

The Advocate

Alice Brown

"You goin'?" called Isabel Wilde from the road, to Ardelia, sitting forlornly on the front steps.

It was seven o'clock of a wonderful August morning, with all the bloom of summer and the lull of fall. Isabel was a dark, strong young creature who walked with her head in the air, and Ardelia, pretty and frail and perfect in her own small way, looked like a child in comparison. Isabel had been down to carry a frosted cake to her little niece Ellen, for Ellen's share of the picnic at Poole's Woods. It was Fairfax day, when once a year all Fairfax went to the spot where the first settlers drank of the "b'ilin' spring" on their way to a clearing.

"You goin'?" she called again, imperiously, and Ardelia answered, as if from some unwillingness:--

"I guess so."

"Now what do you want to say that for?" rang her mother's voice from an upper window, where, trusting to her distance from the road, she thought she could speak her mind without Isabel's hearing. "You know you ain't. Oliver's gone off to work in the acre lot."

Isabel had heard. She stood regarding Ardelia thoughtfully, her black brows drawn together and her teeth set upon one full lip.

"Ardelia," she called softly, after that moment of consideration.

"What is it?" came Ardelia's unwilling voice, the tone of one who has emotion to conceal.

"Come here a minute."

Ardelia rose slowly and came down the path. She was a wisp of a creature, perfectly fashioned and very appealing in her blond prettiness. Isabel eyed her sharply and judged from certain signs that she had at least meant to go. She had on her light-blue dimity with the Hamburg frills, and her sorrowful face indicated that she had donned it to no avail.

"What time you goin', 'Delia?" asked Isabel quietly, over the fence.

Ardelia could not look at her. She stood with bent head, busily arranging a spray of coreopsis that fell out over the path, and Isabel was sure her eyes were wet.

"I don't know," she said evasively; "maybe not very early."

Isabel was looking at her tenderly. It was not a personal tenderness so much as a softness born out of peculiar circumstance. She knew exactly why she was sorry for Ardelia in a way no one else could be. Yet there seemed to be no present means of helping her.

"Well," she said, turning away, "maybe I'll see you there. Say, 'Delia!" A sudden thought was brightening her eyes to even a kinder glow. "If you haven't planned any other way, s'pose you go with us. Jim Bryant's goin' to take me, and he'd admire to have you, too. What say, 'Delia?"

Ardelia's delicate figure straightened, and now she looked at Isabel. There was something new in her gentle glance. It looked like dignity.

"I'm much obliged to you, Isabel," she returned stiffly. "If I go, I've arranged to go another way."

"All right," said Isabel. "Well, I guess I'll be gettin' along."

But before she was half-way to the turning of the road she heard Mrs. Drake's shrill voice from the upper window:--

"He's begun to dig, 'Delia. Oliver's begun to dig. He won't stop for no picnics, I can tell ye that."

It seemed to Isabel as if the world were very much out of tune for delicate girls like 'Delia who wanted pleasure and could not have it. She paused a moment at the crossing of the roads, the frown of consideration again upon her brow. "Makes me mad," she said to herself, but half absently, as if that were not the issue at all. Then she turned her back on her own home-road and the house where her starched dress was awaiting her, and where Jim Bryant would presently call to take her to Poole's Woods, and walked briskly down the other way.

Isabel stopped at the acre field, but she had no idea of what she meant to say when she was there. Oliver was digging potatoes, as she knew he would be, and she recognized the bend of the back, the steady stress of one who toiled too long and too unrestingly, so that his very pose spoke like a lifelong purpose. She stood still for a moment or two before he saw her, gazing at him. Old tenderness awoke in her, old angers also. She remembered how he had made her suffer in the obstinate course of his own will, and how free she had felt when at last she had broken their engagement and seen him drift under Ardelia's charm. But he would always mean something to her more than other men, in a fashion quite peculiar to himself. She had agonized too much over him. She had protected him too long against the faults of his own nature, and now she could not be content unless, for his sake, she protected Ardelia a little also. Suddenly he lifted himself to rest his back, and saw her. They stood confronting each other, each with a sense of familiarity and pain. Oliver was a handsome fellow, tall, splendidly made, with rich, warm coloring. He looked kindly, but stolidly set in his own way.

"That you, Isabel?" he asked awkwardly.

They had met only for a passing word since the breaking of their troth.

"Yes," said Isabel briefly. "I've got to speak to you. Wait a minute. I'll come in by the bars, and you meet me under the old cherry. It'll be shady there."

