

Mark. She did not mind owing to herself that she wanted to see him. Moreover, the walk to the back lands was a beautiful one and enjoyable at any time, even if the one man out of all the world were not waiting at the end of it.

Lois knew every step of it, for in old play days she and Mark had traversed it times out of mind. They had been devoted "chums," with an open, whole-hearted comradeship that found and took all that was best in those glad young days.

"What a tomboy I was!" thought Lois with a smile. "And what good times we did have! Every nook and cranny of this walk seems filled with the memories of those frolics."

There was a maple lane first, leading from the yard to the pasture lands, where they had always found the earliest violets, lurking dimly sweet in the sunny corners of the snake fence that ran along under the trees. At its farther end was the big beech by the gate where Mark had once cut their names. They were plainly visible yet, although grown unshapely and ragged, and Lois stooped to touch them caressingly.

"Mark cut them as high as he could reach, and I had to stand on tip-toe to touch them," she murmured with a smile.

Beyond the lane a long emerald reach of three fields sloped up to the girdle of woods, all of the same size and shape, and now a luxuriant sweet of clover aftermath. Straight through the middle of them ran a road and down this road Lois and Mark had once been wont to run frantic races when they came out of the woods on the crest of the slope.

"Who'll get to the big beech first?" Mark would say. And then they would hurl themselves down the path, Lois with her brown curls streaming in the wind and Mark with his fists clenched and his brow knotted into a frown as he ran. The honors fell evenly between them, for Lois was a good runner and as often as not flung herself against the big beech first. She thought of those glorious runs as she walked sedately up the slope and remembered that she had won the last race they had ever run together down "the three fields."

"It was just such a day as to-day, and the sun was shining like in just the same fashion over the harbor. I remember noticing it as I ran."

She put up her hand and felt a tiny scar, high on her forehead and concealed by a curl of her chestnut hair. When she had reached the birch a good three yards ahead of Mark she had tripped over one of its roots and fallen, striking her head on a stone. A bad cut was the result, and she could yet see Mark's pale face and lips as he helped her home down the maple lane, with the blood running into her eyes and blinding her. The cut had soon healed, but Mark could never be persuaded to race her down the "three fields" again.

On the crest of the slope the path broadened out into a wood-road striking right into the heart of the forest. The first time they had explored it Lois had been very frightened of the long, dim road that wound away into the eerily whispering woods; her timid little heart beat to her finger tips in Mark's sturdy clasp. There had been wild cats and bears in those woods long ago. Who knew but they lurked there still? How glad she had been when they came out to the back lands that seemed like an enchanted world of sunshine and dreams, shut round by the girdling beeches. The return walk had not been so bad and soon Lois lost her fear of the forest. She and Mark explored every cranny of it. They thought it a vast place, though it was really only a few acres in extent. One day their frolics came suddenly to an end. A childless aunt of Lois had come to Rutherglen for a visit. When she left she took the girl with her to her home in a small town far enough away to cut her off completely from the life of Rutherglen. She had not even seen Mark to say good-bye to him, for he had been away from home when she had gone up to the hill farm to tell him the news of her sudden departure. She recalled the ache in her heart and the choke in her throat as she went down the hill again. To go away without seeing Mark was a tragedy to her. It was the first time the world's pain had touched her.

In the six years that had followed Mark had almost been forgotten. They had never met, for the only time Lois had revisited Rutherglen Mark had been away at college. It was not until they were man and woman grown that she came home to stay and met her old playmate again.

The meeting was a surprise and disappointment to both. Each had been unconsciously expecting to see the comrade of years ago. Lois had looked for a lanky, sunburned lad and found a stalwart, broad-shouldered six feet of young manhood. Mark had looked for a demure little maid and found a gracious, self-possessed young woman. It was long before the chill of change wore off. They could laugh at it now, having found each other again in a comradeship which added the charm of the past to the rich fulness of the present and the promise of the future. But during that first year after her return, when Lois was teaching in the valley school and Mark was fitting himself back into farm life after his two years at the Exeter Academy, there had been between them a strangerhood that was almost resentful.

