

Jessamine

L. M. Montgomery

When the vegetable-man knocked, Jessamine went to the door wearily. She felt quite well acquainted with him. He had been coming all the spring, and his cheery greeting always left a pleasant afterglow behind him. But it was not the vegetable-man after all—at least, not the right one. This one was considerably younger. He was tall and sunburned, with a ruddy, smiling face, and keen, pleasant blue eyes; and he had a spray of honeysuckle pinned on his coat.

“Want any garden stuff this morning?”

Jessamine shook her head. “We always get ours from Mr. Bell. This is his day to come.”

“Well, I guess you won’t see Mr. Bell for a spell. He fell off a loft out at his place yesterday and broke his leg. I’m his nephew, and I’m going to fill his place till he gets ’round again.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry—for Mr. Bell, I mean. Have you any green peas?”

“Yes, heaps of them. I’ll bring them in. Anything else?”

“Not today,” said Jessamine, with a wistful glance at the honeysuckle.

Mr. Bell, junior, saw it. In an instant the honeysuckle was unpinned and handed to her. “If you like posies, you’re welcome to this. I guess you’re fond of flowers,” he added, as he noted the flash of delight that passed over her pale face.

“Yes, indeed; they put me so in mind of home—of the country. Oh, how sweet this is!”

“You’re country-bred, then? Been in the city long?”

“Since last fall. I was born and brought up in the country. I wish I was back. I can’t get over being homesick. This honeysuckle seems to bring it right back. We had honeysuckles around our porch at home.”

“You don’t like the city, then?”

“Oh, no. I sometimes feel as if I should smother here. I shall never feel at home, I am afraid.”

“Where did you live before you came here?”

“Up at Middleton. It was an old-fashioned place, but pretty—our house was covered with vines, and there were trees all about it, and great green fields beyond. But I don’t know what makes me tell you this. I forgot I was talking to a stranger.”

“Pretty little woman,” soliloquized Andrew Bell, as he drove away. “She doesn’t look happy, though. I suppose she’s married some city chap and has to live in town. I guess it don’t agree with her. Her eyes had a real hungry look in them over that honeysuckle. She seemed near about crying when she talked of the country.”

Jessamine felt more like crying than ever when she went back to her work. Her head ached and she was very tired. The tiny kitchen was hot and stifling. How she longed for the great, roomy kitchen in her old home, with its spotless floors and floods of sunshine streaming in through the maples outside. There was room to live and breathe there, and from the door one looked out over green wind-rippled meadows, under a glorious arch of pure blue sky, away to the purple hills in the distance.

Jessamine Stacy had always lived in the country. When her sister died and the old home had to go, Jessamine could only accept the shelter offered by her brother, John Stacy, who did business in the city.

Of her stylish sister-in-law Jessamine was absolutely in awe. At first Mrs. John was by no means pleased at the necessity of taking a country sister into her family circle. But one day, when the servant girl took a tantrum and left, Mrs. John found it very convenient to have in the house a person who could step into Eliza’s place as promptly and efficiently as Jessamine could.

Indeed, she found it so convenient that Eliza never had a successor. Jessamine found herself in the position of maid-of-all-work and kitchen drudge for board and clothes.

She never complained, but she grew thinner and paler as the winter went by. She had worked as hard on the farm, but it was the close confinement and weary routine that told on her. Mrs. John was exacting and querulous. John was absorbed in his business worries and had no time to waste on his sister. Now, when the summer had come, her homesickness was almost unbearable.

The next day Mr. Bell came he handed her a big bunch of sweet-brier roses.

“Here you are,” he said heartily. “I took the liberty to bring you these today, seeing you’re so fond of posies. The country roads are pink with them now. Why don’t you get your husband to bring you out for a drive some day? You’d be as welcome as a lark at my farm.”

“I will when he comes along, but I haven’t seen him yet.”

Mr. Bell gave a prolonged whistle. “Excuse me. I thought you were Mrs. Something-or-other for sure. Aren’t you mistress here?”

“Oh, no. My brother’s wife is the mistress here. I’m only Jessamine.”

She laughed again. She was holding the roses against her face, and her eyes sparkled over them roguishly. The vegetable-man looked at her admiringly.

“You’re a country rose yourself, miss, and you ought to be blooming out in the fields, instead of wilting in here.”

“I wish I was. Thank you so much for the roses, Mr. — Mr. —”

“Bell—Andrew Bell, that’s my name. I live out at Pine Pastures. We’re all Bells out there—can’t throw a stone without hitting one. Glad you like the roses.”

After that the vegetable-man brought Jessamine a bouquet every trip. Now it was a big bunch of field-daisies or golden buttercups, now a green glory of spicy ferns, now a cluster of old-fashioned garden flowers.

“They keep life in me,” Jessamine told him.

They were great friends by this time. True, she knew little about him but she felt instinctively that he was manly and kind-hearted.

One day when he came Jessamine met him almost gleefully. “No, nothing today. There is no dinner to cook.”

“You don’t say. Where are the folks?”

“Gone on an excursion. They won’t be back until tonight.”

“They won’t? Well, I’ll tell you what to do. You get ready, and when I’m through my rounds we’ll go for a drive up the country.”

“Oh, Mr. Bell! But won’t it be too much bother for you?”

“Well, I reckon not! You want an excursion as well as other folks, and you shall have it.”

“Oh, thank you so much. Yes, I’ll be ready. You don’t know how much it means to me.”

