

Sketch

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Bittersweet

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Thomas Ironside Stanton

CLAUDE urged a timid foot against the floor throttle as he glanced off to the west. "Sure gonna be some night," he told himself. "Sun a-settin', moon layin' on her back." Had he been any one of the other farm boys in the neighborhood his eyes would have been fixed impassively on the road ahead, his mind on the coming plowing match or Saturday's dance. But instead, Claude watched the sky. It did something to him, though he never knew just what.

"Wonder if Mildred'll be ready?" He ran a big hand carefully over his hair, oiled and slicked back from his shining, sun-red-dened face. "Hope she wants to take a ride. Swell night for a ride. Plenty a gas. Could drive clear to Cedar Lane." Excitement shot up through him till he felt every inch of his tall, gaunt body. "Never forget the first time we went. Sun a-settin' an' owls a-hootin'. Sure was nice. Took a walk down by the creek—built a flutter mill, her'n' me.

"Never seen a girl before liked them things," he always said. "All most girls think of is dancin' and kissin' and gigglin'. Always laugh at me when I take 'em to Cedar Lane.

"An' Pa!" His brow creased. "Why'd he get so hot tonight when I ast for the car? Gettin' awful jumpy lately. Course, he don't set much store by town girls. Says they're all alike—can't think a nothin' but gettin' married. String a fella along, tell him anything, till he asts 'em. Pa sure gets funny notions. Thinks just 'cause some girls is silly they all gotta be."

NEARING the huge factory at the edge of town, Claude eased his foot on the gas. His enthusiasm subsided momentarily, dulling the sheen of his confidence. He didn't like the factory! It was too big—and dirty and ugly. Like the whole town! And it was the only thing about Mildred that made him uneasy. She was always talking about the men who worked there. About her father being foreman for over twenty years, and about the time Buck was leader in the strike.

"Makes a fella feel kinda puny," he had told himself once;

“men a-drinkin’ an’ cussin’ an’ spittin’”. Girls foolin’ around, eggin’ ’em on.” That had been the time two years ago when they’d come out for a picnic in the woods beyond the pasture—the time they’d caught him lying at the edge of the creek building a flutter mill. He’d known they were in the woods; he’d heard their carousing all afternoon. But he hadn’t heard the half dozen picnickers creep up behind him. The first he’d known of their presence had been a burst of raucous, accusing laughter directly above him. He’d wheeled and stared up at them in guilty horror—at their jeering, swollen faces! One boy had smashed the half-finished flutter mill into the mud with his huge, clumsy boot—and the others had made so much noise that soon the entire picnic was there, dancing around him in taunting, drunken mockery.

Claude had never forgotten that day—and there had been others. Trips to town had become terrifying, and social gatherings a nightmare, until he’d taken to staying home, where at least his stolid, kindly family accepted him in silence. Work, eat, sleep. Work, eat, sleep—for weeks, for months nothing else crossed his horizon until finally his feelings had shrunk within him like last year’s grapes still clinging to the vines in mid-summer. Even the little joys that brightened the months of farm routine—a newborn calf, Sunday dinners with chicken and fritters and dumplings, cider pressing at harvest time—even these lost their meaning.

AND then he had met Mildred—Mildred with her sympathetic understanding, her unexpected interest—and slowly he had come alive again, awakened to the world about him. Once more the farm and all the things he longed to believe in were his!

He turned down Walnut and pulled up before a drab, two-story frame house. A low wire ran along the edges of the walk, ironically protecting the hard, grassless surface of the tiny yard. He climbed the steps and rang the bell.

After a long minute the door rasped open. “Oh, it’s you, Claude. Come in.”

“Howdy, Mrs. Krans.” Claude stepped into the dimly lit hall, stood back politely while the big woman closed the door.

“You can go on in and wait in the parlor,” she said, leaving him. “Mildred’ll be down in a minute.”

Claude opened the parlor door. As he stepped into the room its stuffy heaviness almost overcame him. "Golly!" He sniffed the air tentatively. "Sure stuffy in here! Smells like our ol' cellar after a rain." Somehow he had never been able to place Mildred in these surroundings. She was so full of life.

He wandered casually around the room, looked at the pictures on the wall, picked up a screen magazine off the table in the corner. "Mildred must read all a these things," he thought. "Always talkin' about them movie stars. Said the other night she wished one of 'em'd make love to her once. Golly!"

FOOTSTEPS sounded on the stairs. Claude quickly put the magazine back on the table and turned, just as the plump, well-rounded figure of Mildred came hurrying into the room. "Oh, Claudie, I'm such an old slowpoke! I don't know how you put up with me," she said. "You'll forgive me, won't you?" Her hair was still wet from the combing out of a wave set, in keeping with the rest of her appearance—painted mouth, black satin dress tight over high breasts and swaying hips, black web stockings.

"Ain't in no hurry," Claude offered. "How ya feelin'?"

"O. K."

"Wanta take a ride? Swell night for a ride."

