O PROLONG the pleasure of independent home-coming, the first she had ever tasted in a considerable lifetime, Malvina Leed paused upon her small door-stone to admire her two acres with lenient leisureliness before fitting the key into the lock.

"Not much of a farm," she commented in high good-humor while a glow of rosy content overrode the look of pale suppression habitual to her countenance. "But it's all mine!"

This last came in a furtive whisper, as if she had good reason for supposing she might not be permitted to exult long if she exulted too audibly.

"Nor much of a house, either!" This second damaging admission seemed to afford her a satisfaction even more rapturous than the first. She literally trembled with pleasure as she turned the key and pushed open the door. Key, door, house, all were new to her, and the entertainment of the moment was immense.

Her usually exacting nostrils sniffed enjoyment even the lifelessness of the air which crept out to her,—that subtle atmosphere of barren unwelcome which exhales from an untenanted dwelling.

Just as she had mustered sufficient audacity to make a possessive entrance, her mature but childishly expectant face clouded with a panicky concern. "Joey told me most particular to do something with the key, and what it was I clean forget. 'Twas either to hang it on a nail—or slip it on my key-ring—or—he'll be that annoyed!"

Then, the frown of concern turned to a frown of protest, and it grew courageously till it obliterated completely her subservient attempts to recollect. This frown marked absolutely the first rebellion in all her rather harassed, and decidedly excitable, married life against the dictating precaution of her extremely executive husband. With a nod of defiance she let the key take chances and dropped it among the bewildering miscellany of a capacious pocket.

"Why should I not do what I like with my own key and in my own house, too?" she muttered, sternly. She felt that sternness was necessary. Her resoluteness needed severity in order to be operative.

"My house!" The unusual words brought a smile to her lips. "Only three rooms—but all mine!" Again the lowering of her voice as if there were danger in a too audible expression of content. "Mine,—like the land."

Mingling with this inconsequential exultation, but without any depreciating effect, Malvina had a common-sense knowledge that her "inheritance" was almost valueless viewed as real estate.
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Subconsciously, this knowledge gave security to her enjoyment. If her property were not worth possessing, perhaps no one would bother to interfere with her management of it. "No One's" name was—Joey.

The tiny place had come to her not long ago through the death of a relative. It was at that time being used as a summer home by a young married couple who had now gone back to the city,—gone, as summer visitors generally do, at the most gorgeous season of the year, in rich October, red with turning woods and plenteous with garnered harvests.

"And, Mally, you'd better hurry there at once and see what you've reely got," had been Joey's dictum. So of course she had hurried. She allowed Joey to plan her life down to the most trivial detail, not that she was incapable of doing it as well and better, but that it infinitely saved trouble to let Joey run as far as possible all of the universe that was not directly under the hand of its Creator.

So patiently had she submitted herself, and for so many years, that sheer habit had kept her from realizing how impatient she was and always had been of his all-prevailing assertiveness. Nor until she stepped within this little kingdom of her three-roomed house did she discover how needlessly thorough he had been in his persistent thwarting of her harmless preferences.

"If there isn't a table in the middle of the sitting room!" she cried, and a flush of gratification intense enough to be pathetic in its inconsequent connection burned in her excited cheeks. "Now, isn't that cosy! Ma always had hers in the middle. Seems as if I never could see the use of a table up against a wall. It kind of wastes one side of it. I'm so glad the table's in the middle!"

In Joey's house—and hers,—if she could ever bring herself to feel ownership in anything so aggressively controlled by her partner,—nothing was ever in the middle of a room. Joey was large of bulk and resistlessly progressive and during progressions objected to hitting projecting portions of his anatomy against corners of furniture. He therefore arranged his belongings inexorably close to his walls, keeping his rooms as unobstructed at center as fighting rings,—which they often were.

Malvina walked around and around her table in ecstasy, gathering additional comfort from the fact that it was covered with a fringed cloth. Tablecloths irked Joey considerably, being in the way of free distribution of ashes from his pipe, and fringed tablecloths were
utterly tabooed, fringe having aptitude to entangle in Joey's buttons with disastrous outcome as concerned Joey's temper.

