

and cheap, consisting of cracker beef, grits, sweet potatoes, sweet bread and fruits. A little bouquet decorated the centre of the table. Mr. Dawson was hungry and tired, and he ate heartily of every dish set before him.

After supper the two men smoked their pipes and talked about land. Hilary busied herself in the kitchen, rattling the dishes around livelier than common. She did not catch much of the conversation of the evening; but when all her work in the kitchen was finished, she heard her brother say:

"Yaas! I'll sell you that whole section dirt cheap. It's fine rollin' pine land, with some high hummock land here and thar, an' a fine clear water lake right in the midst of it. Thar ain't a better section in the whole State of Florida fur settin' out a big orange grove and buildin' up a nice winter resort. Of course thar ain't no railroad out that way yet, but they'll have one thar mighty soon, you can bet; the land is too rich an' the country too fine to let it go long without runnin' a railroad through it. If you like I guess we can take a trip out thar ter-morrow mornin', an' get back agin in a couple of days; it's 'bout twenty miles to the west of us."

"I should enjoy the ride out there," replied Mr. Dawson. "Let me see; you say it is in township 33 and range 22; that brings us about here."

With his finger he traced out the section of land on an official railroad map, which was divided up into townships, ranges, sections, and quarter sections for the guidance of surveyors and land speculators.

Now, Hilary knew that her brother had bought a section of land in the township and range that the two were speaking about, and that most of it was under water. He had bought it from the Government on a sort of speculation, intending to irrigate it if possible. She knew, also, that the investment was a failure, that the land was poor and worthless. Her brother had always been sharp at a bargain; but she had never known him to cheat a customer deliberately. This was a common trick among the real estate dealers in the State; and many of them would sell low, wet hummock land, immense marshes and lagoons for the best high rolling pine or hummock land. Only a few were justly accused of selling the water by the gallon, and even the air above the land for exorbitant prices. But if such "heathenish tricks" she never thought her brother would be guilty.

She did not listen to the conversation further; but repairing to her own room she took down a large map of Florida and quickly located township 33, range 22. It was as she expected. It was one of the unsurveyed and unsettled sections of the State, with ominous black marks traced here and there over it, which to her untutored eye indicated lakes, marshes, swamps, lagoons and low river bottoms. She hastily closed the map; then, resting her chin upon her hands, she gave herself up to quiet meditation. A new side of her brother's character was about to reveal itself to her. Of all things she despised dishonest tricks, cheating and swindling. Yet Jim, her brother, the only relative she had in the world, was deliberately negotiating a gigantic swindle. And would she not be a party to it if she kept quiet? Would not Mr. Dawson look at it in that way and learn to despise her?

"Well, I will let them go out and look at the land; and then if he concludes to buy, why—"

She stopped in the middle of her sentence. Another thought dawned upon her mind. Would not her brother take him to a good section of land, and then, after getting his approval, sell him the poor section? This was a common trick with the land speculators:

"Impossible!"—she muttered aloud—"impossible!"

Yet the troubled expression on her face was proof that she did not think it absolutely impossible.

The two men were off on their long journey before sunrise the next morning. Twenty miles is a comparatively short distance; but in the Florida flat lands it is a tedious and tiresome trip. Right after heavy rains the land is flooded with water and mud. The giant-like palm-trees, forming an intricate surface bed, seem to be the only substantial foothold for wheels, while the spaces between sink down into everlasting beds of mud. Horseback riding through the flat lands is thus made dangerous and unpleasant.

Hilary did not expect to see her brother and his visitor for at least two or three days, and so she prepared herself for another long, lonely vigil. But this time she had thoughts to occupy her mind, and she went about her work with feverish excitement. Unconsciously she found herself bestowing special care upon the room which had been assigned to Mr. Dawson. Everything was cleaned, scrubbed, dusted and polished. A few little ornaments were transferred from her room to the guest's chamber. The day of their expected return found a beautiful bouquet of roses, wild jasmine and lilies in his room.

Hilary then went about her household duties, stopping now and then to think, or to look down the sandy road to see if any one was coming. Toward night she heard her brother's familiar shout in the distance, and shortly afterward the two horsemen emerged from the pine woods. Their horses were covered with sweat and foam, while the riders looked tired and jaded.

"Back again, Mrs. Benson," shouted Mr. Dawson, cheerily, as he dismounted from his horse and handed the bridle to Jim, "and hungry as bears."

Hilary stammered some reply, and then choking down something in her throat, she asked timidly:

"Did you like the land—was it as good as you expected to find it?"

"Yes, yes; first-class," was the quick response. "It was just as represented. I have about decided to buy either that section or the one next to it. I haven't seen the other section, and so I think I'll buy the first."

"Do not. Take my advice, and don't buy any land in township 33, range 22. Jim is—*is* deceiving you. He bought it from the Government, and it was reported to be mostly under water. You will be cheated—deceived—if you buy it. Take my advice."

