

When the
Whippoorwill—

Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings

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A Crop of Beans

A TILLIE-HAWK SWOOPED INTO THE TOP of a dead cypress. The mocking-birds and red-birds that had scurried like wind-buffeted leaves ahead of him stirred uneasily in the live oaks and palmettos where they had concealed themselves. The sky had emptied itself for him of living things. Against the blinding blue of the Florida afternoon hung indolent masses of white cloud. The hawk shifted from one claw to the other, hitching his shoulders like a cripple. There ran a road—a fat chicken snake—a man——

The young man swung his shotgun from his waist to his shoulder in a quick semi-circle. The tillie-hawk exploded into a mass of buff feathers and tumbled to the edge of the road. The girl caught her breath.

“Lige” she reproached him. “You hadn’t orter wasted a shell on a ol’ tillie-hawk.”

A horn sounded behind them and a truck loaded with bean hampers lurched by in the deep ruts of the sand road. Old man Tainter and his negro driver passed without the customary “Hey!” or lift of the hand. The young woman crowded back into the dry dog-fennel. The man no more than stepped aside, unbreaching his gun. He kicked a cloud of sand after the truck.

“His beans ain’t a mite better’n mine. Parts of ’em is plumb sorry-lookin’.”

"They're earlier, ain't they?"

"Jest a week. He ain't no more likely to miss frost than me. Ary time, now it's a'most November, we're like to git us one o' them piddlin' leetle ol' frosts don't mean nothin'. Tonight, mebbe."

They turned between chinaberries into the Widow Sellers' gate. Her sharp tongue clicked at them from the porch.

"You Lige Gentry, you, how'll I ever git my cane cut? I ain't payin' you by the week reg'lar to traipse around with your wife."

He rose to the familiar bait.

"Dog take it, o' woman, Drenna's been a-cuttin' cane with me all evenin'. An' who'll pay for it? Not you. I'll be horn-swoggled if you ain't the meanest white woman in the county."

He stamped across the porch. Drenna dropped down on the top step, draping her gray percale skirt across her worn shoes. The widow hunched herself on the cowhide seat of her hickory rocker, drawing her shawl around her shoulders against the chill air from the northwest.

"Ain't you sick o' keepin' Drenna hangin' around where you kin look at her all the day? I ain't done laughin', the way you begun a-courtin' her, like you was huntin' a squirrel goin' acrost a oak thicket an' you tryin' to keep sight of it. How many years ago was it? Two, three? Anyways, long enough to git you a couple o' young uns. An' you ain't sick o' lookin' at her yit!"

Lige towered over her. He shook back the curly sun-bleached hair from his sweaty forehead like an infuriated bull. He plunged roaring into her trap.

"Dog take you! You ain't fitten to fish the same creek 'long-side of her! Drenna, move offen the stoop away from her! You'd orter study on sayin', is she sick o' lookin' at me! A pore sorry thing like me, to git a woman——"

The Widow Sellers rocked violently in sheer delight. Her

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little black chinquapin eyes danced. She scratched her white head excitedly with a piece of the okra she was cutting. She shrilled above him.

"Now you said it! Now you and me agrees for onct, Mister Gentry! A pore sorry thing like you! Now you're talkin'!"

He stopped short.

"Oh, go to the devil," he said good-naturedly.

Drenna smiled uneasily. The ribald quarrelling of this pair still disturbed her. It was scandalous for two people so dependent on each other to talk so. No other man, black or white, would work so hard for the old woman, at the low wages of six dollars a week. Certainly no other employer would allow Lige time off every afternoon to work his own few acres. They threw these facts at each other at every encounter.

The Widow Sellers was admitting now, "Shore you works hard. Bless Katy, all you know is to work. You don't know nothin' else. You got you no sense."

"You wait 'til my beans gits top price next week. You'll say I got sense."

"You got Davis wax, eh? Them new-fangled ones. They're pretty, but they ain't got the good flavor. Sellers always planted Wardwell's. You won't never make you no crop," she said comfortably. "Here," she reached behind her rocker and pushed a pair of worn child's shoes in his hands. "I had me a box from Janey, in Alabamy. Git along to your sorry bean-patch."

