

A Befated Avowal

By Mary C. Hews.

"You know I like you, Barbara! I've always liked you," stammered John Leighton awkwardly, leaning against the kitchen window sill and looking in with a shy, embarrassed smile. "I've never seen my way clear to telling you so before—but—but—I've made the last payment on that old account this morning, Barbara. I can start fair after this."

The woman to whom he spoke stepped back and returned a cooling frown on the stove before she answered.

"Yes, John, I know you always liked me," she spoke in a hard, resolute tone. "I feel like telling you just once, John," went on the voice at the ironing table, "how much you've cared for me in reality. It began when I was 18, you remember—with plenty of others to choose from. I was a pretty girl in those days, too, as there's no harm in saying now, when all the prettiness has faded."

John Leighton's honest eyes rested upon her in astonishment as she spoke. "I never saw her work," "You paid me lots of attention at first, but you never really said anything. I kept expecting that you would through week after week and month after month, and I set my whole heart upon you, John, 15 years ago. It's a long time to be kept waiting upon uncertainties, isn't it?"

"You needn't look at me so reproachfully, either. I understood all along that your mother had queer turns and wasn't exactly right in her mind, and everybody said she was scared almost to death for fear you'd bring a wife like her. But you know you could trust me to wait, John, and hold to you steady through it all?"

"What did you say? That was just it—you didn't want to stand between me and anything better. I showed so many signs of wanting anything better, didn't I?" She smothered a sudden sob. "And a girl has no pride to be hurt, of course, when folks keep asking her when it's to be, and she knows in her own heart that there is no 'it,' let alone the 'when.'"

She flung a handful of drops at random across the sleeves of a garment that she had been drying while she talked. Her cheeks were scarlet now, her eyes shining. "You needn't look so ashamed of me!" she flashed out excitedly. "I know you're thinking I'm too bold to live, but I shouldn't be saying all this to you, John Leighton, if the house wasn't let and my trunks all packed to go out of it tomorrow. When this ironing's finished—and I've taken up a little root of myrtle from the burying ground—I'm through here. Don't upset that flowerpot, John; there's no need of jumping round as if something had stung you, if I am."

"Barbara, aren't you forgetting about my brother, and the shame?"

"What did that amount to, anyway? It wasn't you that forged the check—besides, I never can see that it's any man's duty to put on every yoke that a whole family see fit to whittle out for him. You were foolish to let it go that 'twas your signature, \$900 is a pretty big sum for a farmer to save up and pay out for somebody else, as you have. But I never cared so much for you in my life as I did the night you told me about it—and when you got through the telling you took up your hat and went home without so much as a goodby."

The man who stood outside the window had bowed his head. More than one thread of silver gleamed in his hair as the sunlight fell upon it; his face was grave and pale. "Barbara," he began, with a curious choking in his voice, "I've always—"

She did not seem to hear him. "I did expect you'd speak, John, when father died and I was left all alone here. I can own it now as honestly as if I'd died, too, you see. Something has died in me lately; my heart, perhaps, or the old happy feeling, and there's nothing left but the lonesomeness and the ache."

A sigh that was almost a groan came from her listener, but he made no attempt to speak.

"I used to think there never were two people any better suited to live together than we were," she said, and her voice trembled. "We're both plucky and fond of work; a good laugh now and then suits one of us just as well as it does the other; we like books, too, and we're about the only ones in the neighborhood who realize that there can be a little strip of the world outside of what's in their sight from Montrose hill. As to dispositions, I'm quick, I know, but I don't hold my temper; and you—why, you haven't any temper to hold."

"I don't know about that," John twirled his straw hat upon his fingers and made the admission with slow sincerity. "I can be pretty spunky when I get started, but I've always liked you too much for—"

"Oh, well, it doesn't make any difference now. The end has come at last—both to the wishing and the worrying." She had dried her wet fingers upon her apron and stood erect with tightly folded arms. "You're let duty and what you were foolish enough to call disgrace stand between us like a great iron fence. You've played at being dumb so long that you are almost dumb in reality at last; and I'm nothing but a homely, disagreeable old crosspatch in these days, whatever I may have been once. I'm going to live in Springfield after this, out of sight of the old home where I used to be so happy. When you go by here on your way to the postoffice, perhaps you'll remember the times we've talked together down by the clamor of the wash in the garden and forgive me for being so hateful this last morning. It's almost killed me to blame you, John, but—somehow—I can't help it." Her voice yielded upon the words to a sudden storm of sobs that shook her from head to foot.

The straw hat fell unheeded to the ground. Its owner made two steps to the open door, two more to the kitchen, and clasped her, heedless of resistance, in his arms. His eyes, misty with sympathy and love, sought hers eagerly; his heart beat with strong throbs of tenderness—but his lips shaped only the familiar words: "You know I like you, Barbara! I've always liked you!"—Criterion.

Facing the Enemy.

Mrs. Bullitt—Tell me it again, darling; the story of your facing death fearlessly before Santiago.

Major Bullitt—But you must be tired hearing it.

Mrs. Bullitt—Oh, no! It will nerve me to go down and face the cook.—Brooklyn Life.



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