

The New Poor Document

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BY A L I C E
H E A N R I C E

UP from the banks of Kentucky River, Gray Knob rose rugged and uncouth. Two lone cabins stood upon the clearing on its summit, stood and gazed 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 shifty against the hillside, apparently indifferent as to what supported it, the favors on the dilapidated wall as important as a peep in the buttonhole of a beggar.

In these dwellings lived the Skittles, Mrs. Skittles in the self-respecting cabin, and Mr. Skittles in the shabby one, and between them lay fifty feet of hillside and as much 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 campment upon the clearing, there was but one deserter. Two years ago Mr. Skittles had found the martial 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 ration daily, in a tin bucket, which was carried to him from the mess-room by one of the little Skittles, in return for what 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 getting on to twelve o'clock," she said; "I heard the little Skittles come out from under breakfast. Rhoda Ray," she called over her shoulder, "have you seen the children come 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 waist to display to the worst advantage a pair of knocked knees. Her mother's question seemed to strike her dumb with confusion, so 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 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 averaging doubt about to descend upon the unconscious revelers.

The interior of the room presented an aspect of startling contrast. In the corner was an unmade cot, covered by an old piece of rag carpet, while beside it stood an imposing self-rocking upholstered in crimson plush. On the plain wooden walls hung two multicolored chromes, resplendent in wide gold frames, while beneath them stood a stove decorated 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 instillation 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 the edge of the table, in the centre of the room, five noisy little Skittles were clapping 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. But Skittles still to the floor and slipped past his mother, while Lottie, Susan and Eddie Jo helped the three-year-old Ted down from the table. Only Jimmie was left, sitting cross-legged in the corner of the table, fascinated into immobility by her mother's fixed glare.

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

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, hunched and disheveled, as guilty as the children at being caught in mischief.

"Pretty good on," sniffed Mrs. Skittles to the ceiling. "Here I be, hustlin' round from sun up to the steamboat whistle, an' you onery children, wild of bet' down yonder strippin' terbacor, a foolin' round here. Clear out everyone of you 'cept Jimmie; she ken 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' stocking feet. Then, with a snort of indignation, she backed herself out of the doorway, the children scattering before her like leaves before a whirlwind.

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

Jimmie let himself down from the table and, going to him, put her arms about his neck. "Don't you care," she said recklessly; "I love yer heap better than I do paw."

This blasphemy roused Mr. Skittles to protest: "Oh, no you don't, Jimmie; yer paw's a wonderful woman. I never was good enough for her; her family all said so when we was married. She deserved to get a first-class husband 'till of me."

"I love yer best," insisted Jimmie, 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 today?" she asked shyly.

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

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

Jimmie clasped 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 making a new investment."

"In it a meeleon, Pa?"

"No," said Mr. Skittles, pursing up his lips with some show of importance, "I can't say it's a meeleon, Jimmie. I was changing between a meeleon 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 Jimmie impatiently.

"Well," drawled Mr. Skittles, gaining time and courage, "it's a useful article that a meeleon; it in 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 Jimmie's fat fingers.

"A bucket!" asked Jimmie incredulously.

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

"But the ear-cheer, Jimmie! It sorter feels up inside itself an' looks jes' like a natural cheer, then you turn a peg an' the 'us' thing you know there's a patent wheelbarrow, easy runnin' light as a feather, an' strong as—anythin'."

"Where's it at?"

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

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

Mr. Skittles's face fell. "Well, no, I ain't quite," he confessed, "but that's with another 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?"

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