He hurled the shoes past her head.

"Give your dogged shoes to a nigger young un."

He spat over the edge of the porch and strode off fiercely.

"Fust crop o' beans I make," he called back over his shoulder, "you've seed the last o' me, ol' woman."

"You'll be white-headed as me," she mocked after him, "an' still proud to be takin' my rations money!"

"No need to holler," he soothed from the gate. "You got you a voice like a limpkin."

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"A limpkin?" she puzzled. "That brownified crane screeches like a wild-cat?"

"Now you said it!" he whooped.

His teeth flashed in his tanned face. He was off at a violent trot for his two acres of beans. The old woman grinned.

"Ain't he the biggety thing!"

"Hain't biggety," the young woman said gently. "Jest turrible prideful. . . . He shot him a tillie-hawk a ways back, jest account o' ol' man Tainter was drivin' up behind us. He figgers he's as good as ary man to shoot his shells reckless."

The old woman nodded and chuckled. She put down her pan of okra and picked up the child shoes, dusting them with her apron. Drenna put them under her arm.

"Thank you, ma'am. They'll fit one o' the chappies, shore."

They walked together to the road. The widow shivered.

"That scamp knows as good as I do we'll git heavy frost to-night. We cain't skip it. The whole State o' Texas is a-breathin' cold in on us. Floridy don't make none o' her own troubles," she grumbled. "They all comes in from some'eres else. Wind from the south an' cold from Texas. He better say good bye to them beans today whilst they're purty."

She laid a hand on the girl's arm.

"I was jest a-baitin' Lige about you. Leave me tell you, when he got you, he got him a saint."

The chinaberry cast a lacelike shadow across the translucence of the young sharp-chiselled face.

"There's no harm to neither one of you," the girl said quietly. "I don't pay no mind when either one or t'other of you gits to rarin'."

The three-room rough-pine dwelling a mile from the village was bare and shabby. Drenna's father, prospering one year in hogs, had given her a small melodeon. It was the sole ornament of the main room. When Lige was not so tired that he

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tumbled, sometimes in his underwear, sometimes fully dressed, into their bed in the adjoining room, he coaxed her at night to play on it. She sat stiffly upright on the seat and picked out awkward, quavering hymns.

Tonight he sat teetering in his pine-slab chair, smoking his pipe, his blue eyes staring into space. His shaggy hair curled unnoticed into them. Drenna put the drowsy children, the baby and the boy of three, between clean unbleached muslin sheets over a corn-shucks mattress on the hand-made bed opposite the fireplace. When Lige did not make the usual sign, she went hesitantly to the melodeon. He relaxed a little as the notes of "Rock of Ages" wheezed sweetly from it.

"Dog take it, Drenna, that's purty."

His voice, with her, was gentle. Men who had grown up with him, gone their few scattered seasons with him to the village school, were still astonished at the taming of his exuberance. Passing the small house at night, they reported, through fire-lit windows, the sight of wild Lige smoking peacefully by the hearth, his eyes wide and hungry on the woman pedalling and playing. Tonight the spell did not hold. Suddenly he stood up and knocked out his pipe into the lighter'd knot fire.

"I cain't set here an' let my beans freeze," he burst out. "Tainter's firin'. He's got him smudges all over his field. I don't figger it'll do a mite o' good to burn wood, but I got to try it."

"What wood you got to use, Lige?"

He ran his big hand across her head.

"I aim to give your winter woodpile the devil, ma'am."

He went whistling to the field. The full moon had risen, coldly silver, on a night so still he heard the gray fox in the hammock on dry magnolia leaves. The young beans hung thickly on the bushes, slim and faintly yellow in the moonlight. The dark, tangled hammock pressed in on three sides of the clearing. The field was ordered and beautiful. He cursed out loud.

