



## A Kiss Deferred

By NATHANIEL J. COTTON

(Farm and Home)

THE long, cavernous depth of the floor of Henryway's barn was thickly hung with dim, flaring lanterns. Gigantic mows of sweet-smelling hay were lost in the dense gloom of the towering loft. Piled along the floor in big heaps was the corn to be husked.

Merry voices, shouts of laughter, snatches of songs and sprightly jokes broke on the clear, bracing October air, as under the mellow light of the moon a merry group of girls and boys and staid middle-aged farmers and their buxom wives trooped noisily into the big barn.

Climbing on to a pile of corn, Sol arrested the attention of the merry huskers by a loud shout accompanied by windmill gyrations of the arms. "Hold yer gab thar a minit. 'Fore we pile inter this air corn I've got a sort of an innovation ter introduce. First thing all you gals that are married line up side of thar barn thar."

In a flutter of excitement and amid suppressed giggles and whispered comments, the fresh-cheeked, wholesome lassies of the countryside ranged themselves demurely in line as directed. "Now, boys," continued Sol, taking off a tattered straw hat and dropping it on the corn before him, "cast yer vote fer the gal of yer chise. The one that gits the most votes is ter be queen of the evening, and she'll have the place of honor at the husking, lead the grand march at the hoe-down, and set at the head of the table at the spread. More lively now, boys."

Amid the gibes and banter of the older people the lads furtively prepared and cast their votes, some with awkward diffidence, others with swaggering bravado, all more or less embarrassed by the titter of the girls and the raillery of the old folks.

In suppressed excitement the party watched Sol deliberately count the votes. This accomplished, Sol arose, stroked his whiskers, spat once and with proper solemnity began: "It seems from the vote that the wind blows pretty much all one way. Miss Amy Dean, schoolmarm at No. 2, having a majority of all votes cast, is declared elected Queen of the Huskers. Bring the wreath, Mandy."

Bustling, buxom Mrs. Henryway brought a wreath made of corn husks, and with pompous ceremony Sol placed it upon the dark hair of the pretty schoolmarm, and the boys promptly cheered until the old barn rang.

"Now, boys," broke in Sol, "the Queen's got ter have a King. You young fellers git over thar and git ter shaking corn. The one that shucks the most corn in ten minutes gits the job shaking corn with the Queen, leading the march to the hoe-down, and taking her tea supper. Git ready now, and when I say the word, hump yourselves."

Pulling an ancient watch from his pocket, Sol glued his eyes to the face

of an instant, with one hand upraised; then it dropped, and he roared: "Hump yourselves, boys!"

Right and left the corn shucks fell, as the nimble fingers of the expert lads stripped the coats from the shining yellow ears. Cheers and words of encouragement flew back and forth to the frantic huskers, who were bending their best efforts to win.

With bated breath Amy Dean watched the contest. It was all new to her. Fresh from high school, she was teaching her first school in a country district. Unconsciously she watched a



"The Milking Hour"

big, broad-shouldered, smiling, good-natured young man, who husked with a certain slow deliberation, in striking contrast to the frantic haste of his rivals. As the piles grew in front of the huskers, she realized he was to be her king, and a thrill of pleasure tingled every nerve, as he looked up and she squarely met his smiling blue eyes.

"Time's up," snapped Sol, and closing the big watch he returned it to his pocket, while critically viewing the piles. "No need measuring," he decided. "Cliff Leighton's got more than a half bushel more corn than yew tother fellers, Mandy, another wreath. Come, Cliff, march up and take yer medicine, and git acquainted with the puttiest schoolmarm in Coss County."

Blushing like a schoolgirl, big Cliff Leighton, with a certain awkward grace, came forward and was duly crowned.

"Now, King and Queen, take yer places at the head of the barn, and the rest of you pair off and git ter husking, and every red ear means a kiss."

In a few moments the barn was riotous with mirth. Red ears were plentiful, and scuffles and resounding snatches were heard in every direction.

Amy Dean and Cliff Leighton began husking in shy silence. He instructed her delicate, inexperienced fingers in the knack of stripping off the tough husks. Presently he found a red ear and lifted his eyes questioninglly to hers. She smiled back, but her eyes conveyed no answer, and the ear dropped into the basket. She was unchallenged, and secretly she respected him for his delicacy. But the act was noticed, and a dozen voices shouted: "Kiss her, Cliff; you've got to."

He looked appealingly at her, and whispered: "It's the custom, and they'll josh us unmercifully if we don't comply." "All right," she bravely replied, "but—," and she hesitated, "I'd rather not."

"Trust me," he whispered, and boldly drew her head toward him. She saw his handsome face coming nearer, closed her eyes and waited. There was an audible smack and a shout. It was

the long room, began to scrape onto a lively march, accompanied by a fan-fan of thumping feet, led by Len's number eleven.

Cliff Leighton and Amy Dean trod the mazes of the march in purple light. She owed into the spirit of the occasion, as thrilled by the music, the novelty, and the big, handsome led at her side, she glided along by his side in a dream. Dance after dance, good old-fashioned country dances succeeded each other, as Miss Dean did not dance, Cliff as usual many of them with her, and they grew sociable and quite confidential.

She told him of her school life and hopes in music, and he discussed with her his desire for better things, and advanced education, and an ambition along literary lines.

"I love the farm," he went on earnestly, "and would not leave it permanently. But I desire a higher education in conjunction, and on all I want to succeed in literature. I feel it is in me." Then he went on to tell her of his modest literary success, and was pleased with her earnest sympathy and interest.

After the bountiful harvest supper, finishing with the famous pumpkin pie, sweet cider and apples, put every one in good humor for the continuance of the dance. Yielding to the persistent entreaties of the girls, Cliff executed a country clog dance with plump, pretty Kittie Sinclair. Amy watched Cliff and Kittie execute the intricate steps of the dance, and saw their flushed faces and eager animated eyes looking into each other's and was conscious of a pang—a desire to dance as well as Kittie, with Cliff.

It was soon over and he was smiling down at her, and a pang how she liked it. In the background she saw Kittie's eyes resting fondly on him, then drop to her with a glint of antagonism in them. She was treading on dangerous ground, and eagerly wondered how much there was left between them.

The dance was prolonged until early morning. Soon after twelve, young men began to diffidently approach the girls of their choice and engage them in conversation. Speedily Amy learned the reason why she had been asked if he might see her to her boarding place.

"Why," she replied, "I came with Mr. Hoskins' people; they will expect me to return with them."

"Oh, no," he smiled; "it is customary for the young ladies to be escorted home. If you'd rather—," he began, but she broke in.

"Oh, no, I would be delighted."

Later, as they were departing, Amy met Kittie Sinclair's eyes on the street and the lurid light in them revealed the dangerous nature of the ground she was treading on. But she could not explain or withdraw if she could, so with an uncomfortable feeling she went out into the bright moonlight night with Cliff.

The splendor of the night and the magnetic virility of the man beside her drove Kittie from her mind, and she lived in the present. Light-hearted and happy, she talked volubly, he listened attentively, glad to be near a girl in so many ways approaching his ideal. They discussed their likes and dislikes, their hopes and desires, and presently she ventured naively: "Why didn't you kiss me when you found that red ear?"

"Something told me you would set like it," he quietly replied, "though it would have been one of the greatest pleasures of my life."

Instantly she knew this was sincere and was pleased. "I am sorry you didn't, then," she said, half contritely.

"Are you?" he quickly exclaimed. "I think I am, and still I didn't

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