

profit, and you certainly had no reason to offer it at a discount.'

Mr. Leescom coughed uneasily.

'No, I didn't sell at no discount,' he declared. 'Fact is, Mr. Cheesick paid me a premium—two per cent.'

'A premium—Mr. Cheesick?' incredulously. 'I don't understand. And, anyway, how did he come to know you held my note?'

'Well, you see,' apologetically, 'he was out this way yesterday talkin' over things. He'd been to Lindenwood's place, 'joinin' me.' Seems to think he'll be a close neighbor before long, so he's round gettin' friendly.'

'Lindenwood doesn't want to sell,' sharply.

'No, no, course not. It's Lindenwood's gal, Mercy. They'll make a fine couple,' with a grin, and looking at Bates through the corners of his eyes. 'I guess it is pretty much fixed. He seemed to hint that way. An' he said he counted on givin' up business an' comin' out here to be a gentleman farmer. I guess he'll be a good neighbor, for we need more money in the country. Oh, come, come,' at the look on Bates' face. 'Don't go to gettin' mad now. What difference does it make whether the note's in my hands or Cheesick's? 'Tain't due till day after to-morrow, an' I guess you'll be able to fix it up all right with him. You see, he knew 'bout you buyin' land from me, an' he asked sort of casual if it had been paid for. That led to my tellin' about the note. Then he said he'd got some money he'd like to put out at interest, an' he'd buy the note an' give me two per cent. Of course, I let it go. It was just a business trade, an' nothin' for anybody to git mad over,' in an injured tone.

'No, I suppose not—from your point of view. Well, I must be getting on.'

Lindenwood's house was a half-mile farther on, reached from the main road by a winding lane. Long before he got to it Bates saw a girl standing by the box, and the sight momentarily drove the anxiety from his face. Not so very long ago she had often waited there, when the weather was good, and he had remained as long as his duty permitted and talked with her. But of late, even on fair days, he had seen nothing of her. The Lindenwood mail had been deposited early in the morning, and the indicator raised, and he had mechanically exchanged the mail he brought for that found in the box and driven on. Now he urged his horse a little faster.

'Good morning, Mercy,' he said cheerily, as he took her mail from its pocket and sprang from the wagon. 'Isn't it a fine day?'

'Yes, it is very nice,' the girl answered. But she spoke coldly, and her face lacked its usual animation. As he handed her the mail Bates noticed 'that she did not look at him; her eyes were averted, gazing somewhere out across the fields.'

'What's the matter, Mercy?' he asked anxiously. 'Are you ill?'

'No, I am as well as usual.'

'But something's the matter,' he persisted. 'I never saw you look or act like this before. Is it anything I—oh,' as though with sudden enlightenment. 'Is it because I didn't come out that evening last week, as I promised? My brother was taken ill that day, and I remained with him all night, and have been with him part of every night since. I thought you would understand. I intended to explain the next morning when I brought the mail, but you wasn't here, and I haven't seen you since until now. I shall have more time after to-day, for I left my brother much better this morning, and the doctor says he will improve steadily now. Suppose I come out to-morrow evening—Wednesday?'

She shook her head, her eyes coming round to his now, as he thought, indifferently.

'I have an engagement for to-morrow evening. But please fill this out as soon as you can,' handing him a money order. 'I am in a hurry. I had been waiting here ten minutes when you came.'

'Yes, I was detained by Leescom,' He filled out the money order rapidly. 'Well, say the next night—Thursday.'

'It won't be worth while—any time,' she answered impatiently.

Bates finished the order and handed it to her, then changed the ten-dollar bill she gave him. But as he gave her the difference he grasped the extended hand firmly.

'Now, what's the matter, Mercy?' he demanded.

'It's my right to know.'

'Nothing that you don't know already,' she replied, her eyes beginning to flash. 'Let go my hand, sir!'

'But tell me,' he pleaded.

'Let go my hand!'

He released it.

'I'm sorry, Mercy,' he said simply. 'I asked only what I had a right to ask, and I thought you would be fair.'

'Well, then,' she blazed, 'you haven't been doing well lately. You get in debt and don't pay, and you visit saloons, and I don't know what all. As my father says, quiet folks who pretend to be nice, and do such queer things, are worse than those who make no pretensions and do them openly.'

'Get in debt and don't pay,' repeated Bates, looking puzzled. 'I never did a thing like that in all my life. I don't owe a man a cent, except in one case, where I've bought some land and haven't quite finished paying for it. And as to saloons, I've never bought—oh, yes,' his face broadening into a smile—'I did go into one the other day after a quart of brandy for my brother. But it was by the doctor's orders.'

'You've been in them more than once,' sharply. 'You were seen—'

'Twice,' he smiled. 'You've got a pretty good scout, Mercy. I went into one after alcohol to bathe Tom. I don't know when I've been into a saloon before that, though,' sturdily. 'I shouldn't hesitate to any time if there was need. I don't drink myself, but that ain't saying I don't think liquor's good for lots of people, especially ailing ones. I'd just as soon go on an errand into a saloon as into a grocery store. It doesn't hurt me, and I'm not trying to run the world after my ideas. I don't know enough, for one thing. Any more charges against me, Mercy?'

The girl's head was high, her eyes flashing, but it was a flashing of that peculiar lustre which has tears behind.

'Plenty,' she answered shortly. 'Mr. Cheesick says—' She stopped, biting her lips and flushing a little.

Bates stepped quietly into his wagon.

'Oh, Cheesick,' he said. 'I've already heard some things about him this morning. I haven't anything more to say. I don't care to balance my word against his.'

He had two letters in his hand which she had given him. As he deposited them with the outgoing mail they chanced to fall with faces up, and involuntarily he noticed the superscriptions. One was the firm to which he had made out the money order, the other to Alonzo Cheesick. The letter given him by Leescom had also been to Alonzo Cheesick. He wondered what they contained.

As he tightened the reins he remembered a voluntary duty which had devolved upon him gradually, but which was regarded by some of the farmers as of equal importance with their mail. He was their weather forecaster from day to day, as well as the deliverer of their letters and papers. He leaned from his wagon.

'Mercy,' he called, 'please tell your folks the thermometer will probably fall to zero or below to-night, with heavy snow. The cattle and sheep had better be looked after and the poultry given good shelter. The indications are that it will be much the worse storm of the winter.'

Mercy had started up the lane. She had made a slight inclination of her head that she had heard, but did not turn.

The principal outgoing mail in the afternoon left the Post Office at 3 o'clock, and the carriers were supposed to complete their rounds in time to have their letters and papers assorted and the stamps cancelled for this mail. Usually they were back by two, and then spent an hour or more in the Post Office, helping with the mail and arranging as much as they could of the next day's delivery in order to facilitate work in the morning.

That afternoon as Bates was arranging and tying packages of mail, a letter was thrust toward him through the window.

'Hello, there, Bates! Put a stamp on this letter, will you? And say, let me have fifty cents' worth of twos while you're about it.'

Bates affixed the stamp and passed out the required number, dropping the change into the money drawer without looking up. He knew that Cheesick was grinning at him through the window. Indeed, he believed the letter had been thrust in to him solely that he should see the address while he was affixing the stamp.

'You'll take it out all right in the morning?'

'Of course,' shortly; 'that is my duty.'

'Well, I thought I'd better ask. I don't want any carelessness, you know. Take it right to the house.'

'Certainly not. You know very well our rules don't allow us to drive from the main road.'

'Yes, that's so. Well, put it in the box. Some of 'em will be out during the day. You see,' confidentially, 'I'm going there in the evening to call on Mercy,