

## THE COUNTRY ROAD.

From the busy fields of farmer-folk  
It starts on its winding way,  
Goes over the hill, and across the brook,  
Where the minnows love to play;  
Then, past the mill with its water wheel,  
And the pond that shows the sky;  
And up to the bridge by the village store,  
And the church with its spire so high.

You would never think that the country road,  
From the hill to the store, could be  
So long to a boy with an errand to do  
And another boy to see.  
You can never dream how short it is  
From the farm to the frozen pond.  
Nor how very much further it always is  
To the school house just beyond.

Oh, the country road! at the farther end  
It runs up hill and down,  
Away from the woods and the rippling brook  
To the tolling, rushing town.  
But, best of all, when you're tired and sick  
Of the noisy haunts of men,  
If you follow it back, it will lead you home  
To the woods and fields again.

—St. Nicholas.

## South Branch Farm

THE Taney family had lived on the South Branch Farm since colony times, and no Taney had ever cheated a man of a cent. They lent no money, and they borrowed none; they never sat at any man's table, or asked a guest to theirs.

The Taney pew—a front one—was filled every Sunday, come rain or shine. Mrs. Taney, a middle-aged woman, with her gray hair in a tight little knot behind, and wearing the same rusty black gown and bonnet for a dozen years, was always, like the others present. But sometimes she was asleep. For this was the one hour in the week when she could sit down on a cushion, and fold her hands. The air was warm; the music soft and sweet; no wonder she slept. Sometimes the words that were read stirred her soul; it seemed as if her childhood woke, as if the tears must come to her long dry eyes. But they never did. By the time she had walked home with her son William, the strange story of Bethlehem, or heavenly glory to come, had faded into a doubtful dream, and all that was real was the South Branch farm, the price of pork, or the fall in potatoes. After church, dinner must be ready, (piping hot, too, on account of the boarder), in half an hour; then she had the sheep to look after, and the poultry to feed; then supper; then milking. The Taney family had never kept any "help." Mrs. Taney had brought up six children, been sole cook, seamstress, tailor and dairy maid; yet her husband, old Ben, always had said:

"Sarah's not a capable woman. No Taney blood in her."

Ben had been dead five years; but his wife went on, carrying a growing load, on the back which lacked bone. William was a harder task-maker than his father had been; the very oxen felt the lash oftener, and their corn fell off one-half. He sat in the kitchen now, with a book before him, while his mother and youngest sister, Letty, were cooking supper.

"Take that butter off of the table," he said suddenly. "Molasses will do. What are you cooking meat for? It's not necessary. Put it back in the cellar."

"Yes, William," replied the mother, submissively. "Only I thought the boarder—"

"We can't afford to feed him like a lord. You'll have to exercise economy, mother, I can't always be here to look after things. How can I ever pay for the meadow lots, if the money is thrown about in this way?"

Mrs. Taney forgot to eat her bread or drink her milk. The meadow lots! It was to buy these lots that her husband had made their lives bare, and hard, and wretched, from their wedding-day. The good, wholesome produce of the farm, which should have fed the children, had gone to market, while they ate the refuse; the money, which should have educated them, had been put in the bank to buy these lots. When her baby was ill, no doctor was brought, and the child died; the money saved went to the lots; the mother had begged for a head-stone for the grave. There was Letty, growing to be a woman, half-clothed, without a sparkle of fun or pleasure to lighten her young life; while poorer girls dressed and went out, and had company, and enjoyed, as the young should, days filled with comfort and happiness. Every penny thus saved, William laid by for "the lots." Yes! those twelve acres had come to be the absolute God for these people. Not a happy life, nor God, nor heaven.

After supper his mother followed him out.

"William," she said, desperately, "how many years will it be before you can buy the lots?"

"Years? The lots!" in unfeigned

amazement. "I—how on earth can you understand business?"

It was the first time she had ever spoken in this way.

"I don't know. But I am afraid I will not live to see it. It is so long—"

She went back to the kitchen. The dishes stood untouched upon the table, and little Letty was seated upon the steps, a basket of red peaches beside her, which the boarder brought down from his room.

He was a young man, a teacher in a Virginia country school, who had come up to these hills geologizing in his summer vacation.

"I brought them from the McBride farm, Mrs. Taney," he said. "They are a very common kind in the Shenandoah valley," handing them to her.

Mrs. Taney's thin features grew warm. "I remember a tree at home just like these," she said, "by the old mill. My old nurse used to hold me up to pull them for myself."

"Your little girl tells me you came from Fauquier County. It is a fine county."