Lois knew that Mark was working in the triangle between the woods and the newly cleared outfield and she went down that way under the caressing shadows of the beeches to surprise him. She saw him before he saw her, for he was lying lazily on his back in a little grassy hollow, with his hands clasped under his head and his eyes fixed on the sky. She permitted herself the treat of looking at him for a space with her heart in her eyes and her breath half gone from her in the sweetness of the moment. Then her expression changed to mischief and she threw at him the fir cone that lay ready to her hand in an angle of the fence. Her aim was good and the missile struck him squarely on the forehead. He was on his feet in an instant, looking about him. When he caught sight of her his face lighted up and he came quickly over the hillocks and hollows of fern that lay between them.

Lois hastened to lift her basket and explain her errand.

"Aunt Nan wants crotle, sir. And she wants it good, you'll please to remember. She sent me to tell you so—you, the poor hard-working boy who was too busy to come home to tea."

Mark laughed and tossed his tumbled black hair from his forehead.

"Really, I haven't been idle all the afternoon, Lois. But a man wasn't meant to work on a day like this. It harks back to Eden—to the untroubled days before the Fall. So I coiled myself up among the ferns to day-dream a bit."

"You don't feel very well yet, I am afraid," said Lois.

Mark smiled tolerantly.

"That's Mother's story. How you women do like to coddle folks! Grippe pulls a fellow down a bit, I suppose—but I'm all right. Look at this muscle—and this—no invalid's arm that, madam! Has Mother been telling you that she has badgered me into going to Exeter for a week? I don't want to go—don't need to go—but these mothers must be humored. I'm glad you came back for the crotle. It just needed you to round out the day."

His pleasure in her coming was frank and open—possibly a little too much so. Lois, with her steady gift of seeing things as they are, recognized this. She knew quite well that as yet Mark's feeling for her did not possess the depth and intensity of hers for him. But she hoped that it would in time, and she calmly acknowledged this hope to herself, with no false shame over it. For the rest, she hid her love from all eyes but her own and waited in her womanly armor for the man she loved to find it out when his own led him to seek it.

Mark clove the fibres of a tough old beech stump with his axe and left it there while he took the basket and set off in search of the lichens Aunt Nan required. By the time they found enough of them the sun was setting and all the woods were brimmed with fleeting ruby splendor. They had come in their wanderings to the Fairy Pool—a mysterious saucer of water rimmed with ferns and shadowed by slender birches; it was fed by no visible spring, yet it never dried up.

"Do you remember the day we discovered this?" asked Mark. "Talk about wonder—surprise—delight—silent upon a peak in Darien! I shall never forget your eyes, Lois, when we pushed through that birch coppice there and came so suddenly upon it."

"I felt all the rapture of a great discoverer," said Lois, bending down to dabble her fingers in the unruffled water. "Do you remember the day we quarrelled and you pushed me right into the pool?"

"And then fished you out in agonies of remorse? How wet you were—and how angry! So angry that you would not speak to me, although you had to let me help you up on the fence out there in the sun to dry."

"Oh, I shall never forget it," cried Lois, with a ringing peal of laughter. "I can see myself—a forlorn, dripping mite on that great high fence, trying to be dignified and feeling so furious and drabbed. And you, sprawled out on the grass below me, looking up imploringly and trying your best to appease me. You even offered to loan me your jack-knife for a whole day if I would 'speak.'"

"And you wouldn't. And when you did get a little dry you wouldn't let me help you down but slid off by yourself and stalked home, with that brown head of yours in the air, myself following behind like a whipped dog."

"And I wouldn't stop at your place, although Aunt Nan came out to us with slices of bread and plum jam, but I went straight home where I cried and would not be comforted because I hadn't forgiven you. Your face, as you stood peering after me from the fir lane when I had forbidden you to follow me any further, haunted me tragically all night."

"And next morning I was down in the valley before you were up, waiting for you at your gate, with the jack-knife and a brand-new, nicely peeled willow switch and the blown crow's egg you had always coveted. And when you came out—"

"You poked all your treasures over the gate—"

"And the egg shell fell down and was broken—"

"And I said, 'There now, clumsy!'"

"And Heaven opened before me—and I kissed you through the bars of the gate, didn't I?"

There was a teasing twinkle in Mark's dark blue eyes. Lois flushed rosily and turned away from the pool.

