

CHUG.

KATHARINE MELICK.
(For The Courier.)

The farmer's wife gathered her apron corners together as she stepped wearily over the low, broad fence into the wood-pile. "I wonder if David'll ever get that gate cut through," she thought, looking under her sun-bonnet rim off toward the wheat-field. The big red thresher stood motionless, with dust-clouds settling around it. The men were leading the horses toward the long, low stable.

She clambered quickly over the fence again, hurried to the kitchen, and let the sticks fall with a thud into the big wood-box, keeping a hand-full in the corner of her apron. These she poked energetically into the stove, and the fire blazed up with a flare that sent little puffs of smoke starting from the cracks around the stove lids.

Her eyes ached, as she stirred the great kettle of steamy potatoes, and ladled out smoking gravy and steaming joints. The men, fresh from the broad, dusty sunshine, hurried quickly through the stifling kitchen, almost catching their breath as they went. Filing past, rolling down their shirt-sleeves as they came in one by one from the basin by the door, they filled the room with a breath of machine-oil and perspiration, that made the woman feel faint. She stood in the door, and watched them with their forks heap great piles of meat and potato on their knife-blades.

"I wonder if that Marvin boy ever eat a square meal before?" she thought wearily. "He don't look over-fed. Them sleeves is a sight. There goes that rag into his tomatoes." She turned to cut a fresh plate of bread.

At night when she sat rocking the baby to sleep, on the little porch, her husband tramped heavily up the walk, and sat down on the stone steps.

"That straw was awful dusty," he remarked, taking off his wide straw hat. His wife rocked back and forth.

"The Marvin boy wants to stay here 'n sleep in the hay-mow tonight."

"What fur?"

"As near's I kin make out, he's had some fallin' out at home."

"Well, is there any use keeping up the fuss?" There was a rising inflection in the voice, that made itself felt, above the creak of the rocking-chair.

"I don't know, Janey," the farmer always said "Janey" when he recognized that tone, "but Chug he looked so down in the mouth."

"I never see one of them Marvins that didn't look down in the mouth."

There was silence for a moment. The farmer uprooted with his boot a small bind-weed growing by the scraper. "He said the hay looked so clean in the hay-mow."

The baby stirred, and began to suck its fists violently. The farmer's wife looked across the clover pasture at the field where two huge straw-stacks and one smaller pile stood, gigantic cones in the shadows.

"I epose you told him he could stay?"

"Yee."

But the next morning the farmer stood on the porch, and surveyed his dusty boots in new perplexity.

"You kin take your boy, Mrs. Marvin," he said, looking at his morning caller, who sat on the door-steps. "I aint wanting a hand."

"Taint that," said Mrs. Marvin, in a slow, dragging voice, looking helplessly at her hands, which were twisted and bent with rheumatism.—"taint that. Ef he didn't come here, he'd go som'er's else. He's that discontented."

The farmer looked over the road, across his second-bottom pasture, to the Marvin house. It stood, in its warped siding, with thick, black paper tacked on and hanging in shreds, as it had

stood ever since Jonas Marvin died, leaving his new house unfinished. It had been a long time since a Marvin had shown signs of discontent.

"It don't seem naterel fer him to go off that 'a way. He aint got nothin' to complain of. It jest seems as though we caint suit him."

David Woods shifted his boots uneasily. "I reckon he'll go back, after I've had a talk with him."

Mrs. Marvin shook her head helplessly. "No. Taint no kind o' use to argue with him, when he's made up his mind."

"F' Jep 'd go som'er's else"—the words died into unmeaning syllables. It was a way of speaking, peculiar to the Marvins—a hesitating, uncertain lapse, that often stopped a sentence before it was well begun.

"Well. Why doesn't Jefferson go somewhere else?"

Mrs. Marvin looked in a hurt way at her green shawl fringe. "He allus said no one felt fer him but me—a poor motherless boy with that malarial fever out'n his blood. It's come a year nex April sence the Texas herd went through, an' he aint never ben free from in sence the day he come to the kitchen door, an' asked me fer a bit o' somethin' strenghthenin'."