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“Jesus! Only three days more’d o’ made them beans——”

He had no hope of his fatwood fires, but building them, he felt better. A line of them blazed along the westerly, higher end. Thick black smoke drifted across the patch to settle in the lower corner. Drenna joined him toward midnight with a paper of cornbread. The cold was tangible. In the stillness it moved in perceptibly, a chill white ghost from Texas. Under the ineffectual blanket of smoke, it closed stiff hands tight about the succulent plants.

At daybreak, a breeze stirred from the southeast. The day, and the days following, would be warm. There would perhaps not be frost again until the next full moon. The frosted leaves were curling. White spots appeared on the beans. Then they turned translucent, like pale yellow icicles. By night they would be mush; the leaves black and shrivelled.

Walking around the wilting field, Lige saw that he had saved the lower end. The smudge had lain across the last few rows. The east line of the hammock protected them from the sun, as deadly on the injured plants as the frost itself. He made a quick estimate. Fifteen or twenty hampers saved——

He was late at the Widow Sellers’, shivering in his thin blue shirt and pin-check pants. She greeted him amiably. Her own crops of okra, squash, peanuts, corn and sweet potatoes were safely harvested.

“Thermometer went to forty at day,” she told him.

“No need to tell me,” he answered wearily. “I been settin’ up nussin’ them forty degrees. I fired. I figger I jest about saved my seed an’ fertilizer. I’m clearin’ more o’ the hammock. Next time I plant late, I’m goin’ to have four acres instid o’ two, all at the lower end. Then if frost ketches me, I got more’ll come thu.”

She stared at him.

“The bigger fool, you. You’d do best to leave off beans an’ work for me full time. I could mebbe pay ten dollars a week,” she said slyly.

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"You mind your own business, ol' woman. I'll make me a crop o' beans'll git me shut o' you an' your ten dollars, an' your six."

She eyed him dubiously.

"What did you fire with?"

He walked away carelessly.

"A damn good wood-pile an' a damn good woman."

II

When a stranger—a Georgia truck driver or a platform buyer—asked Lige his business, he answered with a mustered defiance:

"I'm a bean man!"

It was true. The long hours he gave to the Widow Sellers' rich farms had no meaning beyond their moment. In mid-afternoon he hurried off to his own field, sweaty and excited, to turn furrows, to plant, to cultivate, to hoe, to harvest.

The quick growth of the crop stirred him. One week, the sandy loam lay golden, its expanse passive for the reception of the seed. The next week, the clearing in the hammock was covered with cotyledons, pale-green and pushing, like twin sails dotting a tawny sea. In forty-eight days the first crop was ready for picking. The emerald bushes crowded one another in the straight rows. The long beans hung like pendants, butter-yellow if they were wax, jade green if Giant Stringless or Red Valentine.

The earth responded to him. When he and the soil were not interfered with, they made beans as fine as old man Tainter, who kept a wagon-load of niggers and bought fertilizer by the carload.

He was betrayed constantly by elements beyond his control. He fared no worse than the other growers, but the common misfortunes struck more implacably. Men who could borrow money for seed and fertilizer and rations, who were free to do other farming or stock raising, made out more or less com-

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fortably until the inevitable time when a good crop sold on a high market. There was a finality about his loss of a crop.

He lost beans from cold or rain or blight three seasons in succession. The fourth season, the second autumn, he made a fair crop. The market dropped so low it scarcely paid to ship. In October he quarrelled violently with the Widow Sellers. The old woman, in a growing security that he would never shake free of her, taunted him.

"You jest as good to say you're done. You jest as good to say you got no sense for bean-makin'. Drenna's like to go naked, and you piddlin' away with beans. Your young uns'd be stark if 'twa'n't for Janey's things from Alabamy. You know it. You take me up on steady work at ten dollars, afore I studies you ain't wuth nothin'."

If Drenna had been with him, he would not have touched her. He shook the old woman by the shoulders until she screeched for her neighbors. He shouted her down.

"Damn your gizzard! If I figgered like the niggers, I'd say you'd put a cunjur on my bean-field! 'Twon't be too long 'til you sees the last o' me. Dogged if I wouldn't ruther do without rations than take your talk."