Weaning herself from the table, Malvina went to the window, ran up the shade, raised the sash, gleefully surveyed her scant acres from this new vantage and gloried in her sole big apple tree just discovered at the back.

“Cayuga reds!” she murmured, and her calm blue eyes grew wistfully eager. She mourned because the apples were out of reach. She ached to handle one, hers, off her farm. Just here the muslin curtain blew against her cheek and awoke a new train of rapturous sensations.

“Sash curtains!” she cried with another flush of exceeding pleasure as she ran a welcoming hand up and down their starchy smoothness. Joey was not sympathetic in the direction of sash curtains, holding that they harbored dust and obstructed the light, and he invariably emphasized his theories by twisting into unsightly ropes or rolling into damaged wads such curtains as Malvina ventured upon from time to time.

“Have the other rooms sash curtains, too?” wondered Malvina, letting her expectations broaden audaciously.

Exploration happily proved that her hopes had not betrayed her. Both kitchen and bedroom were whitely curtained and the curtains moved gently in the draft as if they were sentient things and waved their friendliness toward her. The bedroom appealed strangely,—it beckoned like a sanctuary,—so quiet and dim it was, so spotless and unlittered, so free from pipes and boots and whip-thongs and earth-stained overalls. Except for the bureau and the bedstead, the small room contained nothing but a rocking chair and a table only large enough to hold a reading lamp and a book, yet the apartment seemed spaciousness itself to Malvina. It was as wide as—freedom.

She stole from it reluctantly, wooed away only by the magnitude of her interest in her possible kitchen ware. Those utensils were few, but eminently satisfying in their state of newness and cleanliness.

“Brides is the least tidy mess I's people to live after as ever I see,” admitted Malvina, as she entrusted to the glass cupboard the wisp of tea, the loaf of bread and the pat of butter which she had thriftily brought with her to serve as supper and breakfast. Her proposed stay overnight was practically enforced, for the return trains were inconvenient in hour, one being too early in the morning, the other too late at night, to permit of her finishing her appraising trip within the day.
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Incontinently, she set to work and kindled a fire in the stove long before she had any need of it. She really could not put off till its conventional hour the pleasure of lighting this fire, her first in her own home. The simple act was to her symbolical of very much more than she could put into words. The first leaping of the cheery flame, followed by its steadier glow, filled her with a sort of mysterious awe, an unguessed heritage through the ages from savage ancestry when the kindling of a hearth fire was a significant act in the ritual of possession and dominion. "Her" fire,—that is what exalted it out of the commonplace. Moreover, a fire is the best of company. Under its hearty crackling, the little house was as if filled with guests.

"Now, I'll have a good look around at the outsides," declared Malvina, nodding a temporary farewell to the cheeriness within.

She found that the kitchen garden had October written ruthlessly all over it. The one or two remaining tomatoes were dark and mushy from a recent frost; the corn rustled in yellow spoliation; the potato hills were merely hollows and empty at that; the bean poles supported but leafless strings of stem from which the podded wealth had long been stripped; nothing remained but a few tough squash and a head or two of rabbit-nibbled cabbage; but Malvina saw it with the eye of optimistic futurity, green in the sprouting rows of spring, next spring, when she herself would plant it according to her own desires, not with Joey's cast-iron precision. It was the goodliest patch of garden she had ever seen.

She pulled a leathery leaf from the seeded lettuce and chewed it with meditative gusto.

"What kind, I wonder?" she ruminated. "It's the best I ever eat." She was tasting more than lettuce; it was the improving savor of ownership which gave to every mouthful its unique superiority,—ownership not valued because it meant personal aggrandizement but because it permitted the unfettering of a soul. On Joey's farm even so infinitesimal a trifle as a bite at a leaf of lettuce might not always chance to pass without belittling comment,—was she taking to rabbit feed for a change? perhaps she liked dirt, he preferred lettuce washed!—had he slackened up any on provisioning lately? if so, he'd go to town and 'tend to it. Joey's fleers generally masqueraded as jokes, but each held its intentioned sting. Malvina mildly made up her mind that the jokes prevailing on her own two acres should be of her own manufacture, or approximating that brand.

