

Print, Currier & Ives

Helen Pundt

Following is a second excerpt from a longer work written by Helen Pundt. A frequent contributor of both poetry and prose, her "Hudson River Interlude" appeared in the December issue. The story itself is laid in 1844. In her own words, Miss Pundt says: "This is a section of what I hope will be a completed larger work. It is in a sense a practice piece, since greater consideration has been given to the plot while matters of mood, local color, and consistencies of character will have to wait for a later writing."

BEYOND the bend in the road, an old stone house sat sphinx-like in the morning sun. Wagon tracks curved around it to a group of outhouses. Through the open door of the wellhouse, Sara Lynn saw a shadowy, skirted figure working her arms in a slow up-and-down motion. At the sound of their approach, the figure moved to the door and stood for a moment blinking in the light. She was a girl of about twelve with braids to the waist of her faded blue dress. A large mended apron fell below her knees.

"Hello," shouted Jonathan. The girl stared, and then gathering her skirts in her hands ran past them and into the house. They led their horses to the shade of a maple tree. From the half-open door came the clatter of pans and the clipped chatter of voices. Jonathan left Sara Lynn with the horses and moved with his quick bounding step to the porch of the house where he knocked sharply. The clatter within ceased. Somewhere a door banged to, and Sara Lynn saw a small tow-headed boy run swiftly on fat legs to the barn. Jonathan looked toward her with his eyebrows together. He bent his head as if listening. Then he knocked again smartly. After a moment, a tall, bony woman pushed through the door and stepped onto the porch so close to Jonathan that it seemed as if she must have trod on his toes. She shut the door behind her and stood with her back pressed against it. Sara Lynn heard Jonathan's deep, round tones and the shrill female voice that somehow did not fit the bony frame. The woman

opened the door and slipped quickly through. Jonathan came down the steps and across the wagon ruts.

"Friendly folks, these tenants of yours," he said. He took a pouch from his pocket, opened it, and pinched a small amount of snuff between his fingers. The smell of it was sweet.

"What did the woman say?"

Jonathan laughed shortly. He raised his voice to a falsetto.

"Don't know as there's much we can do, but I'll fetch my old man."

"How rude," said Sara Lynn. "We should tell father."

Jonathan raised his eyebrows and smiled a crooked, half-dimpled smile.

"Mustn't try to remake the world, Sary," he said. She blushed. He talked as if she were a child. But the woman was rude and ought to be put in her place. After all, this was her father's land.

Her horse wriggled his wet nose into her hand, and she petted him. The noise of swishing horsetails mingled with the hum of insects.

Jonathan had bent down and was examining the sore hoof again when a thin, weather-beaten man approached them. He had a seamed face and held his hands awkwardly. But his voice was brisk.

"What seems to be the trouble, sir?"

Jonathan straightened up.

"Think it's a pebble under the shoe," he said, "but I can't be sure."

The farmer squatted down on his thin haunches. His faded overalls were patched at the knees.

"Guess we can fix it," he said. He looked at Sara Lynn with the same shrewdness that she had seen in the eyes of Tabby. Sara Lynn felt small and uncomfortable.

"I'll get ye a chair on the stoop, Miss," he said. She followed him across the wagon ruts, stepping carefully. He opened the door and shouted.

"Marthy, bring a chair for the young lady." As Jonathan led the horse around the end of the house, the gaunt woman maneuvered a chair through the door and banged it on the stone floor. She went back in, clanging the door behind her.

"Whew!" said Sara Lynn. The chair was straight-backed and rough. She sat down gingerly and unpinned her hat, running her fingers through her moist hair.

She had felt so gay and grown-up earlier that morning, and now everything was spoiled. There must be something about me, she thought. People never treat Lucy like this. They always either pat me on the head or act as if I were in the way. After her debut, she would wear her hair differently, pulled low like Nora's with womanly knots at the back of her neck. And she would walk taller somehow. Maybe if she practiced again with books on her head as she and Lucy used to do. She would drive her own carriage and hold her head high. People would bow and say, "How do you do, Mrs. Russ." Dear Saints! Whatever made her say that. Mrs. Russ. Mrs. Jonathan Russ. She began to write it with the tip of her finger on her velvet knee. A door slammed at the back of the house, and the young girl, whom they had first seen, walked rapidly toward the wellhouse. She was watching Sara Lynn over her shoulder, but turned abruptly when she saw that Sara Lynn was looking. She stumbled and half fell, but straightened herself quickly and disappeared into the cool shadows. Then Sara Lynn heard the swish of the butter churn, and could see dimly the motion of her arms.

Sara Lynn would have liked a drink from the well but decided she would give no one else a chance to be rude. Another sound came to her ears now, and for the first time she saw that the field was full of men with scythes. That was strange. She could have sworn they weren't there before. Sun blinked from the curved blades, and the long sweeping motion of many arms made her drowsy.

I wonder what time it is, she thought, and gave a start when she saw that a tow-headed child was leaning against the step staring at her.

"Hello," she said. He put his head down and looked at his wiggling toes. His trousers were too big. Likely they had belonged to someone else and were cut off at the knee. His shirt was patched at the underarms and down the front, and even then it was threadbare in spots.

