

"Honey"

By Harriet Whitney Durbin

MAK a mess o' nice, frash jew-berries, jist gethered?"

The lean little man standing at John Follen's log door-step folded back a clean, blue-barred towel, showing the edge of a splint basket full of berries, large, purple-dark, musky and moist from June fields of dew and sunshine.

"Fetch 'em right in, uncle," invited the poet hungrily.

The young man had a general utility utensil in the shape of a tin dish-pan, which he now dragged from under the stove, and into it the fruit tumbled with crushy fragrance as the old man tipped the basket.

John was delving, experimentally, into the heart of Nature for quiet and for inspiration to aid in his wooing of an uncertain Muse. And Nature was proving bountiful on those points; but tin cans, outwardly embellished with corpulent scarlet tomatoes, peaches like yellow full moons, and pea-pods resembling feather bolsters, had become a weariness to the spirit; and the most tempting of "flakes" and "granules" but as dust and ashes.

The old man looked as if the suns and rains that had ripened the wild berries to lusciousness had warped and gnarled him and beaten him brown; yet a measure of alert buoyancy animated his lean little frame.

"I could-er sold 'em every one at Jim Peters's sto'," he chatted away with blithe openness, "unly I'd hafter take trade. And that suits me, good enough; gimme whut coffee and sody's needin' and a plug o' chawin'—I'm happy. But Jim don't keep the little tricks gals likes, and I want'er buy Honey some year-bobs and a peenk ribbon to wear to quarterly meetin'."

The old man's weak blue eyes appealed trustfully to John for responsive interest.

"Is 'Honey' your daughter?" John asked.

"Naw; Honey ain't real kin. I married her Granny, and she hadn't no paw and maw, so her Granny and me riz her; Sereldy's her crishened name — Sereldy Baker. My name's Bean—Uncle Jabez, folks calls her. She's all I got left, Honey is—her Granny's dead—and I 'low to buy 'er all the little notions and trinklets I kin. Wish I could buy 'er a hat—a squashin' big one with red posies on it and a gret long feather dangling over the aige—Jing! Mis' Prince couldn't git 'er away fum me then, could she?"

"Is she trying to take 'Honey' from you?" John asked interestedly.

"Yas; Mis' Prince is the milliner-woman nex' ter Jim Peters's; she's goin' to the city to do millin' there, and wants Honey to go 'long to try hats on and wait on folks; she's forevermore tellin' her how sweet she'll look in a new hat every fifteen minutes or so, and whut a lot of jew'lry and stuff she kin buy with her selery; and young gals loves them little finifed fixin's — it's in 'em; they can't hep theirselves any more'n a pretty-by-night kin hep fum bein' red and han'some. Wull, I must jog 'long so's to git the stuff for Honey. Fetch ye s'more berries?"

"You bet," answered the poet fervently.

II

When next the old man appeared at John's "shank," the big basket was piled nearly to the handle with the fragrant dark fruit, behind which the old fellow's weak blue eyes glimmered with new enthusiasm.

"The's a squashin' lot of 'em," he piped cheerily. "I 'lowed if the' was more'n you wanted I could trade part of 'em at the sto' and git a pound o' tea for money; she was feelin' kinder ache-y this mawnin'. 'N'en I want'er buy 'er somethin' spang this trip, and I want you to tell me somethin'. Ef you was me would you buy 'er some musling curtains for the winder by 'er bed, or a pair o' silk stockin's?"

"Wouldn't the curtains be the more useful?" hazarded John uncertainly.

"Yas—I do no but whut they would. She'd love to hev some musling curtains. Reckon I'll try'n git some with a kinder

little frill on the aige, mebbby. The' ain't unly a little old peenk caliker curtain by 'er bed, now. But then, agin, Mis' Prince she promised Honey a pair o' silk stockin's, bang-up new ones, if she'd go 'long with her, and I'm powerful 'feared she'll git Honey away fum me."

"I should think"—John expressed himself bluntly—"if 'Honey' had any feeling she would stick by you, whatever offers Mrs. Prince makes her."

Uncle Jabez arose and took his basket,

with a patient shake of the head over John's non-comprehension of "gals."

"They ain't to blame, gals, fer likin' them little tricks and prettyfyin' things," he explained with gentle reproof; "they was made that-a-way; it's borned in 'em lak sugar in a mushmillin. Reckon"—he turned around, his interest in the vital question cropping eagerly out again—"atter all, I better buy 'er the stockin's this trip, and let the musling curtains wait till the nex'."

John watched the old man as he went hopping down the path like a cheery old wooden bird, and wondered within himself what manner of womankind "Honey" might be.

III

"Honey's gone."

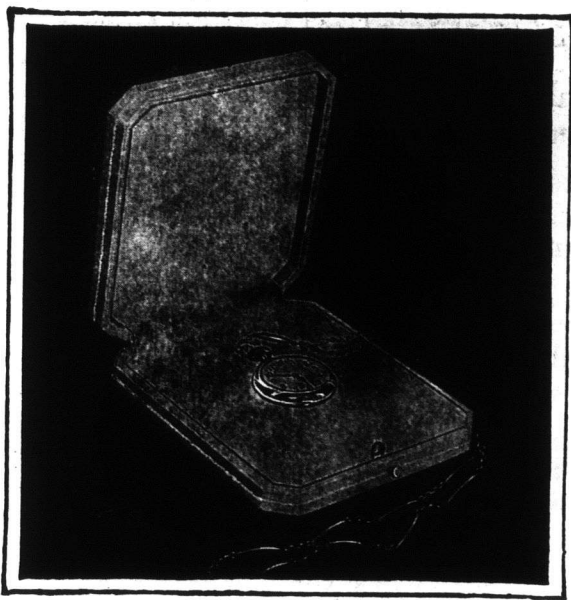
The old man, standing once more in

John's doorway with his basket of berries, looked lean and wilted. Something of stored freshness, like the sear crispness of an autumn leaf, was gone from his look and manner, but his puckered old mouth paraded an unsteady smile.

"You don't mean she has left you, to go away with Mrs. Prince?" John asked.

"Yas; went's mornin'. Leastways, I tole her good-by 'fore I left, and she'll be gone aginst I git back; Mis' Prince is startin' to-day. Honey settled it with her yisterday she'd go, 'cause, she sayed, it'd be betterin' us both fer her to go; mebbby it is—but law-law, I wisht the Lord could see His way 'cler to takin' me outer the world, now—yis, I do. Huh? The berries? Oh, you kin hev them ole berries and welcome; I unly fetched 'em, 'cause I wanted to come and tell you

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