"It is the most beautiful in the world," said Mrs. Taney.

She stopped and went in hastily. She felt the tears choking her. She could hear Mr. Burke tell the child that his school was in Fauquier, and that he often passed her grandfather's house. It was for sale now with a dozen acres about it; would sell very cheaply, no doubt. Land had depreciated since the war. "A quiet, comfortable little homestead, too," he said, "as any in the State."

Mrs. Taney paused in her work.

"Oh, if I could only show it to Letty," she said to herself. "The dear old farm. The sunny porches, the Bourbon roses, and the great oaks centuries old. She never had spoken of her old home to her other children, but to Letty she had talked of it often when they were alone. Letty was like herself, the others were all Taney's."

She came to the door.

"Do you know, Mr. Burke, if there is an old negro on the place—a gardener?"

"Uncle Tod? Oh, everybody knows the old man. And his stories about the Cleverlands, de family, as he calls them."

"We were the Cleverlands. And old Tod is really living yet?" she laughed for the first time in a year.

When Letty had gone in, Mr. Burke paced up and down the porch. He was a manly, large-natured young man, and his heart ached with pity for the poor, pinched lives of this child and her mother. All he could do to show them kindness was to lend books to Letty, which she devoured eagerly, for she was fond of reading, in fact she had obstinately persisted in staying at the free school until she had educated herself.

William Taney waited until the young man had gone, and then he went into the pantry, where his mother was straining the last crock of milk. Something in his manner made her set it down, trembling.

"You have bad news to tell," she said.

"No," with an uneasy, stricken laugh. "Most folks call it good. Fact is, mother, I've made up my mind to marry—"

"Oh, William," her old cheeks coloring.

"I made up my mind three months ago. And the girl's courted, and the wedding's to be to-morrow. There now. No need for you to look in that way. I'm generally pretty close-mouthed about my own business, you might know that. And I didn't choose to have the matter cackled over at

home. The girl's Miss Sophy Crawford."

His mother came toward him. He was her son after all, and this was the turning-point of his life. She put her arms about him and kissed him.

"God bless you, my boy," she said. He stood immovable as a log.

"Don't let us have any fuss," he said. "You'd better sit down. You're shaking all over. Well, that's all. There'll be no wedding hubbub here. I don't hold to spending money in feeding a lot of guzzling fools. The Crawford family have a regular blowout in the morning. But you don't want to go, I reckon?" uneasily.

"I should like to see you married," timidly.

"Oh, nonsense. There's no sickly sentiment about me. I'll have Sophy home by supper time. You'll have to see to things here."

He lighted his candle and turned to go.

"By the way she was here a month ago."

"Yes," Mrs. Taney remembered distinctly the gross-featured, black-eyed young woman, who had swaggered through the farm-house in her cheap silk and gilt jewelry.

"She came to look at her new home—well she rather took a fancy to the south chamber. You'd better fix it up for her."

"My room, William?"

"Yes. It's all the same to you. Of course you can go up to Letty's."

Letty, who had been at work inside, came out, and threw her arms, sobbing, about her mother. She knew that it had been her mother's room for thirty years. All Mrs. Taney's children had been born in it—the baby died there.

William stopped and came back, saying:

"Now, look here. It's just as well to speak plainly at once. I'll have no opposition from you, Letty, nor from—"

from any other woman. I'm the head of this house. My wife shall be mistress of it. She brings me a snug bit of money and I'll not have her nor her family insulted in it."

"My son."

But he stalked off to bed.

There was no time the next day, for Mrs. Taney or Letty to even think of the coming trouble.

While they were hanging out clothes that afternoon, Mrs. Taney heard a tap, three times repeated, on the orchard fence. Letty's face colored. She dropped the clothes and ran behind the apple-tree. As she came back her mother saw her thrust a note into her pocket. Mrs. Taney grew suddenly sick at heart. Letty with a secret, Letty carrying on a clandestine love affair?

While Mrs. Taney stood doubting whether to ask the child for her confidence, Letty had disappeared. A few moments later, the girl went down the road in her clean dress and sun-bonnet.

Mr. Burke, coming over the fields that afternoon, with his hatchet and bag of specimens, was amazed to see Letty standing on the road in earnest conversation with a man. "A coarse, red-jawed, beery fellow," was his angry verdict. The fellow talked long and earnestly. Then he took Letty's hand and pressed it fervently. Burke turned his back on them, and struck across the hills. The girl's mother should hear of this at once, he said to himself, decidedly. Then he slackened his pace. What was it to him why should he vex himself about this girl? Or meddle in her love affairs? He went slowly back to the hills. But the good rushed with a strange beat through his veins.

