

[Jennie]

Asheville Cotton Mill

Asheville, N. C.

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I. L. M.

JENNIE

She picks her way slowly along as she walks the rutted paths from own neighbor's house to another on Factory Hill. Often she can be seen going to the house of Arthur Callahan, who is her brother-in-law, to borrow a cup of lard or a pan of meal. She makes a handy run-about for her family, and they humor her in the little things which please her. Her protruding shoulder blade is as a burden which she cannot put down. The leaders in her neck seem to clutch at her head and draw it back with such tightness that her eyes have the perpetual look of one asking for mercy. Her body has grown through its crookedness and its wretchedness to not more than four feet, and one wonders at first glance whether she is still a child with time yet to attain her height. But upon closer view, it is plain that Jennie's face is old and there to no more time in which she can grow.

Jennie is the first-born of Maggie Robinson and she is twenty-eight years old. Maggie says that Jennie's trouble started from a fall she received when she was two years old. Maggie was working in the mill and Jennie was left in the care of an eleven year old child. She fell off the porch one day and injured her spine. "But it never showed up to amount to anything until a year later when she had the pneumony fever." Maggie continues her story. "I noticed then when I'd take her out of her cradle that her little back was beginnin' to curve. The doctor said it was caused from the fall and he told me to take her down

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to Atlanta for treatment. We got together what money we could and Tom took her down there. They wasn't enough money to keep her in Atlanta for long, and be brought her back home. The older she grewed the worse her back got and the doctor put a brace on her body. She wore it for twelve years and I reckon hit was the brace that give her a chance to grow what little she did.”

Jennie's voice is low and seems to creep out of the corner of her mouth. She turns herself slightly as she speaks so that she can look up into her listener's face. She went through the fourth grade in the public schools of Asheville, and then the authorities stopped her from school. She still feels resentful about it because book learning was a sight of pleasure to her, she says, and there was nothing much left for her to do. She wishes her father had gone ahead and sued the city as he planned to do when she was forced to stop.

3

There stands out in Jennie's mind one person who has been kinder to her than any other outside person touching her life. She is a former leader of the Girls' Club of Factory Hill. “Law, she was one sweet thing, sweet as a angel,” she says as she turns her head to see that you understand her words. “She was good to me and I never missed a meetin' when she was here. They was always a smile on her face and it seemed that she come to the meetings because she really liked to be with us. So good — and so pretty,” she finishes and pushes her body deeper into the chair.

The Robinson family is always mindful of Jennie's feelings and they succeed in alloting to her a place which is that of an adult except where her physical limitations are a deterrence. She helps a little with the cooking and straightens around in the house a bit. Always when there's company she takes her part in the conversation. The Robinsons believe that it was only a lack of money which kept Jennie from having a strong, straight body and it is no shame to them that they did not have money. They have done what work they could get and accepted the wage that was paid them. Then, there are some things in their life in which they can take pride. Maggie is proud that her father who died 4 at eighty years of

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age was able to work in the mill until two years before his death. He was tall and portly, she says, and as handsome a man as you are likely to find. Years ago he bought him a little place in the country and from there he drove his own car in to his work. Jennie, too, will join in listing his merits and she remembers good days she has spent at his house. Maggie's daughter, Alma, married Arthur Callahan who is Democratic Chairmen of his precinct. That is another point of pride with the Robinsons and they like to tell visitors of the part Arthur plays in politics. Then, Jennie herself can command respect among her neighbors for her ability in quoting scripture.

Church attendance is an important part in Jennie's life. She goes each Sunday to Patton Ave. Baptist Church, and during the week following often quotes from the sermon that she has heard. Revivals are even a greater pleasure to her than regular sermons. She has gone this summer whenever someone would take her to hear Rev. Ham who is holding a revival in the tobacco warehouse. "He's deep in the scriptures," she says "and it does me good to listen to him. A few Factory Hill folks are goin' pretty regular to hear him, and they shorely need to. Not many around here go to church at all."

She moves her crooked body and tries to bring it 5 to a better resting position. Her eyes look up out of her drawn-over head, and she says in creeping, solemn tones, "Why don't they go to church? I'll tell you what's wrong with them. The devil has got a hold on 'em. Yes, he's shorely got a good hold on more than one on Factory Hill."