

—you may not know it even—but you don't love me enough. You don't—'

He loved to hear her protestations, but he sighed as he listened. For six months now, ever since the sleighing party in February, he had been listening and arguing and going beaten from the field. And at that moment he loved Betty more desperately than ever. He thought it all out for the thousandth time as he went across the starry fields where the dew was hardly dry. Mrs. Warner, a little invalid with a life of hard work behind her, had been a widow for but a year, and she and Betty had clung to the big farm and had been all the world to each other until that sleigh-ride party in February. Betty would never leave her there alone—he faced that at last and found no alternative. And for him to sell his own rich strip of land and come over to the hilly, stony stretch known as 'Warner's place' meant only years of needless, profitless toil for them both. There was a dejected droop to the strapping young shoulders that smote his mother's heart as he passed the dairy window.

'Cassius!' she called. 'You come here!'

He stood in the low doorway, fanning his flushed face with his hat, and looking at her with a smile in his eyes. She was a nervous, quick-moving woman, and her keen eyes read his face.

'I've been thinkin',' she said, briskly.

'What, mother?' asked Cassius, leaning in the doorway.

'Why don't you buy the Bitley corner, an' fix up that house some, an' hev it ready—'

'Bitley!' cried Cassius. 'Is he willin' to sell?'

Mrs. Holmes nodded.

'Mis' Bitley was just here,' she said. 'Says they're going to California. Jake says they're gettin' old for this climate. She says he'll sell.'

Cassius straightened himself, his eyes shining. 'I'll go right an' see him,' he said. 'I guess he'll sell cheap if they want to go right off.' He hesitated for a moment. 'You know what I want it for?' he asked, shyly.

'Betsey Warner,' guessed his mother, bluntly.

'If she'll ever leave her mother,' he admitted.

Mrs. Holmes put back her hair with the back of her hand.

'So that's it?' she said. 'Well, that's all right. Them kind makes the best wives. Cass, you go an' see Bitley.'

The Bitley corner, adjoining the Holmes farm, was five acres of garden, with a snug, new, little frame house under two elm trees. Mrs. Bitley's daughter, lately home from 'town,' had introduced some bits of lattice and a wider verandah, and strips of flowers, and even a short gravelled drive, and the place had called alluringly to Cassius many a time as he had driven by to the village. As Mrs. Bitley showed him the house, he heard not one word that she said, or learned whether the cistern was filtered or the cellar dry; he only knew that Betty by the window, and Betty in that corner, and Betty on the porch, would be advance revelations of heaven. And as for Betty among the flowers, gathering salvia, transplanting pinks, tying up roses—the mere thought was a decision. Cassius would have the Bitley corner.

'Hev they got much garden truck this year?' inquired his mother, when he told her. 'What they got besides spare-grass?'

'Oh—some beans,' said Cassius, vaguely. 'Mother, don't you think the house'll furnish up real well?'

'It ought to,' said his mother. 'How's their peas look?'

'Don't b'lieve I noticed the peas,' confessed Cassius.

'Roof leak any?' demanded Mrs. Holmes.

'I didn't see it leak any,' replied Cassius, absently.

'Nice porch they've got. Rose bush right in front.'

Mrs. Holmes regarded him silently.

'You'd best get into that house as soon as ever you can,' she said, dryly.

In a fortnight the Bitleys were gone, bag and baggage, and Cassius stalked through the sunny, empty rooms, his face shining. Betty did not know yet that the house was his, and Betty was as steadfast as ever

in her decision. Still, the possession of the house made him feel like a lion of strength, and that night he went whistling up the road to Warner's place, his heart as light as if she knew and rejoiced with him.

'Mis' Warner,' he said, appearing in the kitchen door when Betty and she were drying the dishes, 'can Betty go to town with me to-morrow? I've got to buy some things, an' I need her advice.'

'Course, Cassius,' said Mrs. Warner, cheerily. 'I want a new quart dipper, anyways. She can fetch that out.'

'It's ironin' day,' objected Betty.

'The clothes can lay till next day,' said Mrs. Warner, 'jest as well as not. You go on.'

Mrs. Warner looked at Cassius smilingly.

'Betty's too careful o' me,' she said. 'She ain't like some girls. She makes a baby out o' me.'

Cassius' heart suddenly bounded. Oh, he thought exultantly, couldn't Betty see? Her mother wanted to be her mother—not some one of whom Betty took care!

He called for Betty next morning when the world was a riot of singing birds, and the dew-white fields were stirred by the early wind. They droye down the long shady road between the soft meadows, and Betty in her little print gown, with a pink rose in her hat, sat primly in the old phaeton, half dreading to hear Cassius return to the magic subject, half troubled that he did not. But all the three long, fragrant miles to town, even past the door of Bitley corner itself, Cassius talked on tranquilly of rye, and the new colt, and the new henhouse; and little Betty listened, and stole shy glances at his strong, brown fingers on the lines, and her heart beat and then ached at his impersonality. It is a terrible thing, Betty felt suddenly, when one whom we love ceases to talk to us about ourselves!

In the village Cassius drove straight to 'the store,' and the quart dipper having been duly selected, they went upstairs where the harness and furniture were kept.

'I'm goin' to get some household goods for a relation o' mother's,' Cassius had explained, truthfully enough, 'an' I ain't no hand at it. So I thought if you'd tell me—'

As it chanced, Si, the storekeeper's man, had just bought a farm of his own, and had given up his place as clerk, porter, and bookkeeper to a strange new factotum, who settled in his own mind that Betty and Cassius were bride and groom. And to little Betty, first embarrassed, then shyly amused, came at last the unwilling consciousness of how supremely sweet it was to be so mistaken. And so as they considered and weighed the durability of carpets and dining-room table she half let herself pretend that it was true. To put a tell-tale question, she even waited until the factotum's back was turned, that he might not know that he was wrong.

'I wish,' said Betty, then before a fat brown chair, 'that I knew the sort of house these things were going in, Cass. I could tell so much better about them.'

'Why, it's the Bitley place, you know,' said Cassius, well knowing that she did not know.

'It is?' said Betty, startled. 'Have they sold? Oh, I'm so sorry.'

'Why?' asked Cassius curiously.

'I like that little house,' said Betty. 'I always wanted mother to sell the farm an' buy it. It's plenty big enough for us two.'

Cassius suddenly bent to see what the springs of a rocker were like.

'Yes,' he said in a muffled but strangely exultant voice, 'it's big enough for two!' and beamed sunshine on the returning factotum, in pure joy.

In an hour everything had been selected—simple things of matting and willow, such as the little store afforded and Betty's good taste commended. Betty sighed as they picked their way among the kegs and barrels to the door. She sighed again as they took their places in the old phaeton and turned homeward.

'What's the matter?' asked Cassius, as they drove down the shady street.

'Nothing,' said Betty shamelessly.

'Little tired?' suggested Cassius, longing to take her in his arms.