In an hour Letty was back at work with redoubled vigor, to make up for lost time. Her mother scanned her innocent, meek face with a breathless terror.

Surely there was no guilt there. She would not doubt her; she would not ask a question.

"I have dressed the table with flowers," the mother said, "and made a cake—a real bride's cake. I hope William won't be angry. But this is so different from weddings in Virginia. Oh, Letty, if you and I could only go to the old house and sleep for one night in the room which was mine when I was a child. I think just that thing would give me years of life."

"There they come," cried Letty, as the big Crawford carriage was seen dashing up the road. She grew very pale and shrank back. The girl had always been afraid of her brother William; and his wife, she suspected, would be as hard a ruler and a more vulgar one.

But Mrs. Taney led her to the porch. "You must welcome them, Letty," she said.

The bride watched them from the carriage window with keen, jealous eyes. Her father had given her a hint as to her future course.

"You've made a good match, Sophy," he said. "Bill Taney's got as long a purse as any man in the country, and the farm's comfortable. But the old woman and her daughter will be a drawback. They'll try to rule over you roughshod, likely. Just take your stand at once. Let 'em see you will be mistress in your own home."

"Trust me for that, pappy," said Miss Sophy.

The whole Crawford family had accompanied her to see how she would hold her ground.

When poor Mrs. Taney stepped forward, therefore, her thin face reddening, and her hands held out, the bride received her welcome with a careless nod.

"I hope you will be happy in your new home, my dear," said the gentle lady.

"Oh, no doubt, ma'am! I generally hold my own pretty well. Come in, pappy. Come, Sue. I want you to see my house before it is dark. Here's the living room. Bill must fit that up into a parlor—double quick, too. D'ye hear that, Mr. Taney?"—laughing loudly. "You needn't trouble yourself, ma'am, to show the way. Come along, all of you."

William stopped, and looked with sudden pity at his mother, and then followed his wife, who went, talking loudly, up the stairs.

Mrs. Taney and Letty placed the supper on the table. The bride came in, the noisiest of the noisy party. She went hastily to the head of the table saying:

"This is my place, I believe."

William gravely motioned his mother to a seat among the strangers. His wife bore herself as though she had been mistress for years, and found fault freely when the humor seized her. The bread was dry as chaff, the ham was bitter with salt, she said.

"That's your idea of cooking, mother Taney, eh? I'll give you a hint or two, to-morrow. We young people have progressed, you know."

"Not that I mean to take the work out of their hands," she said to her sister, aside. "No, no! If we feed 'em they've got to earn their bread."

Letty overheard the whisper, and her scared face grew a shade paler.

"Very nice old silver, William," said the bride, directly, weighing the spoons on her finger, and then reading the mark.

"Cleveland, eh? You must have that altered, please, to our initials. I can't use spoons with strange names on 'em."

William glanced uneasily at his mother. But the latter did not speak.

"Very well, my dear, it shall be as you please," he said.

One morning Letty came into the room, when William stood joking with his wife before going to the field. They looked at her with astonishment, for the girl was always silent and shy.

"Brother, I want to speak to you," she said, catching her breath.

"Well, go on," said Sophy, impatiently. "What are you afraid of?"

Letty spoke directly to William, ignoring her. "The potatoes and apples must be picked over, and the cellars are damp. Could one of the hands do it?"

"Good gracious! Do you want harvesting to stop?" cried Sophy. "You and mother Taney can do it at your leisure. Do you suppose your brother pays men such ruinous wages to wait on a lot of women?"

"You have always done it," said William.

"Mother is not well, William."

"Well, manage it as you like. I can't be bothered with the kitchen work," he burst out.

Letty left the room hastily.

"That's right, William. The truth is, you're too open-handed. You can't afford a parcel of able-bodied women in idleness, if you ever mean to buy the meadow lots."

"That's a fact!"

The mention of the meadow lots keyed his courage.

When he came back that afternoon he found Sophy, resplendent in a pink-flowered muslin entertaining half a dozen girls in the parlor. He stopped to joke and romp with them. The next moment the door opened, and Letty stood, like a ghost, on the threshold.

"Come to mother!" she said.

"What is the matter?"

"You have killed her, I think," she said quietly.

The poor old woman had sunk down on the floor of the cellar and lay as if dead.

William trembled as he lifted her. The doctor of the village happened to pass at the moment.

"No, she is not dead," he said, after examining her. "Great exhaustion. It will be a long illness. She must have rest and careful nursing."

Letty stepped forward.

