

"LITTLE BOY BLUE"

The little toy dog is covered with dust. But sturdy and staunch he stands; And the little toy soldier is red with rust, And his musket molds in his hands. Time was when the little toy dog was new And the soldier was passing fair, That was the time when our Little Boy Blue Kissed them and put them there.

SINNERS

"We have to keep it kind of warm in here because of their not getting any exercise—they get chilly," the matron explained. "Don't they get out?" "Not this weather. And they sort of lose interest—"

The matron glanced at the visitor and the latter, a big quiet-eyed woman in a handsome, dowdy coat, looked back at her dubiously. "They haven't got much ambition left when they get here!" the matron said, with a laugh.

The other frowned faintly, as if in vague pain. She followed in silence through the big clean impersonal halls that smelled of coffee, disinfectants, air heaters and herded, over-clothed humanity. "I didn't get your name?" "Huggett. Mrs. Joe Huggett."

"And you're some kin to Lucas Rippey?" "Oh, no. Just a friend." Mrs. Huggett cleared her throat; her serious face had turned a little pale.

"State's prison?" "Yes, at first it was," he admitted.

his eyes fixed on space as he remembered. "I wa'n't much more than a kid, and some of them men wa'n't fit companions for man or beast. I was sickly, too; I'd be'n raised in the Bayliss County Orphan's Home, you know."

"I didn't know that!" she said, stricken. After a moment she added, "One minute, the last thing I was thinkin' of, was you. The next, I was tellin' Ma and gran'ma this long rigmarole about how I seen you up by the Madison place runnin', and how you was buryn' something up near the birch grove in Holley's Woods."

"I never was anywhere near the Madison house that day," the old man offered, as she paused. His blue eyes were fixed upon her with a sort of innocent, dispassionate expectancy. It was almost as if she were entertaining him with a story.

"You told 'em that in court," she nodded. For the first time anguish came into her voice. "Oh, why, why, why," she began, knotting her big work-worn hands together, "why didn't they believe you, instead of takin' the word of a crazy girl of thirteen! Mind you," she went on suddenly, "after that crazy Easter afternoon, when I'd told my mother this yarn, I lay awake all night, and I made up my mind that I'd come out with the truth the next day and tell them I'd been lyin'."

"But I couldn't get my courage up for it at breakfast, and at school, in recess, I kinder began to let it out to the other girls that I knew something about Kane Madison's murder. It was just too easy. "Walkin' home from school, I remember, the wickedness of what I was doin' suddenly came over me, and I spoke right out loud, while he was gain' by Bassett's Ford. "This has got to stop!" I says, as loud as that."

"But then when I got home Judge Robbins was there—the old judge himself, that us kids were all so scared of. And he held out his hand to me, gently and friendly, and he says, 'Come here, Emma. You're only a little girl, he says, I want you should promise me that you'll not say any more about poor Kane Madison and the Rippey boy. Will you do that?' he says. "Well, a great relief came over me, and I felt like I was saved. It never occurred to me that he was holdin' me as an important witness."

"I thought my share of the whole thing was over, and when the newspaper sent me out to get my picture the next day I was just as happy as I thought I'd be, gettin' my name into the paper. Judge Robbins had told me not to say nothin' more about anything, and yet I was gettin' all the excitement of bein' pointed out and talked about."

I would find you in a State Home, or that somewhere, sooner or later, I'd be spint' it. "You spent sixteen years in prison for a crime you didn't commit, and it was my fault, she summarized it. "I don't know, Lucas, that anything in the world can make it up to you," she added, and there was a wistful softening in her heavy face as she looked at him.

"I guess I didn't amount to much, anyways," he said gallantly. "That's neither here nor there; that don't lessen what I done," she persisted. "Well, I always say I've had more time than most men for readin'," Lucas said cheerfully. "I'm a great hand for a book. Adventures—I seem to share 'em with the authors!"

"I'm well fixed," the woman said, not listening. "And you live in California?" "I was tellin' you. I've got a ranch—chickens and fruit—outside a place called Santa Clara." He looked from the high institution window at barren fields level under January's snow. "You don't have no snow there?" "My alfalfa was three inches up this New Year's day."

"For pity's sakes!" "I had a big room fixed off the kitchen for my father," Mrs. Huggett presently observed. "He had a sciatric, and he couldn't climb stairs. I have a radio down there and a phonograph and an airtight. He was comfortable there. I've got an old car you could drive. "I'd do for you," she said humbly, thickly her voice trembling, and her big bare hands beginning to tremble, too. "I'd do for you just as don't for Father. There's lots you'd like to do about the place. There's a Portuguese girl helps me with dishes and cleanin', but I'm one to run my own kitchen and I'd like to have someone to cook for agin."

"I don't know as I understand what you're drivin' at," Lucas said, clearing his throat. "She's only a little way makin' up to you," she persisted stubbornly. "Why," he said kindly, pityingly, "what you done you done as a little girl. I wouldn't hold that against you! Nobody wouldn't. You seen a good chance to show off—children'll do that—that ain't nothin'."

"I never thought, if I ever did find you, that you'd kill me, sayin' that," she observed, as he paused. "I'll get you your ticket, I'll make all arrangements, and I'll meet you at San Jose station," she added. The tears had come into her eyes, with the difficult words; tears stood in his bright old blue eyes as he answered her. "Why, I don't hardly suppose you're askin' me to leave the State Home, Emma?" he faltered.

