

• Massey's Illustrated •

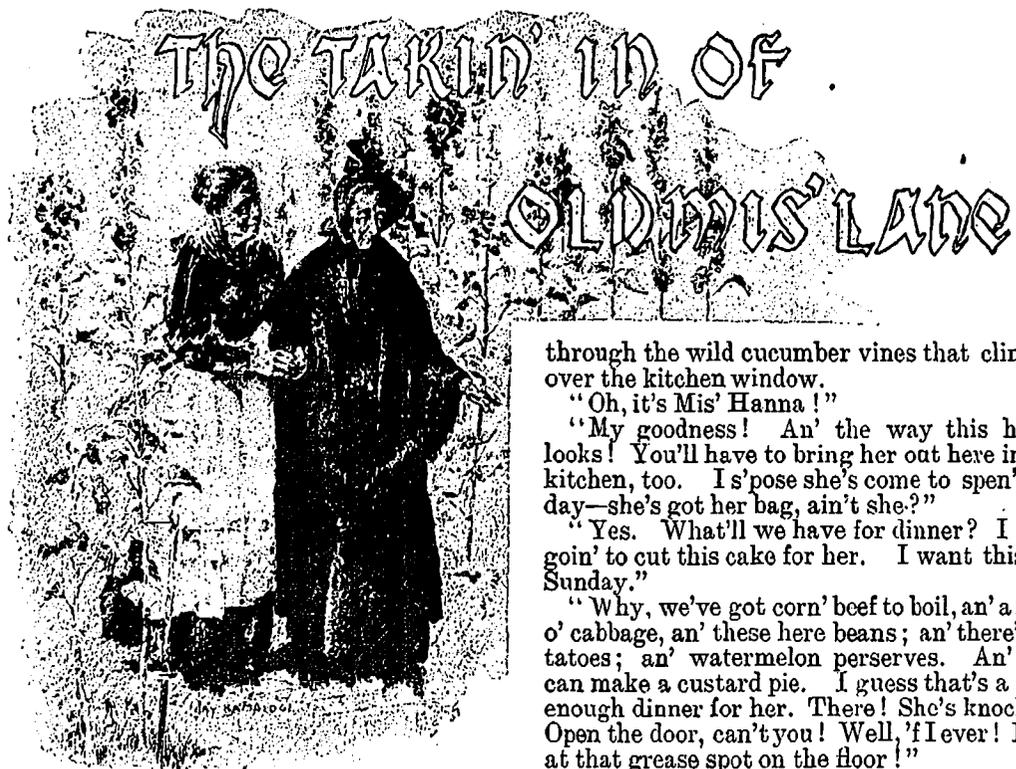
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“WELL, I guess I might's well string them beans for dinner before I clean up,” said Mrs. Bridges.

She took a large milkpan full of beans from the table, and sat down by the window.

“Isaphene,” she said, presently, “what do you say to an organ an' a horse an' buggy—a horse with some style about him, that you could ride or drive, an' that 'u'd always be up when you wanted to go to town?”

“What do I say?” Isaphene was making a cake, and beating the mixture with a long-handled tin spoon. She had reddish-brown hair, that swept away from her brow and temples in waves so deep you could have lost your finger in any one of them; and good, honest, gray eyes, and a mouth that was worth kissing. She wore a blue cotton gown that looked as if it had just left the ironing table. Her sleeves were rolled to her elbows. She turned and looked at her mother as if she feared one of them had lost her senses; then she returned to the cake-beating with an air of good-natured disdain.

“Oh, you can smile and turn your head on one side, but you'll whistle another tune before long, or I'll miss my guess. Isaphene, I've been savin' up chicken an' butter money ever since we come to Puget Sound; then I've always got the money from the strawberry crop, an' for the geese an' turkeys, an' the calves, an' so on.” Mrs. Bridges stopped, and, lowering her voice to a mysterious whisper, “Somebody's comin',” she exclaimed.

“Who is it?” Isaphene stood up straight, with that little quick beating, of mingled pleasure and dismay, that the cry of “Company” brings to country hearts.

“I can't see. I don't want to be caught peepin'. I can see it's a woman though; she is just passing the row of chrysanthums. Can't you stoop down an' peep? She won't see you 'way over there by the table.”

Isaphene stooped, and peered cautiously

through the wild cucumber vines that climbed over the kitchen window.

“Oh, it's Mis' Hanna!”

“My goodness! An' the way this house looks! You'll have to bring her out here in the kitchen, too. I s'pose she's come to spen' the day—she's got her bag, ain't she?”

“Yes. What'll we have for dinner? I ain't goin' to cut this cake for her. I want this for Sunday.”

“Why, we've got corn' beef to boil, an' a head o' cabbage, an' these here beans; an' there's potatoes; an' watermelon perserves. An' you can make a custard pie. I guess that's a good enough dinner for her. There! She's knockin'! Open the door, can't you! Well, 'f I ever! Look at that grease spot on the floor!”