Hilary stammered through this outburst, half frightened at the unexpected step she had taken. When she was through she turned pale and wished that she had kept quiet.

"But I've just seen the land, and it's all right," replied Mr. Dawson, with a puzzled expression on his face.

Hilary felt that she had gone too far to retire, and so she replied eagerly:

"He didn't take you to the right place. He took you to see another township and section. They all do that sort of thing down here. I am only a woman, but I know."

"Well," ejaculated Mr. Dawson; "I've heard about Florida real estate agents before, but—"

"Oh, don't think that Jim is bad. He isn't. He's good; but—don't think hard of him, or of me."

Hilary nearly burst out into sobs as she finished.

"Certainly not," was the gallant response. "I understand. Thank you for your kindness. I'll do as you say, trusting that the other section is good."

There was an exchanging of glances as Jim appeared on the scene, interrupting any further intercourse.

That evening, while smoking their pipes, Jim Benson was surprised to hear his visitor say he had changed his mind. He would not buy the section they had seen; but he would take the section in township 34.

"But ye haven't seen that yet," replied Jim, after recovering from his surprise. "That ain't good land. 'Taint half as good as the one I showed ye to-day. Ye ain't goin' ter buy land without seein' it."

"It will answer my purpose," was the quiet response. "I am willing to take the risk. We will draw up the papers to-morrow."

"All right, ye can do as ye like," Jim answered, knocking the ashes out of his pipe; "but, understand, I ain't crackin' that up as bein' any great shakes. If ye get stuck don't blame me. I ain't to fault."

On the following day the two men completed the sale. Mr. Dawson had a word or two with Hilary before he departed, during which time he took occasion to thank her again for her kindness.—He was going to spend several weeks in the woods, camping out on the land which he had purchased. On his return he promised to stop at the Benson home for several days before returning North. Hilary said good-bye to him with a peculiar quaver in her voice, and a great excitement in her breast.

"What a pretty woman she is," Mr. Dawson muttered to himself as he rode away.

"He thinks I'm Jim's wife," thought Hilary, as she watched his gradually receding form.

"What a queer crank," growled Jim. "He's gone an' bought some land that ain't worth the water that covers it."

"He has?" inquired Hilary, eyeing her brother with a penetrating gaze.

"Of course he has. He took that land I got from the Government. I told him so; but he wouldn't b'lieve me. So 'taint my fault."

A strange misgiving made Hilary feel faint and weak. She made no reply, but turning round she hurried into the house, while her brother strolled out to the barn.

"Can it be possible?" she muttered, faintly. "I cannot be mistaken."

She took down a pile of books, maps and papers from her brother's desk, and sorted them over. She finally found the paper she was looking for. It was a deed of land from the State of Florida to James Benson. She glanced hurriedly through the sentences until she came to the clause which specified the land and its location. To her horror she found that the land was located in the northern half of township 34 instead of 33. For a moment she could not believe her eyes, and she studied the figures intently for several minutes.

But there was no change in them. The good section of land was the one which her brother had advised Mr. Dawson to purchase; the worthless section was the one which she had recommended. Her brother was honest, after all, but she had managed to get herself into an unpleasant predicament.

"What can I do? Jim would never forgive me, and Mr. Dawson, what will he think of me? Oh, dear, I'm always getting into trouble."

To relieve her pent-up feelings, she burst into tears, and had a good, long cry before her brother returned to the house.

Life once more resumed its old time monotony. The soft, balmy air of the pine woods, laden with the fragrance of a thousand blossoms, pervaded everything like some pleasant soporific from the gods. The stately magnolias, queens of the Southern forests, slowly opened their great snowy blossoms, making an impressive spectacle as they towered far above all other flowers of the woods. In the bonnet-covered pools and lagoons, hundreds of white pond lilies opened their glorious beauty to the Southern sun, emitting a heavy fragrance that vied with the pleasant odour of the snowy orange blossoms.

To Hilary the endless succession of flower blossoms was a source of continual enjoyment. The delicate shade of green which characterised the young foliage of the cypress trees, was no less charming to her than the dense hummocks alive with the blossoms of star-flowered jessamines, trumpet climbers, solanum, lantanas, lily-like amaryllis, Easter lilies, king lilies, and the scores of other luxuriant bloomers.

A certain unrest possessed her, which she vainly tried to overcome. She wandered around in the pine woods; cultivated her favourite vines in the garden; spent hours down by the water's edge, listening to the croaking of the frogs, and even resorted to the old pastime of horseback riding.

Under the nervous strain she grew pale, irritable and absent-minded. Nothing seemed to possess quite so much interest for her as formerly.

Several weeks after Mr. Dawson's departure Hilary was engaged in her favourite occupation again—training her flowers—when her