

A Soft Soap Affair.

BY C. B. LEWIS.



ARMER TOBIAS JOHNSON came up the path from the barn with a big tin pail of milk in his hand, and passing it in at the kitchen door to his wife, who stood waiting to receive it, he went to the rain barrel at the corner of the house and washed his hands. Instead of going inside to wipe them on the kitchen towel, he flung the water off his hands and let them dry in the warm evening air as he looked at the blossoming peach trees scattered about. Presently he sat down on the steps, and when the woman inside had put away the last pan of milk, he said : —

“ Mariar, what about Sue ? ”

“ Well, what about her ? ” queried the wife, as she came to the door and looked down upon him.

“ Somethin’s wrong, I take it,” he said after awhile.

“ I don’t see as there is anything wrong. Sue’s got spunk, same as I have, and she won’t let nobody walk on her. If she did I’d be the first to get mad about it. A girl who hain’t got spunk don’t amount to nothin’.”

“ There’s a difference between havin’ spunk and bein’ foolish, I take it,” said the farmer as he tore a sliver off the top step and began breaking it up in his fingers.

“ Well, Tobias Johnson, our Sue ain’t nobody’s fool, and you needn’t worry about it,” replied the wife in earnest tones. “ It ain’t any of your business, anyway ! What have you got to do with young folkses’ quarrels ? ”

“ Sam Andrews is a pretty likely feller, seems to me.”

“ But he ain’t the only one in all this world, not by a jug-full ! Our Sue needn’t break her heart over him for fear nobody else’ll come along. She’s only got to nod her head to have half a dozen beaux. What you takin’ up for Sam Andrews for ? ”

"I ain't exactly takin' up, Mariar," replied the husband as he half turned towards her, "but it seems foolish-like for Sue to get mad and mop the airth with him. They've bin lovin' away for two whole years, and you know they was expectin' to get married in the fall. I've knowed all about it for a month, though I hain't said nothin'. Sue's cryin' half the time, and Sam's spendin' half his nights walkin' up and down the road and lookin' at our house. He used to be here every night in the week, but now he dasn't come at all."

"Tobias Johnson, I am surprised!" exclaimed the wife as she got a little nearer to him.

"What about?"

"That you should have a single word to say about this matter. It ain't none of your business and you don't want to meddle. When me and Sue can't run this house we'll let you know. I'm her mother, and I guess I know what's best for her. If you want to stick up for Sam Andrews, instead of your own flesh and blood, go ahead, but it won't do him any good. If you see to the wheat and corn and hogs and things, that'll be 'nuff for you to worry over."

"Didn't I say I wasn't stickin' up for nobody?" protested the husband. "I guess I can ask what's the matter around here without stickin' up, as you call it. Hain't Sue my darter, same as yours?"

"Very well, Tobias, I'll tell you what's the matter," replied the wife as she sat down beside him. "That Sam Andrews went home from Aunt Mary Tabor's quiltin'-bee with one of them Jones girls,—Lucinda Jones. Just took her on his arm and walked off as brassy as you please, and when somebody said Sue would be mad about it he said he didn't care a — a —."

"A what, Mariar?"

"Well, I never swore in my life, and may the Lord forgive me now, but he said he didn't care a con—continental! If I'm struck dead for repeatin' sich awful oaths you'll have to get along the best way you can."

"But Sue wasn't there that night," said the husband.

"No, she wasn't, but that makes no difference. It's the principle me and Sue looks at—the principle and the swearin', to

say nothing of the brass. If Sue had been there alone d'ye 'spose she'd have let one of them Parker boys seen her home — seen her home and said she didn't care a con — continental what Sam Andrews thought about it? Never, Tobias Johnson — never!"

"Must a had a spat afore that."

"Spat! Spat! Sam Andrews was tryin' to boss her, and tellin' that he was goin' to do this and he was goin' to do that, just as if she hadn't no spunk and no mind of her own. She just brung him up with a sudden jerk, same as you do a calf with a rope around it's neck, and he walked off with that Jones girl for spite."

