

Bial made no answer, for he was still in a pet with this particular neighbor.

"It's you that's got to bear the responsibility too," pursued the old man. "You can't disown your own clothes that we've all seen you wearin' all these years, nor your own hard hat, and it's you that made him."

"What in timenation be you talkin' about, anyway?" demanded Bial.

Uncle Cowallis merely jabbed his thumb over his shoulder in the direction of the cornfield, and went on his way with a chuckle.

Bial, with swift suspicion as to what all these mysteries of the forenoon tended, dropped his harness and trot-around his barn.

His second self was not on the knoll attending to business. Black spots gotted all over the corn piece showed that the crows were strictly attending to theirs, however. His next natural impulse was to seek further with his eyes and discover what had happened to the widow's scarecrow, in this discomobulation of effigies. His legs wavered under him when he saw the awful spectacle. Even from that distance, he could see it clearly. His scarecrow, in his clothes had to all appearances rushed over into the other field and now stood there in broad day affectionately embracing the widow's scarecrow in her clothes. The wooden arms had been bent forward around the plumply stuffed calico gown, and the hard hat on the pillow-case head was tenderly close to the widow's smart headgear.

Muttering profanity for the first time in his mild life, he started post haste for the shocking scene, for the first dizzy moment feeling wild, unreasonable anger toward the culpable effigy itself. The whole tableau looked so natural—so life-like, you understand! But when he reached the line fence he was swearing at the impudent and mischievous neighbors.

Now it happened that some sly remark had been deftly dropped in the widow's hearing at about the same time, for it was the design of the jokers to notify both parties at the psychological moment. She, too, was on her way to the cornfield. The two of them came face to face beside the tableau.

"If it isn't enough to mad an angel," she cried, wrathfully. "Just let me lay hands on the one who did it, that's all!"

"You know mighty well I didn't do it, Mis' Goff," he quavered. "I feel jest as you do about it. I'll go and lick anyone you tell me to. That's how I feel to'ards you—I mean that's the way I feel about this."

He made no attempt to pull away his scarecrow. He stood and looked on the tender recontre with a mild eye into which some tenderness crept. That painted, s'ly face so close under her old hat seemed so cosy and confiding and then were not those old clothes, basking there in that simple perfume of hers, the same clothes that had grown into intimacy with him?

"Of course I know you didn't do it, Mr. Barton," she replied. "I'll say this for you—you seem to have more good sense and mind-your-own-business than the rest of the folks in this town. I've noticed that much about you from the start. I've noticed the other about the rest of the folks. I ain't used to their kind."

"Nor I neither," he blurted. "That's the reason why I ain't got mar—I mean that's why I ain't tried to be very sociable with anyone around here."

"I'll warrant you're a superior sort of man to them all, Mr. Barton," she exclaimed. The fact that the two had been a victim to the same joke that their neighbors were now maliciously chuckling over seemed somehow to give them interests in common. There's no surer and quicker way to a woman's confidence than to induce her to think thoughts of that kind.

"I don't put myself up over anyone," he answered, meekly, "but I know enough to understand that when strangers come here to town they ought to be treated with respect, especially when they are better than all the folks around 'em—and that's what you are."

This compliment tossed at her so

bluntly embarrassed her for a moment, as her red cheeks indicated.

"Excuse me, Mis' Goff," he stammered, "but I ain't been much used to talkin' with any ladies whatever, and I don't know how to put it right—but at least I am honest."

"I know that you are, Mr. Barton," she said, gratefully, looking into his frank blue eyes. The glance was so straight and so sincere that he felt a little catch in his throat—a quick up-lift as though his heart had bobbed suddenly. He turned away, feeling the red run up into his face.

As his eyes fell on the distant highway he spluttered an angry word that seemed to startle her.

"Look at the old fools," he gritted, vibrating his hand at the road.

A half a dozen teams were lined along the fence, and many persons were leaning over it watching them.

