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THE CHIEF OFFICE

Lon's Catch

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Lon Herrick was up in the hills trapping that week. Therefore it chanced that out of the whole community at Three Cheers he was the sole male absent when Mrs. Buss arrived. She came without warning, even as a stray cat, and had settled herself in the inglenook of Three Cheers' heartsome hearth by the time Lon came back.

"She's a fine specimen of a woman, Lonnie," said Noonan tentatively, yet with a sort of submerged enthusiasm. "About thirty-eight, maybe."

"What did she come after?" asked Lonnie, who was a sober and cautious individual.

"To make a living, same as the rest of us. She's opened up a sort of home bakery."

"It's the first hook they put into us," said Lonnie. "Is she fat?"

"She's what an onlooker might call nicely distributed," said Noonan, blithely.

It happened that Lonnie was away most of the hunting season, and only came into camp at intervals. In the spring, when the water burst the ice on the rivers, he came home, and the long wait had only made Mrs. Buss more indifferent to his existence.

"Is that him?" she asked, when Noonan pointed him out, stalking leisurely up the main street of Three Cheers, his old coonskin cap, with its dangling tail, hiding his face from sight, his three hounds at his heels.

"The poor fellow."

"And why do you call him that, Mrs. Buss?" queried Dan, tenderly. "He's a fine figure of a man."

"I'm thinking what a lonely life it is he leads," said Mrs. Buss. "And dangerous, too, no doubt."

"The lumber trade is more so. I've been shaking hands with death all winter long and no body to sympathize with me."

"Go 'long, you artful creature," laughed back Mrs. Buss, merrily. "You haven't missed a day coming down here. Go tell Lon Herrick I want to see him."

"He won't come."

"Try him."

Dan carried the message and brought back the answer dutifully. It was simple and withal uncompromising.

"He says he does his own cooking."

Mrs. Buss' lips set firmly and then parted in a laugh. And her answer was enigmatical.

"He doesn't know me," she said.

"Where do the trappers and hunters around these parts sell their pelts?"

"There's a fellow comes through about this time and buys them up—from Laramie. I can get his name if you want it."

"Get it," said Mrs. Buss.

About a week later Three Cheers was startled to find an announcement in Mrs. Buss' window. It stated that therein was the agency for Barclay & Burden, furriers, of Laramie, followed by a tempting list of prices for pelts.

Lon considered the situation from all points. It looked strategic to him, and yet he was a modest man, and knew not the limit of a woman's patience. Several times he spread out his season's catch and looked them over—deer, bear, fox, wolf, otter and coon skins. He resented Mrs. Buss' assumption of authority. It had been part of the yearly excitement, the visit of the buyer to his cabin, and the swapping of stories over the sale. Yet the second week after the sign appeared in the bakery window he went down to the camp bearing his catch with him and a look of resignation.

He had purposely chosen midafternoon for his visit. The other men would be up in the timber then. He wanted as few witnesses as possible.

"Come right in!" called Mrs. Buss cheerily, as his long shadow fell across her threshold. She lifted a smiling, contented face from her knitting. "Why, hello, Lonnie," she said. "Got a pretty good catch there, haven't you?"

Lon said nothing, but he dropped the pelts.

"Shut the door, dear," added Mrs. Buss. "And don't get nervous. I'm not going to hector you a bit. Sit down and talk."

"Hadm't we better look the pelts over first?" asked Lon hesitantly.

"Plenty of time. I only took the agency so as to make sure you'd have to come here to see me. The day I got here, and found out you were away, I just switched round and changed my name and went to work. Lonnie, don't you get lonesome?"

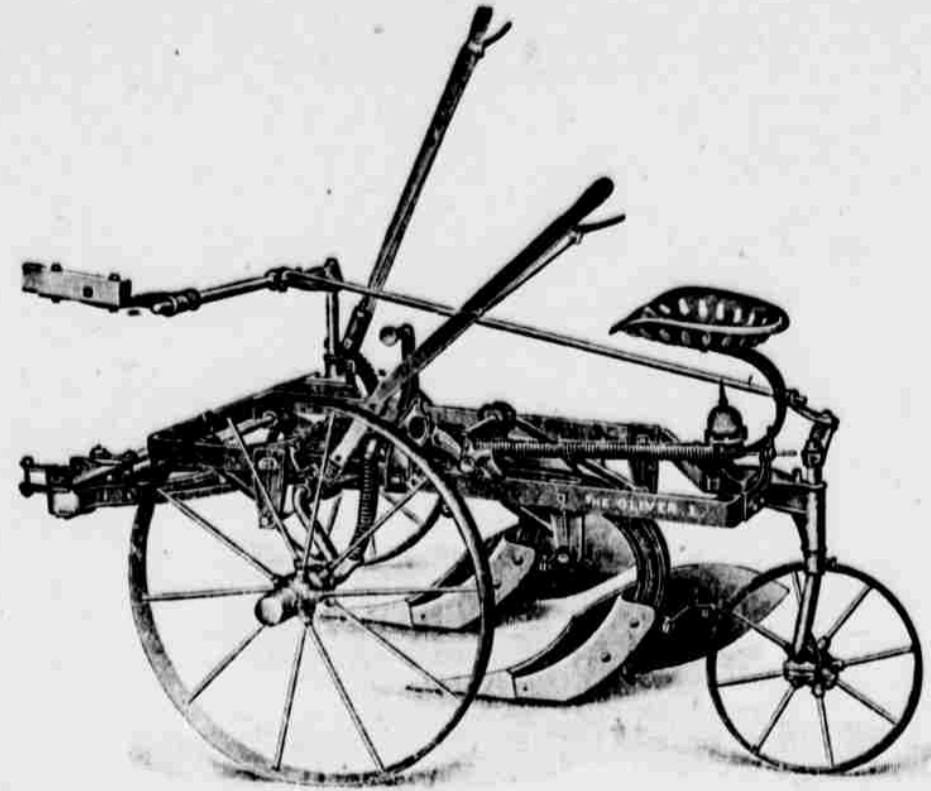
"I do my cooking," Lonnie started to explain, then out of the corner of his eye he caught a glimpse of the table with its freshly baked pies and cakes, and huge loaves of white bread.

"Not this kind. Mostly corn cakes and bacon."

"You could go hunting in the season," began Mrs. Herrick, late Buss. She glanced up, met Lon's eyes, and blushed slowly. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself to make me set all the traps. Why don't you say something?"

Then Lon rose awkwardly, and reached toward her.

"There ain't anything to say, honey," he laughed. "I never heard a caught creature that was given to conversation. You've got me alive."



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