then, the very next time he met her he had become as dumb as a frozen fish. At no time a ready conversationalist, he was tongue-tied on this topic.

Now, however, decided Ben, the time had come for definite action. The presence of a possible rival would admit of no further delay. Ere he unlatched his front gate he was resolved upon a line of procedure that promised well. Since he had been unable to utter his heart in her presence—probably because her exquisite loveliness overwhelmed him and made him too conscious of his own shortcoming—he would reveal his passion via the telephone.

Passing his mother, sewing on the front porch, he went forthwith to the hall telephone, fearful lest, at the last moment, his courage desert him. In the interval required by the operator to connect him with the Sage's residence his throat grew curiously dry and he must needs moisten his lips copiously before he could answer the feminine voice which presently spoke at his ear. And now, instead of the opening sentence, carefully rehearsed for this occasion, he stammered in confusion:

"Miss Sage—G-Gertrude—will-y-you—would you mind—going horseback riding with me today?"

But it wasn't Gertrude, after all—only the maid.

"I'd like to speak to Miss Sage," said he.

"Miss Sage," replied the maid, "has gone motoring."

"Alone?"

"No; not alone. She went with a gentleman from Chicago—a Mr. Henkel."

Mrs. Abbott could not help overhearing her son's end of this conversation, and when he came out to her on the porch she divined what the other end had been. She saw by his face that he was deeply hurt and she knew the only remedy that would afford alleviation. She rose, contributing her sewing to a wicker basket.

"Dear, it's such a glorious day, let's drive out to the farm."

Ben's depression almost, if not entirely, vanished at the sight of green fields and country woods, and when he and his mother drove within sight of their homestead his heart swelled with ineffable longing. The place was now at the very height of its production and the bountiful crops, the peace and plenty, everywhere apparent, allured him, beckoning him back to the soil as nothing else could.

"Mother," he asked, very earnestly, "don't you want to come back? Don't you feel the call too?"

She smiled at him happily as they walked on through the fragrant meadow and that was her only answer—then.

"I don't like the way Lukens is running things. It's his funeral of course, but it fairly goes against my grain to see any farm run at a loss and our farm is one of the best in Illinois."

"But he's not running it at a loss, is he, Ben? Everything looked pretty prosperous to me."

"Well, of course the hands have saved him a lot. But Lukens doesn't know anything about farming, Mother; not a thing. He never was cut out to be a farmer. When I saw him trying to handle that heifer in the barnyard it was all I could do to keep from butting in and showing him the right way."

"You did show him, Ben."

"Did I? Well I hope he doesn't forget it. Lukens is a good fellow and I like him, but he's not a farmer. You said the farm looked prosperous; it is prosperous, but it's not as prosperous as it was when we had it; and that," said Ben, looking squarely at his mother, "brings me to what I want to say: Mother, we've got to go back."

"What about Lucy?"

"I'll attend to Lucy," said he, increasingly delighted to perceive she was yielding to him. "If she doesn't want to go to Aunt Ella's and if she won't go back to the farm, maybe she can be persuaded to go to boarding school."

Slight persuasion was needed, for Lucy, it developed that night, was happily amenable to the boarding-school idea, and straightway, with great zest, examined the educational advertisements in a late magazine. The final objection thus removed, Mrs. Abbott at last gave her son a definite answer and so the three of them sat that evening around the living room lamp, all planning for the month after next, though not in quite the same way.

One of the loves of Ben Abbott's life—his love for the earth—was to be thus satisfied; but the other—his love for Gertrude Sage—remained to torment him; and he made a resolve to end this torment, or at least the uncertainty of it, with no more ado. On the following day, Sunday, he started for the Sage home with the stern determination of making a proposal of marriage.

(To be continued)

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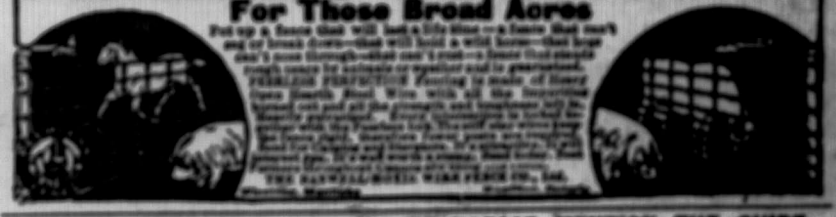
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