From the comfortable environment of her barren inheritance, she gazed with unenvious curiosity at the wooded estates of her neighbors,
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whose angle of roof or curl of smoke showed sociably above the branching of distant orchards.

"I b'lieve I'll run over to one and see if I can't buy a pint of milk," she murmured, advancing perfidious reason, for she preferred her tea clear.

Possessing herself of the gayest of all the seemly little jugs in the glass-doored dresser she ambled her contented way through fields and lanes till she reached the farmhouse of her selection.

The protests of a barking dog had heralded her approach, and a woman was in readiness upon the back porch to greet Malvina before she had need to knock. The woman eyed her with stern caution, not unkindly, but with the shrewd appraisement of country-folk.

"What do you want?" she asked with unadorned directness. She examined the milk pitcher, aloofly critical, and without admitting that it carried any suggestion.

Striving to conceal her pride in being a neighbor and a landowner, Malvina joyously sketched her milkless condition and wound up with,

"So I jus' run over to ask if you had any,—to sell."

"Well, I d'know," said the woman doubtfully. "I'll see."

It seems to be a point of etiquette with a farmwife never to express any certainty of knowledge concerning her possession of a drop of milk, a shred of butter or a single egg. She always has to "see." But before disappearing for the purpose this woman unhesitatingly appropriated Malvina's pitcher and soon returned with it filled.

"Oh, thank you very much," said Malvina, pleasantly, hastening to brush away the steely disapprobation gathering on the other's face by hurriedly adding, "and what's the price of it?"

"Well, I d'know," said the woman, again firmly intrenching herself behind doubt, though the quoted price of milk per quart as given by the weekly paper from town all but leaped from her eye in order to attack Malvina should the latter tender a cent short.

"Five cents?" offered Malvina, risking nothing, for she knew. "Well, all right," was the woman's acceptance, still intoned doubtfully.

Malvina began to back away. The strange woman was one quivering question mark from head to foot, but she kept her lips sealed. She, too, much wanted to know. It is only your woman who really does not care who makes the most persistent questioner. Malvina comprehendingly helped out a little more.
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"Any time you're short of something, come and see if I mebbe haven't it, over yonder, to Malvina Leed's! Good evenin'."

She turned and retraced her way. "To Malvina Leed's!" How the music of the expression sang in her ears and in her happy heart! Everything had been "Joey Leed's" for so carpingly long that she had grown to connect the title only with things annoying and unrestful. The content of her surroundings grew with each atom of experience. Besides a farm, she now had a neighbor and a good one. For Malvina was not deterred by that neighbor's exterior from detecting the warm womanliness within. This cold bargainer, cautious about squandering her friendship, her dignity, her reserve, her provisions, was just of the sterling strength to be of help in time of need. The frank and open eye above a chary tongue,—that tells a reassuring tale.

"Who babbles her sympathy, dribbles it," philosophized Malvina. "She's all right. If I was took sick tonight, she'd be over in the shake of a cat's tail—with somethin' hot."

She almost wished to be taken sick,—for the joy of the companionship. Joey had been a discourager of neighborhood. "Don't want nobody's old hens cackling 'round my roost," was his defense, persistently jocose, but unfailingly selfish. Malvina dashed away this reminiscence with a happy jerk of her head; this was not Joey Leed's, but Malvina's.

She had regained her own doorstep. The brief October day, vanishing without a warning twilight, had given place to cool crisp evening which would soon be night.

Either driven from its hiding place by cold or hunger, or wooed out by the security of darkness and an uncanny awareness of milk, a thin but amiable kitten arched and purred on the doorstone.

"The trollop!" said Malvina, scourgingly, referring not to the kitten but to the erstwhile unmessy bride. "Too sweet-hearted to give you a merciful drowning, kitty, but able to leave you to freeze and starve! I know the kind! There's a-plenty of them. And they're all city-folk and ought to know better. Come in."

Frenziedly appreciative of the invitation, the kitten made a contorted entrance, squeezing into slim retreats, making immediate reappearance, arching with nervous suddenness, treading on hot eggs and purring royally.

"I kind of like a kitten," mused Malvina, pensively pouring it out some milk. "Ma most generally let us keep one, though she talked a heap."
Joey never talked. He acted. He said he wanted animals kept in their "right place." From evidence, this place was wherever it was unseen of Joey.