She turned back to the bars, ducked deftly under, and, holding her skirts from the rough land, made her way to the cherry in the corner of the lot. Oliver wonderingly followed. She felt again that particular anger she

reserved for him, when she saw him stalking along, hoe in hand. It was a settled tread, with little spring in it, and for the moment it seemed to her a prophecy of what it would be when he was an old man, with a staff instead of the hoe. She was waiting for him under the tree.

"Oliver," she began, speaking out of an impulse hardly yet approved by judgment, "you goin' to the picnic?"

Oliver looked at her in wonder.

"Why, no," said he slowly.

"Didn't you promise 'Delia you'd go?"

"No, I guess not. I said mebbe I'd be round if I had time, but I ain't found the time. These 'taters have got to be dug."

The red had surged into Isabel's full cheeks. She looked an eloquent remonstrance.

"Oliver," she said impetuously, "'Delia's sittin' on the front steps, waitin' for you to come. She'll be terrible disappointed if you put her aside like this."

Oliver took off his hat and passed a hand over his forehead. She noticed, as she had a hundred times, how fine his hair was at the roots, and was angry again because he would not, with his exasperating ways, let any woman love him as she might. He seemed to have nothing to say, but she knew the picture of lone 'Delia sitting on the steps was far from moving him. It did cause him an honest trouble, for he was kind; but not for that would he postpone his work.

"Oliver," she continued, "did you ever know what 'twas that made me tell you we must break off bein'--engaged?"

He was looking at her earnestly. His own mind seemed returning to a past ache and loss.

"I understood," he said at length--"I understood 'twas because you kinder figured it out we shouldn't get along well."

She stood there, a frowning figure, her lips compressed, her eyes stormy. Then she turned to him, all frankness and candor.

"Oliver," she said, "I never give you any reasons. What's the use? I was terrible fond of you. I was. I don't know 's any girl ought to say that when you're engaged to somebody else, and I'm engaged myself, and happy as the day is long. But what 'twas--what come between us--you never made me have a good time."

He stood leaning upon his hoe, very handsome, very stern in his attention to her, and, as she could see, entirely surprised. The child in her, that rare, ingenuous part she kept in hiding, came out and spoke:--

"Why, Oliver, we never had any fun! You were awful good to me. You'd worry yourself to pieces if I was sick; but we never had more'n one or two good times together, long 's it lasted, and them I planned. And I got terrible tired of it, and I says to myself, 'If it's so now, when we're only goin' together, it'll be a million times worse when we're married.' And then when you took a fancy to 'Delia, I was real pleased. I says to myself, 'Maybe she'll know how to manage him. Maybe 'twas somethin' in me,' I says, 'that made him not want to have a good time with me, and maybe now 'twon't be so.' And when I see you goin' on the same old way, workin' from mornin' till night, I says to myself, 'Something' 's got to be done. I ain't goin' to have 'Delia put upon like this.' 'Tain't because it's 'Delia. I ain't so terrible fond of 'Delia, only we went to school together. But don't you see, Oliver, I couldn't say it for myself? No girl could. But I can for 'Delia."

"Well," said Oliver, "well." He was entirely amazed. Then as he looked at the field, a general maxim occurred to him, and he remarked, "The farm's got to be carried on."

"No, it ain't, either," said Isabel, with a passionate earnestness, "not as you do it. Other folks don't work themselves to death the way you do, and you're forehanded too. It's because you like it. You like it better'n

anything else. You were born so, and it's just as bad as bein' born with an appetite for drink or anything else."

"I never knew you felt so, Isabel," he said gravely. "I don't see why you didn't speak on 't before when--old times."

"I'd rather have died," she declared passionately. "Any girl would. 'Delia would. Maybe she'll cry all the afternoon if she finds she ain't goin'; but if you call over there Saturday night, butter won't melt in her mouth. She won't tell you how 'shamed she is before folks to think you didn't take the trouble to go with her. Anyways, she won't if she's any kind of a girl."

Oliver had plucked some wisps of grass from the edge of turf under the tree, and he was wiping his hoe thoughtfully. Isabel began to laugh. She was trembling all over from old angers and the excitement of her new daring, and she kept on laughing.

"One thing," she said, as she brushed away the tears with an impatient hand, "'Delia's mother's got her spy-glass on us this very minute. What under the sun she thinks I'm here for I don't know and I don't much care. You can tell her anything you're a mind to. Only you come. Come now, Oliver, you come!"

Oliver quite meekly hung up his hoe in the branches and waited for her to lead the way.

"I've got to ketch the colt," he said. "Mother took Dolly to go after aunt Huldy. Mother's always made a good deal o' the picnic."