David pulled a leaf from the morning-glory vine which swung against his hat-brim as he stood before the door.

"He's a well meanin' critter. Gits along the best kind with the girls. But Chug, he seems to have a pick at him. I caint see" * * * the words fell off again.

The farmer took down the milk-pails which stood on a table under the vines. His visitor rose, and as she stood up, her loose coil of thin, black hair fell in a stringy twist down over her green shawl. She did not notice it. She walked slowly and stiffly away, saying half to herself, "It don't seem naterel."

"David!" came from the kitchen door. The farmer stopped, with one hand on the fence, the other holding the two tin-pails.

"Did that boy's mother come after him?"

"I'm blessed if I know what she come after."

A child's cry within, made the door close suddenly. Mrs. Woods went about her hot kitchen, with a frown coming and going between her two tired eyes.

"How can I help it," she said to the muffins, when she pulled them out of the oven, "if he's been brought up like a dog?"

She watched him across the table, as he bent his head over his plate, his dingy, brown hair drooping over his forehead, and took every thing that was handed to him without raising his eyes. He had a queer, nervous twitching around his mouth. His ragged sleeves seemed a reproach to her, when she looked at Joe's trim wrist-bands.

After breakfast, she saw him slouch away to the clover pasture, with a hammer and a can of staples. "He looks as if he'd do well to use some of 'em on his clothes," she said to herself.

Next morning, the new hand woke to find his soiled shirt neatly patched, hanging on the chair by his window. He said nothing when he came into the kitchen at breakfast time, but he stood long at the glass trying to make a part in his hair.

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The wagon creaked slowly over the stalks of corn that bent and broke under the neck-yoke. "Whoa!" said Chug, flinging a red ear of corn over the high "side-board." He tore open the dry husks with quick jerks, snapped them off, and sent the ears flying into the empty wagon-box. "Git up there! Whoa!" He scowled at a small nubbin he had just extracted from a huge, stiff husk, and tried not to look under his flapping hat-brim into the field below. He had

reached the top of the slope. In the stretch of low-land at the foot of the hill, a man was riding a harrow over the corn-stalks. The harrow had a kitchen chair nailed to the frame. A man sat in the chair, holding the lines straight out before him, with gloved hands. Chug sent the ears faster and faster into the wagon. As it turned, at the end of the row, he saw the low, black house with its ragged walls. A tall girl with bare feet and arms was carrying two wooden pails toward the trough not far from the door. He could see the little white pigs running from the barn—a queer barn with boarded windows and a roof sunken like a "sway-backed" horse. It had been the first home of the Marvins. Chug pulled up his blackened felt brim, and his mouth twitched as he turned his back to the girl and the pigs, and labored up the slope. When the end of the long row was reached, he stopped the team and tied them to a post. He swung over the fence, through the corner of pasture, to the low, red barn with its mow running over with new hay. He whistled as he looked in through the square window, and saw a little black colt lying on the fresh straw. As he moved away again, a long, black nose was thrust from the window, and the mare's head dropping between two small ears laid back, shook viciously at the big felt hat. Chug laughed.

When he came again to the top of the slope, the harrow was standing still in the field below. The girl stood beside it, and the man in the chair was holding a jug to his lips. The girl's black hair hung in lank locks that blew in the wind. Chug's lips jerked spasmodically as he stalked around three long rows, and went again to the window of the red barn.

The little colt was trying to stand on its ungainly legs. It fell, and bruised its knees on a long, splintered board that the black horse had kicked loose from the stall. Chug slid back the barn doors, reached through the slit that the broken piece had left in the partition, and pulled out the board. It seemed somehow drearily natural to him when the black horse let her heels fly at him as he stepped back.

When he came to the top of the hill, the man still sat in his chair, and the girl stood beside him, balancing on one bare foot on the top of one of the blue bars of the harrow-frame. It had been Jefferson's notion to paint the old harrow blue. Chug had not thought the paint much of an improvement. It had never looked quite so ugly to him before. He looked at the sun. Eleven—twelve of the long rows before dark. Six times to come to the foot of the slope. "Git up—Whoa," he growled.

