

AT THE END OF THE ROAD

"They ain't to know a thing about it unless they mistrust it's to be a real surprise," said Lou Harlow, polishing herself like one about to take a flight, in the doorway of Mrs. Green's kitchen. "You must come, Mrs. Green. I will do you good, to get out. You're too much shut up. Sarrell will miss you if you don't come. She'll want to see her neighbors, if nobody else is there. Get 'Rastus to bring you down."

Mrs. Green set the teapot further back on the stove and murmured an indefinite "Mm." The kitchen door opened with a rattle of pails. Lou's eyes turned slightly in that direction as she talked on persistently.

"Brother Ed was going to stop yesterday and invite you, but he had to go another way, so I stopped in now. It's rather late to be giving invitations, I know, but it's all been planned in such a hurry that we are out and out flustered. I thought, too, that I might stir you up to coming better than Ed could. It does seem too bad not to have a lot of folks at a tin-wedding surprise party. Everybody's to bring something besides refreshments, you know. I've the cutest little oatmeal cooker that I got at the five-cent store in the city, and I shall take that. Well, I won't hinder you any longer from your supper. Good-by. Now do come if you can. Good-by."

The kitchen door timed its closing with mathematical accuracy to the leaving of a young man from the kitchen. Through the window, Mrs. Green saw Lou's innocently surprised heart and cordial bow, but the bit of talk that followed was inaudible to her. She felt certain, however, that it was about the surprise party. "If those Harlows ain't managin' it," was her mental comment. "But it'll be more'n a pretty puttin' on to make Lou, one mite engagin' to 'Rastus, I guess."

"Rastus came in presently, and, after washing at the sink, sat down to supper. He was thin and not over tall, with a vivid boyish complexion and a chin like his mother's, marked by a decision that almost severe coldness of gray blue eyes accentuated. It was only when 'Rastus smiled that one knew how winning his face could be."

"Lou Harlow stopped in, to ask us to a tin weddin' surprise at her brother Will's. Probably she mentioned it to you," said Mrs. Green, as she poured the tea. "I shall have to carry some'n in the shape of tin. I wonder if the dipper, I got of that pedler last week won't do. I took it for rags. They do pay so little for rags now, I declare it's hardly worth savin' 'em. If it hadn't been for them old overalls of yours I shouldn't made out enough to get this dipper."

"Likely they won't have more'n seven dippers," said 'Rastus, helping himself to a second dish of apple sauce.

Mrs. Green looked disturbed.

"Well, dippers is handy. Every housekeeper needs two, and they use 'em quick. Dippers nowadays ain't what dippers used to be. There's hardly one to be got but has a weakness in the solderin'. I don't know what's more provokin' than to have a dipperful of water come splashin' on the floor and leave nothin' but a handle in your fingers."

"The quick bright smile flashed over 'Rastus's face."

"Better carry a pan or something of that kind."

His mother took the question as profoundly serious.

"I haven't one I could spare. Can't stop for the Blake girls, 'Rastus? They like to get out, and it's rather for 'em to walk now they're fallin'."

"I declare it goes to my heart to see poor Miss Betsey so meechin' like. She doesn't seem to know whether her things is on straight or not."

"Last Sunday 't was all I could do to keep my mind on the sermon. I wantin' to straighten her. I false 'twas twisted so the parlin' 'over one eye, and it's real pavin' to see Miss Harriet hoverin' at her sister and fussin' to make 'em comfortable, when all the time 'Harriet's the oldest. Miss Betsey ain't but sixty-eight. I shouldn't say if 'twould chide 'em up con- siderable to go to the surprise party evenin'."

"You can take 'em, I'll walk. I'd be too crowdin' in the bug- gies, and I don't want to get the business wagon. There's the looke."

Mrs. Green looked narrowly at the repose of his face indicated.

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The musical girl laugh sounded again.

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Dodgson, the local merchant's wife, began talking at her elbow.

"How nice Lou Harlow looks tonight. That lace at her throat is very becoming. I hear something about her and your 'Rastus. How's that?"

Mrs. Green drew herself up stiffly. "Folks can hear a good deal," she said.

"'Rastus looks rather young to think of marrying. And Lou—why, she's—let me see." Mrs. Dodgson screwed herself into arithmetical puckers. "She's three years old'n 'Rastus! I remember she was born the same year as my Ameret."

"Oh, well, it's the fashion nowadays for men to marry old'n themselves," Mrs. Green answered, with a blandness born of remembrance that Mrs. Dodgson's own son had wedded a woman ten years his senior—a widow with an overgrown daughter just entering her teens—and that the affair was very displeasing to his people.

But her neighbor's friendly inquisitiveness set her into a new train of thought. What if Lou Harlow had been the one whom 'Rastus had fancied? Before her rose a vision of heavy bread, cake smelling of saleratus, careless housekeeping, which she knew to be the rule at the Harlow homestead. She thought of what it would be to live day after day with Lou's giggling laugh, her persistent chatter and good-natured officiousness. Looking across the room at one who but a few hours ago she characterized as "that fittin' little Holland girl," she noted with a stirring of pride akin to what she felt in 'Rastus, the trimness of the black-gowned figure, the quiet manner, the delicate contour of a face whose prettiness did not conceal decision and capability. 'Rastus was talking with her now, his attitude marked by that new dignity which his mother had noticed of late. Something in the turn of his head reminded her of his father when he had come courting out Pomigewasset way, where she lived as a girl.

When came a homeward movement among the guests, Mrs. Green paused, talking in the open door on her way out. Her quick eye had recognized two young figures at the gate, and she turned her back upon them, barring the progress of Mr. and Mrs. English.

"I have enjoyed it all so much; haven't you, Miss English? I do think a surprise tin weddin' the best way of rememberin' the anniversary. It don't make so much work for the folks of the house. Seems to me it's a pretty long while since you and your husband have been up to take tea with me. Now, why can't you be a mite more neighborly and come soon? Say Wednesday. Nothin' blinder. Well, I'm real glad and you are to bring your niece. Not havin' any girl of my own I like to see."

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