There was a beat of hoofs upon the road, and Isabel, her present mission stricken from her mind, turned to see. It was Jim Bryant, driving by to call for her.

"My soul!" she said, under her breath.

"What is it, Isabel?" Oliver was asking her, with concern.

She had caught herself up, and she laughed in a sorry mirth.

"Nothin'," she said. "You catch the colt."

They walked out of the field in silence. At the stone wall he paused.

"Isabel," he said solemnly,--and with that double sense she had had all through the interview, she thought this was the look she had seen on his grandfather's face when he led in prayer,--"Isabel, you'd ought to spoke to me before. Why, I've been tryin' to get ahead so 's to make her comfortable, when--we set up housekeepin'."

Isabel was not sure whether he meant her or Ardelia. At any rate, it was the woman to whom he was determined to be loyally kind. She also paused and looked at him with earnest eyes. It was the last moment in all her life to convince and alter him.

"Don't you see, Oliver," she urged, "that's what folks are together for, chiefly, to have a good time. I don't mean they've got to be on the go from mornin' till night. They've got to work hard, too. Why, what's 'Delia marryin' you for, anyways. 'Tain't to stay at home and work, day in, day out. She can do that now, right where she is. 'Tain't so 's she can see you workin'. She can take her mother's spy-glass and have that, too, till she's sick to death of it. You go along, Oliver, and catch the colt."

He looked at her very kindly, gratefully, too, perhaps, and turned away toward the live-oak field. But Isabel, hurrying homeward, stopped and called him.

"Oliver, you say your mother's gone?"

"Yes."

"She lay your things out?"

"No, I guess not. I told her I wa'n't goin'."

"Well, I'll see to it as I run along."

Laying out the things of the men folks of the family was rigidly observed in this household, where Oliver was regarded as the cherished head. He had been brought up to a helpless lack of acquaintance with his best clothes. He knew them only as lendings apt to constrict him a little when he got them on, and to rouse in his mother a tendency to make unwelcome remarks about his personal charms. Where they lived, between those times of warfare, he scarcely knew.

Isabel laughed a little to herself, in a rueful fashion, as she hurried along the road. Her own swain was waiting for her, but not for that would she abjure the quest. She ran up Oliver's driveway and, without pausing, opened the blind where the key, she knew, was hidden, and snatched it forth. She unlocked the door and crossed the kitchen, rigid in its order, with Oliver's cold luncheon set out on the table under wire covers. She made her way upstairs, and in his room, also in beautiful array, stood for a moment looking about her. Isabel gave a little laugh. "I should think I was crazy," she said to herself; and then she opened bureau drawers until she found the careful display of bosomed shirts she knew were there. She laid one on the bed, his collar and necktie beside it, and took down his best suit from the closet. She gave the collar of the coat a little unnecessary brush with her hand. It seemed almost a wifely touch, and she was angry with herself. Yet it was only that this was mating-time, and the tender and the maternal strove blindly in her, and brought forth a largess great enough to touch other lots besides her own.

Then she sped downstairs and went away to her own home. Her mother-- a little woman, all energy--met her at the gate. She had on her best bonnet and carried her Paisley shawl. She was shading her eyes with her hand and looking tense in a way Isabel declaimed against, for it made wrinkles in her mother's nice forehead.

"For mercy sake, where you been?" she called. "Ain't you seen Jim?"

"No," said Isabel lightly. "Where is he?"

"Well, I dunno where he is," said her mother reprovingly. "He come here after you, all dressed up, an' I told him you was gone down to Ellen's to carry the cake. So he said he'd go along down an' fetch you up, an' I told

him he better stop to Ardelia's an' see if you wasn't there. An' then he come back, ridin' like the wind, an' he said I could tell you Mis' Drake said you's goin' to the picnic with Oliver. She see you through the spy-glass, an' Oliver'd gone to ketch the colt."

"There's father," said Isabel steadily. "He's drivin' out the carriage-house now. You got the cake in the buggy?"

"You do worry me 'most to death," said Mrs. Wilde. Her face had tied itself into a snarl of knots, from which the kindly eyes looked angrily. "Who you goin' with, Isabel? You ain't been an' took up with Oliver again, after all's said an' done?"

Isabel laughed, but her voice shook a little, and not with mirth.

"I'm all right, mother. Don't you say anything to anybody. That's all. Here comes father. Take care your dress. You'll get wheel-grease on it."

Her strong hands were lifting the little creature, and Mrs. Wilde found herself driven away. She was turning a glance over her shoulder to the last, and calling, "Isabel, you tell me--" But father, who had Isabel's masterful purpose, whipped up, and they were gone.

