

THE GOOD RED EARTH

Abby Wells had retired in disgust from the city life. She had found it too strenuous, and as she was well-nigh thirty years of age she had given up hope of settling herself matrimonially. She put her savings in to the purchase of a small cottage in the country and a couple of acres of ground. She meant to do such farming there upon a miniature scale as might be attempted by a woman—to grow fruit and vegetables and to raise poultry. To her friends, who remonstrated against the rashness of the venture, she declared that she was perfectly confident she could make a living for herself out of the good red earth.

And she might have realised her ambition but for a certain untoward circumstance. Her farm adjoined another, and as often happens in country districts, a strip of land where the property joined was claimed by both parties. The feud was a long-standing one, but the previous owner of the farm had included this land in the sale to Abby, as though it was really his, despite the strenuous protestations of the neighbor. Abby having purchased in good faith, and having an obstinate will of her own, was indisposed to admit that opposing claim. The piece of ground chanced to be particularly desirable. It had a spring, it was fertile—it had a sunny exposure, and, to crown all, a delightful view. Abby not only asserted a vigorous claim to this bit of the farm, but set about preparing to utilize it. She determined to grow fruit there, to add to the fruit trees already planted, and to supplement them by currant and raspberry bushes. She hoped, in the course of a few years, to realise handsomely upon her expenditure. She made it her custom, moreover, to proceed thither every evening and enjoy the view, seated usually upon a great boulder of rock, which served as a boundary between that and her neighbor's possessions. It was the highest point of the land, and the view was glorious, over wide meadows and downward into a valley watered by more than one stream. She found this a relief from the quietude of the house, where only the presence of her old nurse disturbed the absolute solitude.

Hostilities from next door began with a letter which fell as a bombshell upon her plans and projects. She was warned off the disputed ground, forbidden to till or to plant, or even to trespass there. Thence sprang a voluminous correspondence. Abby, who was reticent of speech, and decidedly mild-mannered, penned page after page of argument and remonstrance, which gradually, it must be owned, became abusive and vituperative. The replies were couched in a bold, strong caligraphy, and were concise and to the point. Abby declared to her confidant, the nurse, that they were aggressive and dictatorial. She made a few disheartened and dispirited attempts by day to proceed with her planting, with a view to asserting her rights, and at evening, all the summer through, she took her station upon the boulder, at sunset time usually. She brought her book, but she no longer enjoyed either its perusal or the delights of the landscape. She had an uneasy fear of being watched by malignant eyes and of some disagreeable interruption to the solitude.

The controversy meanwhile grew hotter and hotter upon paper, so that Abby, who did not dare to plant in the forbidden ground, and merely made a pretence of having work done there, frequently spent the sunset hour in looking over her shoulder for the village constable to eject her as a trespasser. Despite her brave words on paper, she had a wholesome fear of her neighbor, whom she pictured to herself as bullying and aggressive. He on his part regarded Abby as the worst virago with whom a man had ever had to deal, and cited to himself certain portions of her letter in support of his contention. Sometimes as he read his cheek blushed, and he only wished that it were a man who had penned the document.

Every evening he stood at the door of his house, which was at a considerable distance from the adjoining farm, and peered cautiously thence at the prim, erect figure, which he could just see seated upon the boulder, and outlined against the sky. He had no idea of what

she was actually like, but he pictured her as gaunt and rawboned, with a hard, masculine face and a rasping voice.

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At last the nights grew colder, the gorgeous colorings of gold and crimson began to die out of the skies, the meadows lay brown and sere, bereft of their golden wealth of grain, and Abby was forced to forsake the boulder and remain by the fireside. After that her neighbor felt a vague disquiet, a sense of loss and loneliness when he no longer descried that figure outlined against the evening sky. In the new restlessness which seized upon him, he wandered one autumn morning in the direction of the disputed territory. He had usually avoided the place in terror of a wordy combat with an opponent of the female sex, which he most of all dreaded. But now he felt a desire to see the place, and—yes, to catch one real glimpse of his fiery correspondent. He approached very cautiously, and with considerable trepidation. Abby was there with her skirt tucked up, busily hoeing out stones which might obstruct the growth of that crop which she had not as yet dared to plant. She did not hear her neighbor approach. She was all intent upon her work, a very pretty color in her cheeks, her lips scarlet, her eyes bright, and a few tresses of her firmly brushed hair escaping into curls upon her forehead. The neighbor stood and stared. Instead of the six feet of gaunt womanhood he had expected, here was a figure under the medium height, which to his own great proportions seemed diminutive. And how pretty she was, and how obstinately was she persevering in her futile labors upon the land!

Suddenly Abby turned and saw a man at least six feet high, broad shouldered and muscular. Intuitively she knew it was her neighbor. He was intently regarding her from the shadow of his slouch-hat, and carried a gun in his hand with which he had been duck-shooting. Abby, looking, began to tremble all over. She cast a hasty glance of appeal into his face, and tried to frame some words, then, overcome by fright, which was apparent in every movement, she turned and fled. She never ceased running till she reached the farm house, fearing to be pursued, or to have a shot fired at her.

When she found she was safe in her own rocking-chair she began to cry, and then she flamed up into fierce wrath against her neighbor, and indulged in the most uncomplimentary epithets she could devise.

The neighbor on his part had been so startled by her appearance, and so completely dumfounded, as he said, that it took him some time to realize that he had nearly frightened the little woman out of her wits.

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During the long days of winter that followed the correspondence on Abby's part waxed still hotter and more abusive. A new and subtle antagonism against her neighbor had developed since that day when he had suddenly appeared. She recalled sometimes the expression with which the big man had been regarding her. It could scarcely have been called fierce. Nevertheless, she referred in the most scathing terms to his presence there on that occasion and his deliberate purpose of scaring her away with a gun. From that time on, however, the neighbor's letters were gradually milder, till they were merely of faint protesting of his right to the ownership of the land, and a much more eager defence of himself against the charges she made. It was curious to see the big man, seated close to the lamp in the great, comfortable kitchen of his homestead, smoothing out Abby's letters, and reading them over and over again. When they were particularly fierce he looked hurt for a moment, and then he smiled and recalled her just as she appeared, hoe in hand.

At last Abby's letters suddenly ceased, and the neighbor felt a real pang of loneliness. He was seized with a discontent of his surroundings. He made efforts to find out what was the cause of the discontinuance of Abby's correspondence, but somehow or other he did not succeed. He made strenuous attempts to draw forth replies by writing innumerable letters, some of which became very beseeching indeed in begging for