“Poor little creature,” said Mr. Bell, as he drove away. “It’s downright cruelty, that’s what it is, to keep her penned up like that. You might as well coop up a lark in a hen-house and expect it to thrive and sing. I’d like to give that brother of hers a piece of my mind.”

When he lifted her up to the high seat of his express wagon that afternoon he said, “Now, I want you to do something. Just shut your eyes and don’t open them again until I tell you to.”

Jessamine laughed and obeyed. Finally she heard him say, “Look.”

Jessamine opened her eyes with a little cry. They were on a remote country road, cool and dim and quiet, in the very heart of the beech woods. Long banners of light fell athwart the grey boles. Along the roadsides grew sheets of feathery ferns. Above the sky was gloriously blue. The air was sweet with the wild woodsy smell of the forest.

Jessamine lifted and clasped her hands in rapture. “Oh, how lovely!”

“Do you know where we’re going?” said Mr. Bell delightedly. “Out to my farm at Pine Pastures. My aunt keeps house for me, and she’ll be real glad to see you. You’re just going to have a real good time this afternoon.”

They had a delightful drive to begin with, and presently Mr. Bell turned into a wide lane.

“This is Cloverside Farm. I’m proud of it, I’ll admit. There isn’t a finer place in the county. What do you think of it?”

“Oh, it is lovely—it is like home. Look at those great fields. I’d like to go and lie down in that clover.”

Mr. Bell lifted her from the wagon and marched her up a flowery garden path. “You shall do it, and everything else you want to. Here, Aunt, this is the young lady I spoke of. Make her at home while I tend to the horses.”

Miss Bell was a pleasant-faced woman with silver hair and kind blue eyes. She took Jessamine’s hand in a friendly fashion.

“Come in, dear. You’re welcome as a June rose.”

When Mr. Bell returned, he found Jessamine standing on the porch with her hands full of honeysuckle and her cheeks pink with excitement.

“I declare, you’ve got roses already,” he exclaimed. “If they’d only stay now, and not bleach out again. What’s first now?”

“Oh, I don’t know. There are so many things I want to do. Those flowers in the garden are calling me—and I want to go down to that hollow and pick buttercups—and I want to stay right here and look at things.”

Mr. Bell laughed. “Come with me to the pasture and see my Jersey calves. They’re something worth seeing. Come, Aunt. This way, Miss Stacy.”

He led the way down the lane, the two women following together. Jessamine thought she must be in a pleasant dream. The whole afternoon was a feast of delight to her starved heart. When sunset came she sat down, tired out, but radiant, on the porch steps. Her hat had slipped back and her hair was curling around her face. Her dark eyes were aglow; the roses still bloomed in her cheeks.

Mr. Bell looked at her admiringly. “If a man could see that pretty sight every night!” he thought. “And, Great Scott, why can’t he? What’s to prevent, I’d like to know?”

When the moon rose, Mr. Bell brought his team around and they drove back through the clear night, past the wonderful stillness of the great beech woods and the wide fields. The farmer looked sideways at his companion.

“The little thing wants to be petted and looked after,” he thought. “She’s just pining away for home and love. And why can’t she have it? She’s dying by inches in that hole back in town.”

Jessamine, quite unsuspecting the farmer’s meditations, was living over again in fancy the joys of the afternoon: the ramble in the pasture, the drink of water from the spring under the hillside pines, the bountiful, old-fashioned country supper in the vine-shaded dining-room, the cup of new milk in the dairy at sunset, and all the glory of skies and meadows and trees. How could she go back to her cage again?

The next week Mr. Bell, senior, resumed his visits, and the young farmer came no more to the side door of No. 49. Jessamine missed him greatly. Mr. Bell, senior, never brought her clover or honeysuckle.

But one day his nephew suddenly reappeared. Jessamine opened the door for him, and her face lighted up, but Mr. Bell saw that she had been crying.

“Did you think I had forgotten you?” he asked. “Not a bit of it. Harvest was on and I couldn’t

get clear before. I've come to ask you when you intend to take another drive to Cloverside Farm. What have you been up to? You look as if you'd been working too hard."

"I—I—haven't felt very well. I'm glad you came today, Mr. Bell. Perhaps I shall not see you again, and I wanted to say goodbye and thank you for all your kindness."

"Goodbye? Why, where are you going?"

"My brother went west a week ago," faltered Jessamine. She could not bring herself to tell the clear-eyed farmer that John Stacy had failed and had been obliged to start for the west without saying goodbye to his creditors. "His wife and I—are going too—next week."

"Oh, Jessamine," exclaimed Mr. Bell in despair, "don't go—you mustn't. I want you at Cloverside Farm. I came today on purpose to ask you. I love you and I'll make you happy if you'll marry me. What do you say, Jessamine?"

Jessamine, by way of answer, sat down on the nearest chair and began to cry.

"Oh, don't," said the wooer in distress. "I didn't want to make you feel bad. If you don't like the idea, I won't mention it again."

"Oh, it isn't that—but I—I thought nobody cared what became of me. You are so kind—I'm afraid I'd only be a bother to you...."

"I'll risk that. You shall have a happy home, little girl. Will you come to it?"

"Ye-e-e-s." It was very indistinct and faltering, but Mr. Bell heard it and considered it a most eloquent answer.

Mrs. John fumed and sulked and chose to consider herself hoodwinked and injured. But Mr. Bell was a resolute man, and a few days later he came for the last time to No. 49 and took his bride away with him.

As they drove through the beech woods he put his arm tenderly around the shy, smiling little woman beside him and said, "You'll never be sorry for this, my dear."

And she never was.

elsewhere.