"Well?" queried Tobias as he fought away a flying bug which seemed determined to alight on his nose.

"Well, as he was the one who walked off he can walk back, only as he walks back he's got to humble himself. It's all his fault that there was a quarrel, and me and Sue will give him enough of it afore he's through."

"'Sposin' he never comes back?"

"'Sposin' the sun should fall down on our pig-pen at noon tomorrow! No feller hain't goin' to stand out agin the girl he loves more'n a month or two. He's got to stand out for awhile on account of his pride, but he'll come crawlin' around sooner or later. It's for Sam Andrews to crawl — not Sue Johnson — and don't you worry that he won't do it! Just leave me and Sue alone and it will be all right."

"When there's been a quarrel a feller has got to have a show to crawl, hain't he?" asked the husband after a silence.

"Yes, of course," assented the wife, "and that's what we are goin' to give Sam Andrews. We don't expect to see him come bustin' in here of a night, nor to send her a letter, but there are different ways, Tobias — different ways. Not bein' a woman you can't understand 'em nor help this case one blessed bit. I'm sayin', same as you, that Sam Andrews is a good feller, and he dotes on Sue and she dotes on him; but a young feller is like a calf, — give him too much rope and it ain't good for him. Sue ain't one of the kind to be bossed around like a nigger, and Sam won't step quite so high when he gits through with this thing!"

That ended the conversation. The wife returned to her kitchen, and the husband went down the path to close the barn doors for the night, and stop on his way back to see if the hens had all taken to their roosting-poles. Next day Tobias noticed that lye was running from the leach, and two days later he was asked to get the barrel of soap-grease out of the cellar. Before doing so he said:—

“Ain’t you about a month ahead of time on this soft soap business, Mariar?”

“I may be a month ahead or a month behind,” she replied, “but that makes no difference to you. I ain’t goin’ around the neighborhood borrowin’ soft soap when I’ve got all the materials on hand to make it. While you are about it you can get that big kettle out of the woodshed and fix for a fire in the backyard.”

“Mariar, how you goin’ to fix it about Sue and Sam?” asked the man, as he stood chewing at a twig he had broken off a lilac bush.

“Tobias Johnson, you go along!” she indignantly exclaimed. “I don’t know what has got into you lately. I used to brag that you was no hen-hussy, but for the last few days you have gone around pokin’ your nose into everything. Didn’t I tell you the other day to leave things to me?”

“Yes, you did, but —”

“But you want to poke! That’s the way with a man. He’ll brag and blow around about havin’ no curiosity, and then every time a hen cackles he’ll run his legs off to see whether she’s laid an egg or been skeart by a skunk! Tobias, you mind your business and get them things ready!”

After supper on the evening of the next day, a fire was started under the big kettle while he was milking the two cows, and he noticed that Sue was attending it. He handed in the milk and stood and watched her for awhile, and then entered the kitchen to say:—

“Mariar, I guess I’ll grease that sore finger of mine with a lectle mutton taller; and what’s Sue all dressed up for to make soft soap?”

“There’s the mutton taller on the shelf,” bluntly replied the wife.

He took down the piece of raw tallow, warmed it at the stove, gently rubbed it over the crack in his left fore-finger, and now and then glanced out of the open door at Sue hovering over the soap-kettle. There was some fire and a good deal of smoke. Soft soap had been made in that family for the last twenty-five years, but always by the wife, and always in her old "duds." Sue, who was twenty years old, had never taken any part in the task, except to feed the fire during her childhood. To see her not only take the work off her mother's hands all of a sudden, but to have her "Sunday clothes" on in addition, was a puzzle to the father. He suppressed his curiosity as long as possible, and then replaced the tallow and said: —

"Mariar, Sue's got a mighty funny streak on, seems to me."

"There you go agin!" promptly replied the wife, as she polished away at the bottom of the milk-pan. "I don't see nothin' funny about it. If Sue wants to learn how to make soft soap that's to her credit. Every girl orter know how afore she's married."