"Oh, no, let's stay in tonight. I've had a heck of a day," she said, sinking onto the couch with a sigh. "Ma made me clean upstairs."

Cedar Lane and the owls flashed tantalizingly before Claude's eyes and then drifted off into the night. He sat down in the high, straight chair across the room.

"Pa'n' Ma's going to the movies, and we'll have the house all to ourselves." Her eyes fluttered across at him; he did not realize that they were as cold as two pieces of glass set in the frame of her painted lashes. "Why don't you sit over here, closer?" she said.

Claude hesitated, then obeyed reluctantly.

"Don't you think this is cozy, just you an' me?"

"Kinda."

"It's nice, stayin' home once in a while, ain't it?"

"Uh-huh." He wondered if it was dark yet. The thoughts of Cedar Lane would not leave him. "Sure havin' some weather," he said.

"Yah, and wouldn't you know I'd have to stay in and clean.

Just when Gertie and me had it all planned to go to the movies.”

“Wanta go tonight?” His hopes soared.

“Unh-unh. I’d rather just sit here and talk with you.”

Silence. “Sure hot in here,” he thought. “Bet it’s cool an’ nice outdoors.” He glanced at Mildred, noticed she was watching him.

“Warm, ain’t it?” he said quickly.

“Uh-huh.”

CLAUDE pulled out a handkerchief, wiped it across his face and around the back of his neck. “Finished the slew tonight,” he offered further. “Pa’s gonna put her in alfalfa, kill some a that quack.”

“Notice anything different around the factory when you come by?” Mildred interrupted with forced casualness.

He glanced at her quickly. “Don’t recollect nothin’.”

“I just wondered. Pa said tonight they’re takin’ on new men. Thought maybe you might a seen some of ’em.”

“Nope. Looked pretty quiet when I come by.”

“Suppose it would be this time a night.”

“Things must be hummin’, takin’ on men.”

MILDRED snapped up the cue. “Yah! Pa says they’re gonna expand,” she said. “Says they’re lookin’ for young fellas that ain’t afraid to work. Pa told ma’n’ me it was a wonderful chance for a young fella wantin’ to better himself.”

Claude shifted uneasily. He wished they could spend one evening without bringing up the factory.

“I wish I was a fella,” Mildred said, twisting her handkerchief aimlessly between her fingers. “I’d get me one a those jobs.”

“Golly! Never catch me in no factory.”

“Why, what’s the matter with the factory?” She turned on him, her eyes shooting defiance. “I guess Pa’s done all right! He’s been there over thirty years, and Buck’s goin’ on eighteen!”

“All right for them ’at likes it.”

“Honestly, Claude, sometimes I wonder just what you do think about. Why, look what the factory has done for this town.”

Claude said nothing. “Anyway,” she continued, “it’s a whole lot better than any old farm. What do you ever get out of a farm? Work! Just work! Morning till night!”

“Good work. Takes a good man.”

“Takes a fool, you mean!”

Claude glanced at her. “Golly! She’s sure jumpy tonight. Wonder what’s wrong. Maybe that cleaning done it. Guess she’s tired.”

But Mildred was determined. “What do you ever do but work?”

“Me? Shucks, lots a things!” His mind flew into the past. “Huskin’ bees . . . an’ . . . an’ coon huntin’, . . . an’ rabbit shootin’ . . . an’ . . . why, once me’n’ Pa trailed ol’ Slewfoot two whole days an’ nights after he kilt the ol’ brood sow. Caught him eatin’ honey under an apple tree. Looked like a big ol’ ghost, squattin’ in among them blossoms, moon shinin’ down on him—ever see moon shinin’ on apple blossoms?” he offered timidly.

“**M**OONSHINE! Apple blossoms!” Acid scorn bubbled through Mildred’s voice. “We’ve got moonshine in town, and we don’t have to sit up and worry over a litter of pigs to see it! Men in the factory have decent hours!”

“Litter a pigs ain’t no worry. Ever see ’em playin’ in the straw, black an’ shiny an’ wobblin’ like they was drunk?” He looked at Mildred, and slowly the grin drained from his face. “Golly, what’s eatin’ her?” He looked away. “Maybe I done somethin’.”

As suddenly and as unexpectedly as it had become defiant Mildred’s voice softened. “Why don’t you quit the farm and get one of those jobs in the factory?” she said.

Claude stared at her. She no longer twisted her handkerchief, but sat quietly looking at him. He felt the sweat break out across his forehead, and the skin along his throat smarted.

“You’re a good worker. You’d do well after you got onto things. Pa’n’ Buck’d help you.” The penetrating stare of her two fixed, unwavering eyes blazed down on him like two suns out of a cloudless sky. He suddenly wanted to move away.

But he didn’t budge, for suddenly Mildred’s voice struck him across the face like a dash of cold water. “You’re scared.”

“**A**IN’T neither scared!” He looked quickly at her, and something released his voice. “Only . . . gosh, Mildred, what ever give you such an idea?”