“Well, I didn't spill it.”

“Who did, then, missy?”

“Well, I never.”

Isaphene went to the front door, returning presently, followed by a tall thin lady.

“Here's Mis' Hanna, maw,” she said, with the air of having made a pleasant discovery. Mrs. Bridges got up, very much surprised to find who her visitor was, and shook hands with exaggerated delight.

“Well, I declare! It's really you is it? At last? Well, set right down an' take off your things. Isaphene, take Mis' Hanna's things. My! ain't it warm walkin'?”

“It is so.” The visitor gave her bonnet to Isaphene, dropping her black mitts into it after rolling them carefully together. “But it's always nice an' cool in your kitchen.” Her eyes wandered about with a look of unabashed curiosity that took in everything. “I brought my crochet with me.”

“I'm glad you did. You'll have to excuse the looks o' things. Any news?”

“None particular.” Mrs. Hanna began to crochet, holding the work close to her face. “Ain't it too bad about poor old Mis' Lane?”

“What about her?” Mrs. Bridges snapped a bean into three pieces, and looked at her visitor with a kind of pleased expectancy, as if almost any news, however dreadful, would be welcome as a relief to the monotony of existence. “Is she dead?”

“No, she ain't dead; but the poor old creature 'd better be. She's got to go to the poor farm after all.”

There was a silence in the kitchen, save for the click of the crochet needle and the snapping of the beans. A soft wind came in the window and drummed with the lightest of touches on Mrs. Bridge's temple. It brought all the sweets of the old-fashioned flower garden with it—the mingled breaths of mignonette, stock, sweet lavender, sweet peas, and clove pinks. The whole kitchen was filled with the fragrance. And what a big, cheerful kitchen it was! Mrs. Bridges contrasted it unconsciously with the poor-farm kitchen, and almost shivered, warm though the day was.

“What's her children about?” she asked, sharply.

“Oh, her children!” said Mrs. Hanna with a contemptuous air. “What does her children amount to, I'd like to know!”

“Her son's got a good comf'erable house an' farm.”

“Well, what if he has? He got it with his wife, didn't he? An' M'lissy won't let his poor old mother set foot inside the house. I don't say as she is a pleasant body to have about—she's cross an' sick most all the time, an' childish. But that ain't sayin' her children oughtn't to put up with her disagreeableness.”

“She's got a married daughter, ain't she?”

“Yes, she's got a married daughter.” Mrs. Hanna closed her lips tightly together and looked as if she might say something, if she chose, that would create a sensation.

“Well, ain't she got a good enough home to keep her mother in?”

“Yes, she has. But she got *her* home along with her husband, an' he won't have the old soul any more 'n M'lissy would.”

There was another silence. Isaphene had put the cake in the oven. She knelt on the floor and opened the door very softly now and then, to see that it was not browning too fast. The heat from the oven had crimsoned her face and arms.

“Guess you'd best put a piece o' paper on top o' that cake,” said her mother. “It smells kind o' burny like.”

“It's all right, maw.”

Mrs. Bridges looked out the window.

“Ain't my flowers doing well, though, Mis' Hanna.”

“They are that. When I come up the walk I couldn't help thinkin' of poor old Mis' Lane.”

“What's that got to do with her?” There was resentment bristling in Mrs. Bridges's tone and glance.

Mrs. Hanna stopped crocheting, but held her hands stationary in the air, and looked over them in surprise at her questioner.

“Why, she ust to live here, you know.”

“She did! In this house?”

“Why, yes. Didn't you know that? Oh, they ust to be right well off 'n her husband's time. I visited here consid'able. My! the good things she always had to eat! It makes my mouth water to think of them.”

“Hunh! I'm sorry I can't give you as good as she did,” said Mrs. Bridges, stiffly.

“Well, as if you didn't! You set a beautiful table, Mrs. Bridges, an', what's more, that's your reputation all over. Everybody says that about you.”

Mrs. Bridges smiled deprecatingly, with a faint blush of pleasure.

“They do, Mis' Bridges. I just told you about Mis' Lane because you'd never think it now of the poor old creature. An' such flowers's she ust to have on both sides of that walk! Larkspurs an' sweet-williams an' bachelor's-buttons an' pumgranates an' mournin' widows, an' all kinds. Guess you didn't know she set out that pink cabbage-rose at the north end o' the front porch, did you? An' that hop-vine that you've got trained over your parlor window—set that out, too. An' that row of young alders between here an' the barn—she set them all out with her own hands; dug the holes herself. It's funny she never told you she lived here.”

“Yes, it is,” said Mrs. Bridges, slowly and thoughtfully.

“It's a wonder she never broke down an' cried