"But she needn't put on her Sunday clothes, need she?"

"She can do as she pleases, Tobias Johnson, so long as she earned them clothes teachin' school! If you keep on losin' your senses you'll have to go to an asylum afore the year is out! Now, then, if you can possibly manage to survive for the next hour I'll have sunthin' to tell you. If your curiosity is so great that it will bust you all to flinders then I'll try and give you a decent funeral. Get the chores done up as soon as you can for we're goin' to bed early to-night."

Tobias sauntered out to the fire and looked to see if Sue had placed a sassafras stick across the top of the kettle to keep the contents from boiling over. Then he went down to the barn, the pig-pen, and the hen-house, and by the time he got back to the kitchen it was dark and the housework was done for the night.

"It's only eight o'clock, but we are goin' to bed," said the wife.

"It's an hour too airy," he protested.

"You wind up that clock and come along, and don't lock the door, neither! I used to think you could see through a barn when all the doors was wide open, but I guess you can't. You needn't say nothin' to Sue afore you come upstairs."

"Is she goin' to stay out there all night?" he asked.

"Wind up 'tother side of that clock and come along! I never did see such a thick-headed man in all my born days!"

He finished winding the clock, shut up the stove, left the kitchen door on the latch, and followed his wife upstairs to find her looking out of an open window on the highway. As he sat down in a chair and sighed heavily she asked:—

"Tobias, have you seen Sam Andrews within a day or two?"

"No," he replied, "hain't seen hide nor hair of him."

"Well, I have! He's been right by this very house at least six times in two days. Each time he pretended not to look, but he was lookin' all the time, and he'd have given his old boots to ketch sight of Sue. He's a-dyin' to see her—just a-dyin'."

"How d' yo know he is?"

"'Cause it's natural—just as natural as it is for cats to eat grass afore it's goin' to rain. When we was courtin' we had a quarrel, and you was almost on the point of suicide when I give you a chance to make up. Sue is givin' Sam a chance to crawfish."

"How is she doin' it?" asked the husband with sudden interest.

"Are you stone blind, Tobias? Can't ye see beyond the tip of your nose? Sam Andrews wants to see Sue and say he's sorry and won't never do it again and then make up. He's got pride. His pride won't let him come walkin' into the house to ask for her."

"Then how's he goin' to see her?"

"Land o' massy, but what a man! Seems to me you don't know 'nuff to kick pumpkins about! What's Sue out doors for?"

"To make soft soap."

"But ain't she all alone? It won't be half an hour afore Sam Andrews will come spookin' around and discover that she's all by herself out there. Then what will foller? He'll come and speak to her, and they'll jaw around for awhile and then make up. Me and Sue have been plannin' this thing for two weeks, and yet you couldn't put two and two together!"

"By gum, ma, but I wouldn't a-believed it!" exclaimed the husband as a broad smile came to his wrinkled face and he felt a wave of relief sweep over him.

"Me and Sue ain't chickens!" she replied, with great complacency, as she looked out of the window again.

"And Sam will surely come, will he?"

"Of course he will. Got to come."

"And they'll make up?"

"Bound to; never knowed it to fail. Hear that whistle down the road? That's Sam Andrews as sure's you're born! He's a-whistlin' 'The Sweet By and By,' and he's the only one around here who whistles it. That's Sue's favorite tune, and he knows it, and he wants her to know he's goin' past. I can see him now, and he's walkin' on our side of the road."

"But he's goin' right by," whispered the husband as he got down on his knees beside his wife to peer out.

"But he'll come back — bound to come back. He's jest spyin' out things. There he stops! He sees the fire and he sees Sue, and I'll bet the sweat's startin' out all over him! Oh, he don't care a con — continental what Sue thinks, eh? Well, you'd better believe he does! I can almost hear his heart thumpin' clear up here, and I know he's weak in the knees."

"Is — is he comin' in?" asked the husband with bated breath after a moment.