"I don't know how they could," she said, as if of a loser, he remarked. "I was the kind of fellow hard-workin' men like to git in to jail."

Her sad face brightened only a shade. "Oh, yes!" she said. "Yesterday was the first. I put some money—fifty dollars—to your account."

"I don't need money!" he protested. "I've got some of that check you sent the superintendent. I haven't no more use for money here than Captain has!" The dog leaped at the kindly old hand that dropped to his shaggy head. "I'd pay a foreman more'n that, Lucas."

"Why, but sho!" he said. "I eat my weight in butter and eggs every day." "You don't eat much," she said quietly. "I'll just accumulate there at the bank," he said stubbornly. "It's a good place for it."

"I want to tell you something that may make you feel good Emma," the man said suddenly. "I've kinder wanted to say it for some time, and I may'st say it now. I'd live the life I've lived all over agin, to have it come out like it has now." "There isn't any money in the bank that could buy your sayin' that," she said simply. "We don't know what governs our destinies," he went on. "What I'd have be'n without them long years of incarceration, who can say? I was destined to eat your 'em, and you destined to endure your heart out with all that for the best."

"You wasn't nothing but a kid, Emma." "I knew better'n that, though." "I certainly would enjoy livin' on a farm agin," he said. "I'm country-bred, and trees and fields seem to say something to me." She was looking at him wistfully; there was something of humble entreaty, something of admiration, in her dull look. "There's just one thing more to say," she began abruptly. "I want you to understand that the obligation in this matter isn't on your side. It seems to me you've already done more for me, Lucas, than I'm ever goin' to be able to do for you."

Six weeks later she walked down to the barn, on a hot March morning, to tell him that luncheon was ready. Supper was never anything but warm-over biscuits and tea and fruit sauce and such nursery fare, but luncheon was a daily triumph for Emma, who was a master hand with chicken tapoca gravy and asparagus omelet. The air was blue and singing, this morning, and all about the white farm-house the lilacs were in flower. The yard was pleasantly littered with ropes and planks and odds and ends; a bridal wreath had burst like a pop-corn ball under the low window of Lucas's kitchen chamber, and over the slope of the hill-side plum trees were white masses of bloom against a celestial sky.

"I don't know as it matters much what you do with your life long's you end it right," Lucas said thoughtfully. "I know. But as if there wasn't trouble enough in the world, to send an innocent man to prison! Lucas," she added abruptly, in a quickened voice, "who did kill Kane Madison?"

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Everything delighted him, every shaking, every breakfast, every hour of his busy pattering, day was a separate delight. He discussed the chickens as if they had been human entities; the old plow horses came over to the corral fence, and rested their great shaggy heads there, when Lucas was busy in the farm-yard; the Airedale crushed his hairy length against Lucas's porch door at night, and whined and muttered from time to time in a very ecstasy of love.

She regarded the sunshiny old face wistfully, painfully. "Nothing hasn't ever embittered you, Lucas." "No," he agreed, considering. "But weren't you thunderstruck when I, the minister's niece, come out with all that rigmarole?" "Yes, I was, as I recall it. I was real surprised."

"It was my evidence that done it, Lucas." "Emma, can't you forgive and forget?" "Emma laughed in desperation, seeing the sympathetic look upon his kindly rosy old face. "I tell you there's many a millionaire of sixty-five that'd change places with me!" he assured her over and over agin. "One hot July noon he and she were alone on the shabby, shadowy side porch. The sky was whitish-blue, the fig tree shadows seemed to pulsate with a green light. In the orderly doorway, filling the air with pungent scent. Chickens were puffing and complaining in the shadow of the stable lane; the windmill wheel was lifeless. Now and then the dog sighed and moaned faintly in his sleep."

Emma always restlessly active, was stringing beans with quick expert movements of knife and fingers. Lucas was tinkering patiently with a flytrap, bending the wire gauze carefully, whistling under his breath. He glanced at his companion now and then; stopped whistling. "Heat's given yer kinder a headache, has it, Emma?" "She raised heavy eyes. "No, I don't know as my head aches," she said slowly. "He worked on again in silence, and again gave her an uneasy look. "Emma," he said suddenly, "there's something I want to say to you."

She glanced up expectantly; his tone was odd. Her hands were still. "I've had this on my mind for some time, Lucas began. His old face had reddened painfully. He hesitated, looking at her doubtfully. "This may make kind of difference," he said, and stopped. "What ever on earth are you talkin' about, Lucas?" "You've be'n very kind to me," the old man resumed, forcing himself on. "And it's only right you should know."

"Know what?" she asked, nervous and impatient. "Emma," he said, "would it surprise you to know that I done it?" She looked at him blankly, heavily, not in the least understanding. "I mean, that you was right about Kane Madison?" Lucas said. "The burning, difficult color of middle age spread to her own face. Her eyes not leaving his, she automatically put aside her panful of beans and raised her fingers to press her throat. "Yessir, I done it," Lucas then stated flatly in an expressionless voice. "You," she stammered, and swallowed with a dry throat. "You—why Lucas Rippey," she added sharply, "you don't know what you're sayin'!"

"Yes, I do, Emma," he persisted simply. For a long moment she watched him steadily almost fearfully. "You wasn't anywhere near the Madison place!" she whispered at last. "Be'uz Kane Madison wasn't killed at his own place. He was killed at Lenhart's barn, and he run all the way home."