

SPOSIN

It had always been Cynthia's word, and Lem felt no disposition to quarrel with it under the circumstances. He let his mind run back to the long ago days when he carried her books to school and planned small treats within the scope of their narrow lives which his awkward tongue and self-conscious mind almost prevented his laying before her.

He saw himself again as he was in those days, big for his years, hands and face tanned almost a leather color with sun and wind, a shock of unruly brown hair and eyes of almost the same shade. He did himself but scant justice as far as appearance went. It did not occur to him that he had been a goodly sight to look upon even at that time, for he had been then as now the seeming embodiment of rugged health.

"I went to school and gave my whole attention to my books, as I had determined to fit myself for a teacher. Somehow I think it always lay back in my mind that I should return here some day. I will not deny that the desire became less a conscious purpose than a subconscious dream as the years went by, but about six months ago it flamed into a purpose that would brook no opposition."

Here Cynthia paused and fell to thinking. Lem noted the fast changing color now, and his heart sank a little. He wondered what had roused Cynthia to the sudden determination and whether it boded good or ill for him and his hopes. Every moment seemed to make it more a matter of life and death that he should know his fate.

With heightened color and eyes that looked steadfastly at the far horizon, Cynthia resumed her story, apparently unconscious of the anxious scrutiny of her companion. "About a year ago a young student came to board with us. As you know, I never had a brother, and before long we became excellent friends. It was very nice to have some one to depend upon, ever ready to do what one needed, to play escort and 'big brother.' That was what we both called it at first. But it seemed to grow to be more, and—and—why, then, he asked me to marry him. It was a surprise to me at first, but after awhile I thought I would say yes. Then it occurred to me that before trying myself to a promise that I might not be able to keep I should see more of life. I was not sure I could be a minister's wife, and besides I did not know whether I loved him or not. I needed absence to prove my feeling to myself. So that is why I am here. I applied for and finally got the position of teacher, and here I am, out with you just as in the old days, and it hardly seems as if it could be six years since then. Does it, Lem?"

Something in the question made the young man's heart leap and the hot blood rush to his head. He looked sharply at Cynthia, but she appeared to be merely wondering aloud, and hope died down again. But it was time for his story now, and, moreover, he felt as if he could tell it, indeed must tell it, let the outcome be what it might.

"It seems to me, Cynthia," he said, "that perhaps without my knowing it you have always been a big factor in my life. I had taken your friendship as such a matter of course that if I thought of it at all it was as something that could not be changed. Therefore your going off to the city that way was a blow that stunned me. I could

not get used to it. I did not once think of asking you to write to me. In fact, I could think of nothing but that you were going. The place seemed mighty lonesome after you were gone, and I gave myself up to my work in the mill as if that, too, would never change. But it bothered me that you were going to have opportunities in the city that would put you away out of my class. That thought was discouraging until one day I said to myself, 'Cynthia, s'pose we both study? And it seemed to me that I could hear you say, 'S'posin'.' That settled it. I began, and after a year or two, during which I had been steadily advancing in the mill, I asked this question: 'Cynthia, s'pose I go away and take a technical course and fit myself for assistant superintendent? And again you seemed to answer, 'S'posin'.'

"I talked the matter over with the superintendent, who had always been a good friend, and he heartily approved. Well, a few months later I went and put in some hard studying for the next few years. During vacations I worked in the mill and got thoroughly acquainted with its needs. I have not known many girls, because I have been too busy, and—well, that seems to be all there is to it. Here I am in the position I worked for, and I arrived just the same day you did."

"That is a coincidence, is it not?" said Cynthia as Lem paused. "We are both lucky, I think, to have found things going our way. Now that we have proved your dream true are you content?"

"I thought I was, Cynthia, until the night I got back; then suddenly it came to me that there was something lacking."

"Isn't that always so with dreams that come true, Lem? It seems to me that the only happy dreams are those that stay dreams," said the girl, with a slight sigh.

Lem made no direct reply to this bit of philosophy. He was in the mood of having his dreams come true and risking the contentment. The suspense grew unbearable. He must know. Anything was better than uncertainty.

"Cynthia," he said softly, and the girl started from her reverie and turned toward him. Her face looked pale and weary, as if life had lost some of its charm. It made him pause a moment, but he gulped hard and spoke again.

"Cynthia, there is a reason for the failure of contentment for me. It is a reason so old that I had not recognized it and at the same time so new that it brings more pain than joy. Cynthia, you are the reason."

He paused again and saw the blood surge up into the girl's face. Her breath came in quick gasps, but she turned toward him with a look that was partly inquiry, partly surprise and some doubt, but there was no repugnance. That encouraged him to take up his narrative where he had so abruptly stopped.

"I love you, Cynthia, but I did not know it until a week ago. I thought I was too busy to care for girls; but

it was because you had all my heart, and I did not know it. It was really for you that I studied and won my way to success. I was too wholly a boy when you went away to understand what gave me such pain to part with you. But even then I must have loved you."

He paused for a moment as if to steady himself for what must follow. Cynthia said nothing, but she drew nearer to him as if unconsciously drawn, and her face was lighted with a smile that even Lem saw was the outward expression of inward joy. He drew her into his arms, and she did not resist. For a moment he held her so, while he waited for his heart to steady. Then with a twinkle in his honest brown eye he turned her face up to his and before kissing her said, "Cynthia, s'pose we get married?"

"And Cynthia answered, 'S'posin'."

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