After rebuilding the fire and setting the kettle to boil, Malvina indulged in a long-suppressed instinct for illumination, trimming three lamps and letting one burn at its brightest in every room, so that the tiny domicile fairly shone with light.

This audacity incited her to a greater.

"Sheets!" she announced with triumph, and dressed the bed accordingly. Joey was hygienic to violence in his denunciation of sheets, insisting the year round upon blankets.

"No eating in the kitchen!" she continued firmly, setting her tea table in the sitting room. "Not even a sight of the kitchen!" and she drew the turkey-red portière across the door.

"Thin toast!" was her next order which she proceeded to execute with a deliberate unconcern of time which was in itself a rare happiness. In the house of Joey things were generally kept jumping by the clock.

Her happiness augmented when she heard the distant shriek of the approaching passenger train,—the one which she might have taken but did not, preferring to arrive at a new destination by daylight,—what hours of enjoyment she had gained by deciding not to come on it!

Before sitting down to her pretty tea-table, she went into the bedroom and "did over" her hair in front of the mirror framed in pine cones, and she noted with joy that traces of past comeliness had crept back to her face by reason of relaxation and content.

"This little home is goin' to be my soul's sanitarium!" she vowed aloud. The startled kitten gave a big purr. Lifting the flattered animal to her cheek, Malvina passed back into the kitchen and sat a blissful moment to enjoy the tranquillity of her surroundings, the grateful glow of the quiet fire, the inviting brightness of the rooms, the serene and confiding snuggle of the cat against her neck, the uninvaded solace of a silence which was not loneliness, of solitude which was not sorrow.

A sudden stumbling upon her doorstone, a man's muttered imprecation at his own misstep, did not arouse a particle of fear within her; she was too proudly anxious to play the hostess if only to a mistaken wayfarer. She hospitably stood, even before he should knock.

But no knock came. The knob was boisterously turned and the door banged open for the volcanically jocose entrance of Joey.
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“Ah ha! nothing like coming unbeknownst to find what’s going on!” he chuckled, uproariously, slamming the door behind him and lunging into the room. The tiny house shivered like a structure of cards, for Joey was over six feet high and broad accordingly, with long swinging limbs ending in sledgehammer hands and anvil-like feet.

In a stupor of surprise, Malvina looked at him, blankly silent. She put down the kitten, quite unconscious that she had given it the kitchen table for a base, quite unheeding that it consolingly curled itself up where she laid it. The silence, brief though it was, pierced Joey’s malevolent sensitiveness and pricked him to spleenetic outburst,—

“Why, if you’re not glad to see me I can go back the way I came, only walking ’stead of traveling!” and he crashed toward the door.

“No, don’t!” cried Malvina, putting out a detaining hand. He was quite capable of carrying out his threat. His endurance was phenomenal,—when he could distress someone thereby. And she had been inhospitable. “It was good of you to come. I was s’prised; that’s all. It was real good of you, Joey.”

Still glowering, he allowed himself to relent, sullenly relinquishing his hold of the doorknob. Then he divested himself of his coat and cap, hanging them upon the upper corner of the cupboard. Nothing was too high to serve him for a peg.

He looked taller than ever in this confined dwelling. His immensity carried with it not the idea of strength, which is restful, but of force. His very coloring was aggressive. His hair was vividly red, glistening as if wet, and it virulently curled,—not loosely and softly, a lure for loving hands,—but curled with the vicious uniformity of copper springs. His eyes went inexorably with the hair, being brown as chestnuts but flecked with fiery red spots which gleamed maliciously whether in good humor or ill. His face was smooth except for the chin where there sprouted a suspicion of beard as wrinkled, as red, as glistening as his hair. For the rest, he was a galvanic whirl of arms and legs.

“Not only did I think enough of you to come, but I brought you some supper,” he grumbled. Snatching a parcel from his pocket and shaking from it a thick slice of ham, he thwacked a frying pan upon the stove, slammed the slice into it, and put all over the open fire where it was soon smoking and fuming and scorching and noisily spluttering.