They certainly don't treat their children well, she thought. And with all this good land, too, they can't be so poor.

"What's your name?"

"Gabe."

He put his hand in his pocket and pulled out something white.

"Look!" he said.

"What is it?"

“My tooth; pulled it yesterday with a string. See.” He drew back the corners of his mouth like a gargoyle and showed her a gap in his dentals.

“My, you were brave,” said Sara Lynn.

“Uh huh.” He moved closer and held out his dirty palm.

“It’s just a little one,” he said, holding up the tooth for closer inspection.

“What’re you going to do with it?”

“Wish on it. Do you know Dr. Boughton?” he asked suddenly.

“No,” said Sara Lynn, “I don’t believe I do.”

“Oh.” He ran his hand timidly along the velvet fold of her skirt.

“You’re pretty,” he said.

“Thank you. Why did you ask me about Dr. Boughton?”

“He was here.”

At that point the door opened, and the shrill voice shouted, “Gabe! Come in here.” The child ran his fingers quickly over the velvet skirt.

“Bye,” he said.

The chair seat was hard. Sara Lynn stood up and walked to the end of the porch. A slim pile of wood lay just below her against the wall of the house. From where she stood, she could look off to the barns. Outside the nearest one, a wagon sagged against the ground with one wheel propped beside it. Hanging from the back end were thonged flails for threshing. Jonathan and the farmer stood together outside the barn door. The farmer was talking, moving his awkward hands. Jonathan had his fists in his pocket. His head was thrust forward and his lips were puckered.

Why doesn’t he come, thought Sara Lynn. She watched him for several minutes, hoping to catch his eye. He turned, saw her, and waved. The farmer smiled as he came onto the porch.

“Tired of waiting, Miss Blakely?”

So, he knew her name.

“It was rather long,” she said.

“If ye’ll just set down again, I’ll fetch some milk.”

Sara Lynn started to protest, but Jonathan shook his head. The farmer shouted to Marthy, and after a time they both came out with glasses of milk. The woman left the door standing ajar, and heat poured from the kitchen.

Good heavens, Sara Lynn thought, she must have suffocated in there. "Marthy" wiped her face with her apron.

"This is Mr. Russ, Marthy, and this, I expect, is Miss Blakely."

"How de doo," said the woman, "Hot, isn't it?"

Sara Lynn nodded and sipped the milk. The woman stood awkwardly with the apron between her hands. Gabe peeked his towhead around the corner of the door.

"Fine young man you have there," said Jonathan. Gabe sidled out and stood with back pressed against the wall. Jonathan reached into his pocket and held out a silver dollar.

"What will you give me for this?" he said.

"I ain't got anything," said the child. In turn, he searched his pockets bringing out a piece of string, a nail, a chestnut, and the prized tooth.

"Will you trade me for the tooth?"

Gabe hesitated. Sara Lynn watched the woman. Her eyes were anxiously on the dollar, but she stood straight as a ramrod and said nothing.

"He's wishing on that tooth," said Sara Lynn.

Jonathan shot her a quick, twinkling look.

"How about the buckeye, then?"

Gabe brightened immediately.

"It's a very special one," he said, "See, it has a wart."

"Fine." Jonathan handed him the dollar and took the chestnut, thrusting it into his pocket.

Sara Lynn gave her glass to the farmer's wife and thanked her. The farmer walked over to the horses with them. Sara Lynn felt the firm pressure of Jonathan's arm as he helped her to mount. Then she waved to Gabe who stood swinging his foot against the porch.

"Was someone ill?" she asked as she and Jonathan left the yard.

"Ill? No."

"Then why was Dr. Boughton here?"

"Huh? Boughton? Now that you mention it, I believe the grandmother is ill."

He looked at her with his eyebrows drawn.

"How do you know Dr. Boughton?"

"I don't," said Sara Lynn, "Gabe told me he was here."

"Oh! Yes, that's right. The grandmother's ill."

Jonathan dug his heels into the horse and started off at a

gallop. Sara Lynn followed behind. Her hat was not pinned securely and flopped rhythmically over one eye. Her horse panted to the top of the hill.

"Jonathan," she called, "Wait, please." He slowed down then and waited for her.

"Sorry," he said, "I wasn't thinking."

"Jonathan, what's the matter?"

"Matter? Nothing. We're late though, and your father won't like it."

"You're not angry about anything?"

"Of course not." She pinned her hat more securely and they moved forward.

"What did you say to the farmer to make him so friendly?"

"Oh, he's friendly enough. They were busy and didn't like to be interrupted."

Sara Lynn and Jonathan turned onto the river road. The water far below tossed back sunlight like a juggler with a thousand dazzling balls. Small ships with bloated sails rode the Hudson like birds.

Here it was that Jonathan had kissed her. She looked shyly at him from under the brim of her hat, but his head was bent forward, and he seemed to be studying the mane of his horse. Without warning, he dug his spurs into the animal and went forward at a gallop. Sara Lynn followed at a steady pace, and this time she did not try to stop him.

Complaint

Phyllis Wendt

I don't mind pulling band-wagons
 While others take a seat,
 But curses on the ones who sit
 Behind and drag their feet.