"We were delightful little idiots. Come, it is time to be going back. It will soon be dark."

They wandered homeward through the lanes. At the kitchen door they found Aunt Nan, straining her eyes in the fading light over the last pages of the magazine story. Her cheeks were flushed with the excitement of it.

She wanted Lois to come in but the latter refused. She must go home, she said, and Mark insisted on going with her, although she protested.

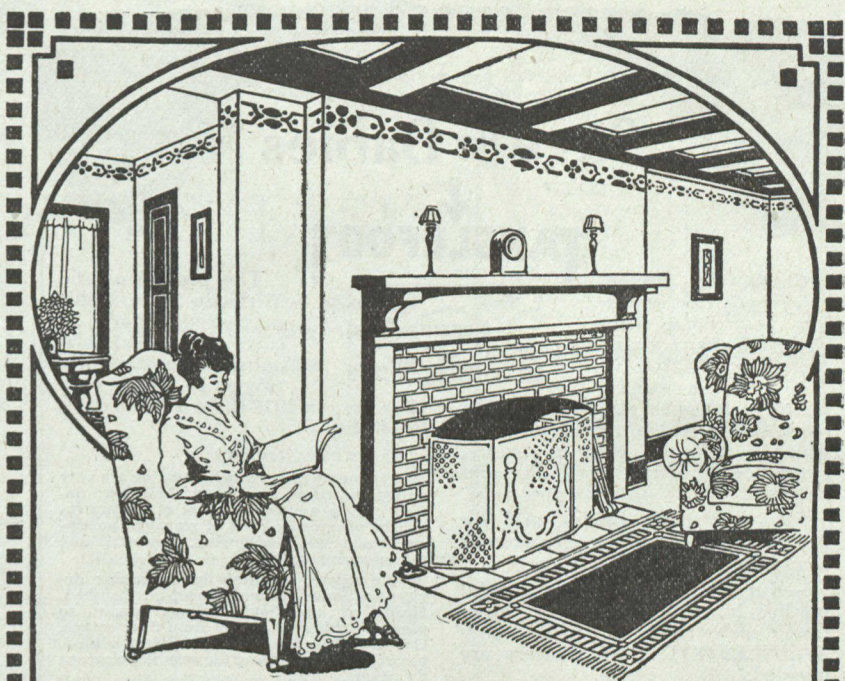
"I'm too big to be turned back at the fir lane now," he said masterfully. "Come along, Lois. No airs!"

He tucked her hand in his arm and marched her off. Aunt Nan looking after them with an inward delight that almost seemed to irradiate her physically in the gloom. They walked slowly to make the most of the beautiful evening.

At the gate of the Wilbur homestead in the valley they lingered to watch the moon rise on the shore meadows. Mrs. Wilbur, a vulgar, good-natured soul, so unlike Lois as to make the relationship between them seem like a huge joke on Nature's part, watched them from the sitting room window, turning up a corner of the white blind with a stealthy hand. In her own way she was as anxious for the match as Aunt Nan herself, and also took her own ways of furthering it—ways that sometimes seemed in a fair way to defeat their object, for Lois, burning with shame over her mother's effusiveness, always retreated farther into herself on such occasions and opposed to Mark's frank advances a seemingly impassable wall of reserve and aloofness. Something of this had at last filtered into Mrs. Wilbur's obtuse brain; so she forebore to go to the door and call to Lois to bring Mark in as she would have dearly liked to do.

The two at the gate were not talking in any lover-like fashion, as she supposed and hoped. In truth, they were talking but little in any fashion, each being content to linger speechless in the glamour of the night. Once a girl went loiteringly by, half pausing by the gate as if ready to join them with any encouragement thereto.

(Concluded on next page.)



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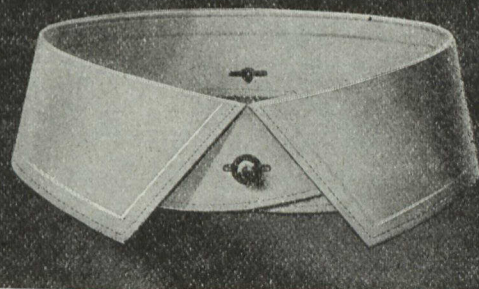
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