"That's the way of this blasted town," he cried. "When anyone proposes to mind their own business the rest of the gang sets out to hector and plague."

"I don't give that for 'em," she ejaculated, snapping her fingers at the spectators, and whirling again to face him.

"Nor I," he echoed. The sudden stimulus of his angry resentment seemed to make a new and different man of him. Here was someone to defend and champion, to swear fealty to. He hankered for the right to be something more to this woman than the rest of the gawkers along that fence. The queer feelings that he had been entertaining ever since she came to town, and had been wondering over, now suddenly took form in a desperate and soleful resolve.

"Mis' Goff," he said, taking off his hat, you don't know me as well as I wish you did, but anyone can tell you I ain't a coward, and that there ain't many mean streaks in me. I'm steady and honest, and I've got enough money in the bank that I don't have to worry. Ever since you came to this town I knew you were different from the rest. I'd just like to see that line fence there come down and stay down. I ain't putting this on the basis of property, for I—for I—well, Mis' Goff, there ain't no two ways about it—I think more of you than I do of anyone else on earth, and I want you to marry me. That ain't very gracefully put, but it's man-fashion and right out of my heart."

"I'm no silly girl, and I know a good man when I see him, Bial," she said with simple heartiness. "There's my hand—and there's a kiss."

And he put her arms around his neck, and smacked him there in the cornfield with the neighbors looking on.

"They're looking for excitement and something to talk about to-day, and we may as well give them a full dose," she whispered, with a little note of woman's hysteria in her voice.

"We'll march right up to that fence and give 'em the news straight from the shoulder," he declared stoutly, and he took her hand and they started with resolute stride.

But the people suddenly whipped up their horses, and the pedestrians went scuffling away in haste. They evidently felt that there were personal reasons why they did not care to meet at that time two persons who seemed to have such a perfect mutual understanding.

And in the general excitement of the principals the two scarecrows were left standing in the same attitude, an attitude that—speaking from the standpoint of human beings—must have been extremely enjoyable.

Sentence Sermons.

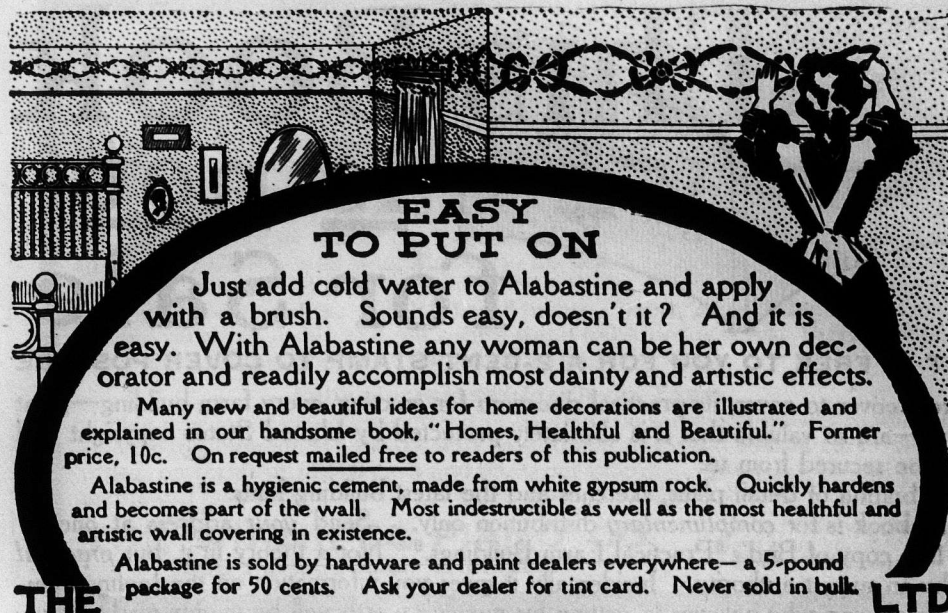
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