"He is!" she replied as she settled back a little. "Tobias Johnson, Sam Andrews is climbin' right over the fence and headin' for Sue, and we can go to bed and feel that all will be well to-morrer mornin'."

"But mebbe Sue won't make up," he whispered with alarm in his voice.

"Mebbe you don't know squashes from turnips," replied the wife as she rose up. "Sue's goin' to be upish for awhile, of course, like any other girl that's got spunk, but she won't carry it too far. She'll know when the time comes to give in. Tobias, the Lord be praised, and now we'll leave the rest to Sue. I thought and thought, and I finally struck on makin' soft soap, and it was the very thing to do."

When Sam Andrews saw the fire and the figure moving about he did not wait to open the gate, but climbed the fence instead. Then dodging the grape arbor and the well-curb he passed around to the rear of the house and came to a halt within ten feet of Sue.

She had heard his whistle; she had heard him climbing the fence; she knew he was standing a little ways off. She did not look up. On the contrary, the fire needed fixing just about then, and as she poked the brands together she began to sing. That was to signify that she was not thinking of suicide because of the quarrel. After two or three moments Sam uttered a cough and said:—

“Miss Johnson, I happened to be passing, you know, and I remembered that your father was speaking about some squash seeds. I’ve hunted ’em up and here they are. I thought it was your father out here, and so I stopped.”

“Isn’t it rather late in the season to plant squash seeds, Mr. Andrews?” sarcastically inquired Sue as she moved around to the other side of the fire and tried to appear very busy.

“Well, y-e-s, but these are late squashes, you know. Then your — your father isn’t out here this evenin’?”

“He doesn’t seem to be out here, Mr. Andrews.”

“And your mother — is she quite well?”

“She’s able to crawl about, thank you.”

After a silence of two long minutes, during which the lye reached the boiling point, Sam shuffled his feet uneasily and said:—

“Well, Miss Johnson, I didn’t intend to occupy your valuable time, and I beg your pardon, and will be moving along.”

“Oh! don’t mention it,” she replied. “Father will always be glad to see you, with or without squash seeds. Is your ma’s rheumatism about the same, Mr. Andrews?”

“About the same, Miss Johnson, thank you. Quite romantic your being out here all alone in the night watching the soap kettle.”

“Perhaps it’s just as romantic as walking two miles at midnight with Lucinda Jones. How is Lucinda this evening?”

“Who walked two miles with Lucinda Jones at midnight!”

“You did, and as I hear you’re engaged I want to congratulate you. Perhaps ma’ll give you some of this soap to rub the freckles off her face, but you can never find a cure for her big feet!”

It was half an hour later, and farmer Johnson had fallen asleep, when his wife shook him and whispered:—

“Tobias, you must be mightily concerned about Sue, to go to sleep afore you’re in bed a minute! Get up!”

“W-what for?”

“Come along to the back window, and don’t you dare cough or sneeze or speak a loud word! There, look at that!”

“Gee-whizz!” exclaimed the husband in her ear, “but it’s Sam and Sue! Sam and Sue!”

“Of course it is!”

“And sittin’ on the wash-bench right close up to each other!”

“Just so, Tobias.”

“And by gum if he haint got his arm around her and is holdin’ her hand, and that soap’s biled over and put the fire out!”

“Let her bile, Tobias; let her bile! I’ve got most a barrel full down cellar, and won’t have to make any new till fall. And now what d’ye think?”

“Ma Johnson,” he whispered, “you’ve gone and done it!”

“Didn’t I say I would?”

“Just planned it all in your own head and carried it out, and Sam and Sue have made up and will get married. Ma, look at me! We was savin’ up them six dozen eggs and ten pounds of butter to get me a Sunday hat and a box of paper collars, but to-morrow mornin’ you take ’em right to town and buy yourself the nicest dress in all America, and on top of that you may run me in debt for a new pair of shoes!”

“Don’t fly off the handle, Tobias Johnson,” said the good woman as she kissed him in the darkness and led the way back to their bedroom.