They sputtered fiercely at each other. It did not occur to her to fire him, nor to him to quit.

He was excited when he came home to supper that night. He had forgotten his anger at the widow. He had forgotten his unprofitable season. He was eager with his plans for spring beans. His lunch bucket had contained the usual meal of soda biscuits and syrup, but he sat at the table, scarcely eating. Drenna listened with her grave smile.

"We got to make out on four dollars a week this winter an' save two. I kin make me a crop o' beans on that hammock land and I know it. I aim to have six acres ready, come spring. Does the rains come on to drownd 'em, I'll ditch. Does frost come, I'll lay me a smudge. And dog take it, Drenna, if they

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ain't no rain at all, and them beans goes to swivvellin', I kin water 'em a gourdful at a time."

The three-year-old nodded gravely.

"I kin water 'em."

Drenna smiled at him.

"Tell your Daddy the whole lot of us kin tote water for him."

"Tainter don't always make a crop," he went on, "and I cain't always lose it."

"Shore cain't," she agreed placidly.

Lige and Drenna planted when the red-bud came in bloom. All the signs were of warmth. Robins and bluebirds were moving north. The cautious chinaberry had put out young leaves. The last of the jasmine perfumed the roadside. Lige strode steadily up and down the long furrows, seeing nothing but the white seed dropping against the golden earth. Drenna stopped now and then to straighten her back. Her gray eyes rested on the rosy flush across the hammock. They picked out the swaying palms, precise and formal against a turquoise sky. When she bent to her work again, the half-smile habitual to her was brighter.

Lige sent her to the house when the end of the planting was in sight.

"Go git me my rations, woman," he told her. He turned her away from the field. "Git!" He took his hands from her shoulders. "Now shame to me. My hands has smuttied your clean dress."

"Soap an' water's plentiful."

His eyes followed her across the clearing and into the house.

The March night was chilly. When supper was eaten, he piled the fireplace with blocks of magnolia. The cream-colored wood gave out a sweet odor, like a mild thin spice. As the fire

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dulled, he threw on pine. He took off his high boots and stretched his bare sandy toes to the fire.

"Wisht I'd takened my boots off in the dark. Look at them feet. Now I got to git up an' wash 'em afore I goes to bed."

From the kitchen Drenna brought him a basin of warm water and a towel of flour sacking.

"Whooeey, ain't that fine!"

He dabbled luxuriously, drying his feet with the warm towel.

"Now you been a-waitin' on me, leave me do somethin' for you. Leave me play for you."

They both laughed. His playing was limited to two tunes on the mouth-organ.

"I'll blow 'The Tall Pine Tree.'"

She sat on a three-legged stool by the fireplace, her smooth head resting against the gray clay, her eyes closed. Lige played his tunes over and over, patting his bare right foot on the pine floor. The children stirred in their low bed, sighing in deep sleep. The magnolia burned into soft gray checks. Drenna nodded.

"Go on to bed, Sugar. I'll set up a whiles. I've wore you out, plantin' them beans. But Drenna—I got no question. We'll make us a crop, shore as dogs runs rabbits."

"Shore will," she agreed sleepily.

He sat by the fire an hour after she had gone, blowing softly into the harmonica, patting his foot.

Lige saved his beans two weeks later by a scanty margin. He had planted dangerously early, and as the crooks came through, it was plain that heavy frost was moving in. Two nights in succession were increasingly colder. All the beans in the region were slightly nipped. The third night would bring real damage. A smudge would be useless over the young juicy plants.

In the crisp morning he said to Drenna, "Ain't a reason in

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the world why I cain't cover them leetle bean plants with dirt today."

But when he drove the mule and cultivator between the rows, the earth he turned did not quite cover them.

Drenna, come out to watch him, said, "Kin do it by hand, Lige."

"Six acres?"

"Well, what we kin git covered is better'n nothin'."