But at the next row the harrow had disappeared. The girl had the horses at the well, and another girl with black hair was drawing a pail of water.

"Work's a wearin' 'im out," said Chug to the side-board. F'ed stayed 'th them cow-punchers there wouldn't ben a grease spot of 'im by now."

He did not look at the black colt again until the sun went down. The pointed ears and the white star in the forehead, the promise in the long legs and the tiny soft hoofs, were dimmed by a haze of blue harrow, and twisted with long horns of Texas cattle. As he drove past the barn, he looked in at the window. The colt seemed half standing, half lying against the side of the stall. He stopped, and sprang down over the front wheel into the stall. The colt had put its head through the hole in the broken board. It was hanging limp and still, with its fuzzy mane stiff along its stretched neck, and its knees bent under. The black horse started, but did not strike or kick. She stood still, whinnying. Chug lifted the colt, slid its neck along to the large end of the opening, and laid the little heap down

in the straw. Then he climbed back through the window, unhitched the horses, and led them to the watering-trough. He loosened the rope from the windlass, and let the bucket whizz down the well.

"Just hear that, Jane," said David Woods to his wife. "He's busted two well-buckets a' ready, an' this un leak."

"Jane" went on filling her apron with sticks of wood. "Taint so bad for a man to have some go about him," she answered somewhat sharply, and her husband watched her clamber over the fence, in silence. He walked slowly to the stable, stopping once to wonder whether "Janey" might have wanted him to carry the wood for her. Then he looked in at the barn-window, and forgot the wood. "Chug!" he shouted.

Chug slouched from the cow-shed with his hands in his pockets.

"What's the matter with the colt?"

"Got 'is head through that ere hole"—Chug stopped with a queer numbness in his arms, where the neck and the soft white hoofs had lain.

"I thought I told you to look in every hour or so."

"I did"—the face under the felt hat reddened. "He was all right about half-past-five, a tryin' to stand up. When I come in, his head was through the partition."

David Woods put his hand on the dead colt's side. "I'd ought to looked after it myself," he said, with the short, harsh tone of a slow man, seldom angry. "A Marvin couldn't be expected to look after nothin'. Supper's ready."

Chug's mouth twitched violently, and he did not move, for a minute. Then a tired voice called, "Supper!" from the porch.

He ate (his supper) in silence, dropping his head over his plate, as on the first evening he had come from home. He buttered his corn-bread twice, and gulped down his coffee without cream or sugar. Then he got up, stumbling over the baby's tin horse, and shuffled out to the barn.

All the way out to the "bone-patch," he did not look at the thing dragging by the end of his halter rope. He could hear from the red barn Joe and Mary Woods, playing "Ante-over." At the end of the pasture he stopped and stared a long time down at the black, ragged house, where two girls, with long, brown arms were carrying slop to the pigs.

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The baby was crying. Mary was at school. The farmer's wife pelted, and coaxed, and rocked the little, wailing mite, and at last, when her potatoes had boiled dry, set them aside, took the crying child in one arm, and started for the well. She must have some water, if the men were to have any dinner. She pumped the bucket full with unsteady jerks, and started up the path to the house. The sun shone hot on her shoulders, thin shoulders, bent and narrow. The bonnet fell over her face so that she could not see. She threw back her head, and the bonnet fell down, hanging by the strings. The sun shone on her head and seemed to scorch her hair. She stopped, and put down the pail.

Someone picked it up. "I was jest a comin' to the house," said Chug, apologetically, swinging the bucket up from her stiff fingers, with a splash that wet her apron. The farmer's wife changed the baby to the other arm and walked on, too tired to say more than "Thank you." She knew that the boy had probably never done as much for his mother or sisters. She watched him, with a kind of wonder, sit down on the steps, and make queer noises to the baby noises like a frog croaking, which at first made it cry harder, and afterward made it open its round eyes in astonishment.

Chug was in a queer state of elation. (She would have wondered more, if she