"I don't see anything wrong with my ideas."

"Gosh—me in a factory! I ain't never been off the farm!"

"Well, is that any reason why you have to stay there? Maybe you don't want to better yourself? Maybe you'd just as soon rot away on an old farm?"

"It ain't that, Mildred. Gosh, only . . . !" For one brief instant his father's words flashed through his mind—but only for an instant. He drove them out.

Mildred turned, pouting. "You don't like me any more, that's all."

"Sure I do, Mildred. You'n' me's got on fine!"

She turned back. "Maybe some day we'll get married, huh?" she added.

"**M**AYBE." Her softened tone flowed over him in soothing relief. "Sure! Sure, Mildred, that's it. I been thinkin' a lot lately 'bout you'n' me gettin' married some day. Ain't in no hurry. Just been thinkin' about it."

"If you get a job in the factory we could get married right away. Lots a fellas do when they get jobs in the factory."

"Ain't in no hurry. Don't like rushin' into things. Fella's gotta have money to get married."

"Pa married ma the day after he started work."

"Wouldn't have no place ta live. Fella can't live outdoors."

"We could live here till we saved enough for a little place of our own."

Her words caught him like a vise. "Holy Moses! Me live here? Golly!"

"Wouldn't you wanta live here?"

Words refused to come. He swallowed and stared hard at the floor.

"Well, wouldn't you?"

He blurted out. "Sure, Mildred . . . only . . . gosh . . . the farm!"

"Oh, the farm! Can't you ever think of anything but the farm?" She threw her handkerchief to the floor and got to her feet, stood with her back to him.

Claude stared at the handkerchief, then at Mildred. Her skirt stretched tight across her well rounded hips. Weakness caught

him . . . "Gosh, what's the matter with her? What's she doin'?" . . . and then confusion—sudden, frightening confusion, smothering the tiny flicker of hope that had risen momentarily within him. With it came the taunting, gnawing reminder of his father's warning— TOWN GIRLS ARE ALL ALIKE! STRING A FELLA . . . No! He tried to drive it out, to smother the awful rumbling that was threatening from deep within him, like a latent, angry volcano. But it kept rising and growing and strengthening and swelling—until suddenly, like a bomb, it burst with a roar in his brain. For one brief instant he started into full realization of the truth—of Mildred's deception! He stared at her, and nausea swept over him—cold, sickening nausea!

Slowly, like a jury master rising to announce a verdict, Mildred turned and sank on the couch beside him. "Just think, Claude," she began soothingly, "how nice it would be here in town. You kissing me goodbye every morning when you went off to work, and me waiting at the gate for you every night. And we could go to movies whenever we wanted and have dozens of parties." She laid her hand deliberately against his.

Something instinctive within him struggled against her, but her nearness smothered him, flowed over him, easing his sudden anguish like a sweet, deadly opiate. Her hand felt soft against his, and a heady perfume crept up into his brain, like a mist creeping over the land.

WITH a vague wonder he looked around at her. She smiled at him wistfully. "You do like me, don't you?" she said. He looked away. His fear had gone, but so had something else. For the first time in weeks his older world began reappearing in fleeting glimpses before him—his world of drudgery and sweat and dulling routine, the world that laughed at him and mocked him, the world that Mildred had led him out of. Suddenly he felt alone. His mind groped out blindly, frightenedly, trying to find something to support him, something to grasp. But there was nothing, nothing but a weak, hollow emptiness.

"My, if you don't look funny!" Mildred's voice sounded across his numbing senses. "Cheer up!" she teased, laughing at him. Then she became softly pleading. "How would you like to take me for a nice long ride? Maybe we could go out to Cedar Lane.

You like it there, and it's still early." She got to her feet. "Wait till I go powder my nose. I'll only be a minute."

THE sudden action broke his tension! Claude watched her back disappear through the door, and a cool wave fell across his forehead. It was wet. His shirt stuck to him under his coat. Stiffness shot up through his legs as he got dumbly to his feet.

There was no joy in him now, no delight at the thought of a ride, of Cedar Lane. He felt weak and washed out, as though someone had suddenly opened a valve at the bottom of his consciousness, letting his feelings flow out of him, down to the last drop. He walked to the window and looked out, his eyes sad, unseeing.



The Norseman's Prophecy

J. W. Newton

When the smiling gods in their empty temples
Stand unattended,
And the last of the priests are dead;
When the last of the rover's fleet
Sinks to the ocean floor
And dark is the mead-hall door;
When the world's foundations totter
And loosed are the sons and daughters of Loki—
Then, say our seers,
Will the trumpets sound!
And the gods of the North ride again
At the head of their men, strong men,
Warriors all from Valhalla,
Riding forth, fighting and slaying,
Till they themselves be slain.
When the last warrior
In his broken armor lies slain,
Then, then, shall be the end—
Darkness will reign again,
And all shall return to the beginning.