The work went surprisingly fast. Except for the increasing ache of their backs, it was satisfying to move rapidly down the straight lines, swinging and stooping, ape-fashion, and cup the soft yellow dirt over the tops of the plants with their two hands. The three-year-old was fascinated. He followed like a young monkey, and in his clumsy way, throwing the sand with too-great enthusiasm, imitated them on adjacent rows.

"I can rest tomorrow," Drenna thought, and after dinner went at it again.

They worked until the night blended plants and earth and hammock and sky into a nothingness as deep and black as a 'gator cave. Drenna brought out kerosene lanterns. They were toiling slowly. The extra labor of moving the lights seemed insupportable. The beans were covered down to a last half-acre at the lower end. They went, stooped, for they could not quite straighten their backs, to their cold bed. They could do nothing more.

The night's frost wiped out the entire section, including Tainter. Those who had the money were planting again. Those who did not were done for the season. Lige waited two days for the cold to pass. Under a benign March sun, with a neighbor boy hired in the light of his hopes, he carefully fingered the sandy loam away from his beans. The plants emerged a little yellowed, wilted and leathery, but none the worse for their warm burying.

The town was aghast at news of the saving.

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The Widow Sellers said to Lige, "Nobody but you'd be fool enough to scratch dirt over six acres o' beans—and then scratch 'em out again!"

He was generous in his good fortune. He pinched her wrinkled cheek and jumped away before her quick hand fell.

"Ol' woman, don't you wisht you'd had you a real man like me, to make you crops when nobody else couldn't make 'em?"

It became apparent that Lige would have almost the earliest beans in the State. Other sections had been drowned out on the first planting, and he would come in at least two weeks ahead of his neighbors. He ordered fancy hampers, with green and red bands. The small crate factory trusted him for them. His beans were perfection. The bushes were loaded.

His first picking was small. He and Drenna and the neighbor boy managed it without help. The beans ripened rapidly, inexorably. The storekeeper, interested, loaned him money to hire pickers. He brought in a truckload of hands for the second picking. Drenna culled, sorted and packed. The Widow Sellers came over. Other neighbor women dropped in to look at the big crop, and stayed to help with the packing. Drenna cooked a generous dinner of ham and grits and cornbread; made a great kettle of coffee and chicory; opened Mason jars of the past summer's blueberries and peaches and figs.

In the field, white and negro pickers worked alternate rows. The white children squatted on their haunches, sliding along from bush to bush. The negroes for the most part bent to their picking, their black arms gathering the beans like swift sickles. The six acres were alive.

Lige worked desperately in and out of the field. The sorting and packing proceeded steadily under Drenna's quiet authority. The volunteer neighbor help chattered and gossiped, but the work was familiar, and they did it carefully. A negro

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asked "Captain Gentry" for buckets of drinking water to take to the pickers. The Widow Sellers' tongue flashed like hail across the work. Her small black eyes watched uneasily the growing spread of finished hampers, stacked up to go to the express office. The picking totalled a hundred and thirty hampers. The neighbors divided up the cull beans and went home.

The third picking ran to nearly two hundred crates. It was the most ample yield the section had produced in seasons. The checks began to arrive. A telegram from the New York commission house preceded the first. Lige's initial shipment had brought the record price of nine dollars a hamper.

The market price dropped rapidly as other sections came in. Yet his returns were consistently good. The last three checks reached him on one mail. His net for the crop was over fifteen hundred dollars.

He went a little crazy.

III

Lige began his celebration at four o'clock in the afternoon. He hurled himself into the house; changed into Sunday clothes without washing or shaving. He slapped into Drenna's hands the accumulation of bean checks, keeping out one for fifty dollars. His stiff store collar was already wet with sweat. Tousled hair hung damp in his eyes.

"Drenna, if I ain't fitten tomorrow, you git the ice-truck to take you to Pondland and go to the bank and put these in it. It's what they calls openin' a account."

"You don't want I should git the cash-money an' fetch it back an' hide it?"

"Now, Drenna, you do like I tell you. That's the ol'-timey way. Don't nobody hide their money these days."

He was bounding down the low steps.

"Lige, what you fixin' to do?"