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"Now for a squint through this dog kennel," he grinned, becoming amiable at the smell of the ham. He plunged into the sitting room, caught his shoulder in the portière and without hesitation tore it from the pole and hurled it into a corner.

"Blamed poor taste putting hanging-truck in such a shantyran, wasn’t it?" he asked, in a cordial tone which made sure of Malvina’s co-operative approval.

She failed to answer him, being too nervously busy watching where the mud was spattering to, brought in on his heavy soles. She watched it with a weariness of heart out of proportion to the harm done, for she knew that October roads were prone to muddiness and that soiled boots could not help but leave a track, but tonight she seemed to see it all in a new light,—Joey was wilfully unchoice of where he stepped, and how, and the mud in which he knowingly trod was significant of other avoidable things in life through which he drove ruthlessly, leaving dark stains over the lives of others.

Done with the sitting room, he promptly blew out the light and brought the tea tray in with him.

"No use wasting oil, is there, Mallie?" he demanded, still sure of having done the commendable. He set the tray upon the kitchen table, saw the cat, and without comment or question put it outside.

"Is this cubby-hole the bedroom?" he demanded, looking in with such scowling scorn that Malvina shrunk guiltily, almost as if her former approval of it had made her responsible for its meanness and his dissatisfaction in it.

His scorn changed to noisy laughter.

"Of all the ratty quarters!" His laughter spent, he deigned to make the concession. "But I guess it’s big enough to sleep in, just for tonight." As he spoke, he hauled the sheets from the bed, bunched them in a lump and tossed them to the floor, leaving the blankets in huddled disarray. Then he blew out that light. His overbearing demolishment seemed to result less from an indifference to the preferences of others than from an unassailable conviction of the universal superiority of his own.

"It’s exac’ly as I thought, Mallie," he sagely announced. "The place is worthless, or it wouldn’t ’a’ been given to you." Here he flapped over the slice of ham and sent a grease shower hissing and snapping across the stove. "So I told Tod Beasley this morning that I’d trade it with him for his clover lot, down our way, and he, having folks hereabout, agreed. I told him the deeds and signing and such’d have to be seen to with you, but that you’d trade all right.
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What do you (me ownin’ the finest farm in the state) want with a truck patch like this? I told him you couldn’t pay the taxes on it and I wouldn’t: and that settled it. Let’s have supper.”

Picking up the brown paper which had wrapped the ham, he planked it on the table for a mat, and dropped the reeking frying-pan upon it. Then he kicked off his boots, jerked off his coat, tore off his collar,—and was dressed for dinner.

He munchéd and crunched his meal to its resounding end, then elbowed the dishes out of the way, never doubting for a minute but that Malvina had finished because he had, lit his pipe and extended his wool-encased feet toward the warmth of the stove.

“Now, ain’t this pretty comfortable?” he advanced persuasively. “Ain’t this better than being alone, Mallie?”

She had been glancing furtively at the ruin about her, her heart acknowledging the same desolation as was miserably patent in her disordered dwelling. Through the dusk of the rooms there still lingered the muck from the frying-pan. Huddled furniture, torn drapery, kicked rugs and muddied floors marked the havoc and wrack of Joey’s ever unquiet passage. The banished kitten mewed persistently. Over and above all the material signs of destructiveness brooded the outraged spirit of Malvina’s harmless individuality. The tragedy of the larger world—its dominion of aggressiveness—threatened to stamp itself in pale miniature upon her frightened face and silent lips, when through the blackest of storm clouds there burst the illuminating sun of rebellion.

“Ain’t it, I say?” Joey jolted the table to obtain assent to his question; and then his jaw dropped almost in horror when he discovered that Malvina was not as usual quivering under his hectoring assault, and that her face was gathering the peacefulness known only to assertion.

“Joey,” she said, explainingly. “The summer rent for my house was put into bank in my name, an’ll pay for the taxes for some years to come, so I’m not a-going to sell yet awhile. No, nor trade, nor nothing, never!”

“What the—the—the dog!—are you goin’ to do with the place?” he burst out.

Malvina rose to the awful height of levity.

“Play house,” she answered, with a benign smile.

Joey’s jaw dropped a hopeless inch lower, and under the encouragement of that sign Malvina arose with gentle firmness, opened the door and let in the kitten.