recalled the present. On top of the deal table, in the centre of the room, five noisy little Skittles were clinging and laughing, and crowding one another, while from under the table Mr. Skittles, with his coat tied over his head, made frantic grabs at stray legs and arms, emitting dreadful growls and snarling with ferocious intensity.

Suddenly there was a pause. The bear subsided. Bud Skittles slid to the floor and slipped past his mother, while Lottie, Susan and Eddie Jo helped three-year-old Ted down from the table. Only Jinnie was left, sitting cross-legged in the centre of the table, fascinated into immovability by her mother's fixed glare.

"Jinnie," exclaimed Mrs. Skittles, in awful tones, "you tell yer paw to come right out from under that fool table."

Jinnie obediently repeated the message, and Mr. Skittles clambered forth with as much dignity as his enveloped head and the obstructing table legs would permit. He was a small, slight man, with slanting shoulders, from which his arms dangled in a perpetual state of relaxation. His straggling beard but half concealed the weak mouth where a vacillating smile was ever on the point of breaking through. But if his mouth smiled his eyes belied it, for a more pathetic pair of appealing eyes were never raised to an irate master. He stood now, humbled and disheveled, as guilty as the children at being caught in mischief.

"Pretty goin' on," sniffed Mrs. Skittles, to the ceiling. "Here I be, hustlin' round from sun up to the steamboat whistle, an' you onery children, 'stid of bein' down yonder strippin' terbaccer, a foolin' round here. Clear out everyone of you 'cept Jinnie; she kin stay and clean up this here pigsty." Whereupon, slowly directing her searchlight from the ceiling to Mr. Skittles, she pointed with a long and rigid finger to the unmade bed, to the soiled dishes in the corner, coming to an awful and accusing halt at Mr. Skittles's stocking feet. Then, with a snort of indignation, she backed herself out of the doorway, the children scattering before her like

MR. SKITTLES did everything on the instalment plan—even to eating a pie in a pie-eating contest and wheeling his girl to his doctor in a combination wheelbarrow and easy chair, which he bought without paying for it cash down. The point of this vow of silence is in its good-humor.

leaves before a whirlwind.

Mr. Skittles, left alone with the plump Jinnie, cautiously closed the door, then sank dejectedly into the plush rocker. Each fresh reprimand from Mrs. Skittles added to his burden of contrition, for, remiss as he had been in other duties, he had never faltered in loyal allegiance to his leader.

Jinnie let herself down from the table and, going to him, put her arm about his neck. "Don't you care," she said, recklessly; "I love you heap better than I do maw."

This blasphemy roused Mr. Skittles to protest: "Oh, no you don't, Jinnie; yer maw's a wonderful woman. I never was good enough fer her; her fambly all said so when we was married. She deserved to git a first-class husband 'stid of me."

"I love you best," insisted Jinnie, hugging his head to her breast.

HE patted her cheek tenderly and drew her down in the chair beside him. She snuggled up close and, holding tight to his hand, tried to direct his thoughts to a more pleasant subject.

"Ain't you got any secrets to tell me to-day?" she asked, slyly.

Mr. Skittles's face underwent a transformation. The look of dejection gave way to one of sudden interest.

"Well, ef I ain't clean forgot to tell you!" he exclaimed.

Jinnie clapped her hands in delight. "Cross my heart and body, make a big ring and a spot in the middle, I won't tell!"

"Well," said Mr. Skittles, peering anxiously around the side of the chair to see that the door was secure, and sinking his voice to a whisper, "I'm a making a new investment."

"Is it a melojeon, Pa?"

"No," said Mr. Skittles, pursing up his lips with some show of importance, "I can't say it's a melojeon, Jinnie. I was a-hanging between a melojeon an' a writin' dext, as you know. But this here is a new offer; it's a patent an' a combination."

"What is it?" demanded Jinnie, impatiently.

"Well," drawled Mr. Skittles, gaining time and courage, "it's a usefuller article than a melojeon; it kin be used in the field and in the house, to fetch and carry in the day-time and to set on at night." Mr. Skittles counted off these attractions on Jinnie's fat fingers.

"A bucket?" asked Jinnie, incredulously.

"No, madam," said Mr. Skittles; "it's a guarantee patent easy-cheer an' wheelbarrow."

Jinnie's face fell. "O Pa, why didn't you stick to the melojeon? You don't need no wheelbarrow."

"But the easy-cheer, Jinnie! It sorter folds up inside itself an' looks jes' like a natural cheer, then you turn a peg an' the fus' thing you know ther's a patent wheelbarrow, easy runnin', light as a feather, an' strong as—as—ennyt'ing."

"Where's it at?"

Mr. Skittles again surveyed the closed door and winked significantly at the woodshed.

JINNIE was silent a moment, wrestling with a new thought. "Say, Pa," she asked, "have you got through payin' fer the clock?"

Mr. Skittles's face fell. "Well, no, I ain't quite," he confessed, but that's with a nother company. It ain't the same thing at all; this here is a new concern, twenty cents a week till you pay up."

"Will they take it away from you, like they did them picture-books?"

"Oh, no. This here is a good, honest concern. The agent said so."

This doubt being removed, Jinnie began to take a lively interest in the wheelbarrow, and Mr. Skittles,