"She will have both. Mr. Burke, will you carry her to Mrs. Wright's across the road? She has promised to give me a room."

The crowd about her were so stunned at the child's action that they did nothing to oppose it.

Mr. Burke promptly lifted the thin figure in his arms, and laid her in the bed in Mrs. Wright's shaded spare room, before William had recovered his senses.

"Don't you see how disgraceful this looks?" Sophy cried, shaking him.

"Your mother turned out. What will folks say?"

He hurried after Letty, scolding and ordering them back. But Letty did not answer him.

"Mrs. Wright will charge boarding. D'ye hear?"

"I shall pay her," said Letty quietly.

Mrs. Taney's illness lasted for weeks. William's wife smoothed the matter over to the community as best she could. "The Wright house was more quiet than hers. She was willing to pay the boarding to insure comfort to dear mother Taney," et cetera. Secretly she rejoiced to escape the trouble of the sick woman.

When Mrs. Taney was able to come down to the porch of the cool farmhouse for the first time, she sent for William and his wife. The doctor was there, and Mr. Burke and Judge Wright, and little Letty and a man whom Mr. Burke at once recognized as "the fellow," and so he turned his back on him contemptuously.

"You've got quite a color, Mother Taney," said Sophy. "You'll soon be able to come over. Help with the canning, eh?"

"Mrs. Taney," said the doctor, "needs a long season of rest before health is restored. I have recommended a change of air—a journey—"

William exchanged alarmed glances with his wife.

"Why, you must take us for millions, doc," she cried. "Change of air? Journey? That sort of prescription suits city, fine ladies. But farmers' wives, who have to earn their living, can't take time for such folderols."

The doctor would have answered, but Letty put her hand on his arm. There was a faint pink on her cheeks, and her blue eyes sparkled like steel.

"Fortunately, my mother," she said gently, "is not in such a strait. I have arranged for her to take the journey. We are going to-morrow to Virginia. I have bought her old home, and we shall live there. She will have a long change of air."

William turned ghastly pale.

"Bought? What money had you?"

"Her own share of the estate," said Judge Wright calmly. "Letty is of age. She seems to have always been under the impression that she and her mother were dependent upon you. She came to ask me about it two months ago; and I, as her guardian and executor, had nothing more to do than to hand her over her share, which was, you know, in bonds. She has chosen to invest it in Virginia land. Mr. Hipps made the purchase for her," nodding to the beery lawyer, who nodded gravely back again.

Mr. Burke moved suddenly over to his side, with a beaming recognition.

"How do you propose to live on this farm?" said William.

"My mother will withdraw her portion of the estate," said Letty. "She is entitled to a third, you know."

"Withdraw? Thirds? Why, I've use for it. If she does that, I have done with the meadow lots!"

His voice was like that of an enraged dog.

"You seem, William," said Judge Wright, "strangely to have forgotten the position of your mother and sister. You have drawn the interest of your mother's money. It must all, of course, be refunded. Little Letty has a clear head. She will manage very well. By the way, she has suggested to me that your wife should send over the Cleveland silver, and all other household property belonging to your mother before marriage."

When William and his wife went out of the gate, he seemed to have shrunk into a smaller and older man. The last words heard from him were "lots." "It's all your fault," in a fierce bitterness.

When they had all gone, Letty put her head down on her mother's lap.

"Now, mother," she said, "for the roses and the old oaks, and rest, and home! We shall find poor black Tod there, waiting; and all your friends—"

There was an uneasy cough behind them. It was Mr. Burke, waiting to say good-by.

"I shall be a neighbor, too, Miss Letty."

"Yes, I remember," blushing very much.

He held her hand a moment.

"You—you are not sorry that I shall be there too?"

But Letty only blushed more absurdly, and could not answer.—Peterson's Magazine.

### Chinese Humor.

The Chinese minister was asked the other day if there were any Chinese humorists, says the New York World.

"Oh, yes," he replied, "plenty of them. There are some very good jokes in Chinese literature."

"Tell one," said the visitor.

"Well," said the minister, "this is a famous Chinese story. There was once a traveler stopped at the house of a friend for some refreshment. He asked for a cup of tea. It so happened that the friend had no tea in the house, but said he would send his son to borrow some from a neighbor. The wife put a pot of water on the fire to boil. The son did not return and it became necessary to add some cold water to that boiling in the pot. This was done several times. The son did not return with the tea and finally the wife said, 'Inasmuch as the tea does not seem to be forthcoming, perhaps you had better offer your guest a bath.'"

It's always a cold day for an office-holder when he gets fired.