Isabel, still smiling, as if the sun itself could judge her and it was desirable to keep up some appearance before it, went into the house and closed the door behind her. She took off her hat and hung it on its nail in the front hall. Then her muscles seemed to weaken in a strange way, and she went into the darkened parlor where no neighbor would find her, and sat down by the centre-table. She bowed her head upon the great picture-Bible, and unmindful of the cross and anchor in perforated paper below and the green wool mat with its glass beads, began to cry. Isabel hated tears with a fiery scorn. She liked to stand on her two feet and face the world as her father did; yet here she was, sobbing over the centre-table and drawing quick breaths of misery. Even then, in the passion of her grief, it did occur to her that in all the anger she had felt toward Oliver in times past, she had never wanted to cry. Something now had hurt a deeper heart than she knew she had.

She had got over the first tempest of her grief, and sat drying her eyes with a wondering shame, and suddenly there was a sound of a horse driven rapidly. Hope flooded her face with color. She sprang up and slipped to the window and peered out at the side of the curtain. But it was not he. It was Oliver, erect and handsome in his best clothes, and Ardelia beside him. Oliver glanced up at the house as they went by; but he bent to Ardelia again in a way that looked fondness and protection at once. And Ardelia was openly in paradise. She was looking up to him with no eyes for any face at the window, and as they whirled out of sight Isabel saw her lift a hand and with an intimate, pretty motion brush something from his coat. Then they were gone, and immediately the neighborhood seemed to settle into a quiet. All the town was at Poole's Woods, and Isabel was left behind.

For a long time, it seemed to her, she sat there, trying to still her breath and school herself into her old serenity. Then, with her handkerchief, a little wet ball, tight in one hand, she rose, went to the glass that even in the darkened light showed her a miserable look, made a little face at herself, and walked out into the kitchen. There she stood idly for a moment, debating what she should do. Jim Bryant had not lived long in the town, but she knew him well from these few weeks of intimacy. He was tempestuously devoted to her, in a way that stirred her blood. There was plenty of fire and passion in him; he had a temper, and he would not come back. Isabel set her lips. "I guess," she said to herself, "I'll have the burnfire." She thought of baking pound-cake, but all the day before they had made cake for the picnic. She might wash the blankets, or begin quilting, or clean the cistern. These dramas were hardly exciting enough. The bonfire was better. She tied on her father's hat and kilted her skirts. Then she brought out the iron rake from the barn and settled the brush-heap anew. It was on the square of land where she had had her perennial bed for three years, and now she had decided to sow it down to grass. The litter of the garden was there, with splinters of shingle and dried weeds, and next week her father meant to burn it.

Isabel touched her match and stood by, watching, while the flames curled and crept. Then they crackled among the brush, and she held them down and got excited over it, and for an instant forgot Poole's Woods. It was a good little fight out-of-doors in the hot sun, with a stream of fire when it

caught something dry, and then a column of smoke that made a tang in the air and stirred her blood deliciously. Isabel was like a creature of the earth combating something for the earth's good, and getting hotter and more breathless every minute.

"What you doin' there?" called a voice from the gate.

She forgot the bonfire, remembering her father's hat and her kilted skirts. Jim Bryant threw the gate shut with a clang and came striding across the yard. He was tall and brown and sturdy. Isabel knew exactly how he looked with his brow set and his blue eyes blazing.

"I've got a burnfire," she said, and raked the harder.

Jim came up and took the rake out of her hand. It seemed to be for no purpose save that he had to do something. Isabel put up her head and looked at him. There was hostility in her glance, but it was the challenge of sex that meets and measures.

"I see the smoke comin' up over this way, an' I thought there was the devil to pay," he said harshly. "What you carryin' on like this for?"

"I ain't carryin' on," said Isabel, from tense lips. "This is our land, and I guess I can have a burnfire if I want to."

"Why ain't you at Poole's Woods?" The fire was dying down a little, but one persistent flame moved like a snake in the dry stubble, and he savagely stamped it out. "Why ain't you? I come after you."

"You didn't wait, did you?"

"Old Mis' Drake said you were goin' with Briggs."

"Did I tell you so?"

He weakened a little.

"N-no! But she said you'd been down talkin' it over an' Oliver'd gone to ketch the colt. She offered me the spy-glass."

Isabel's lips had a little line of white about them. She looked full at him now.

"Did you take it, Jim?"

"Take it? No!" he roared at her. "Do you think I'd do a thing like that?"

They stood looking at each other, glance holding glance, their eyes blazing. Suddenly he threw the rake as if he had been throwing down a shield and held out his arms to her. Isabel walked into them, and while they kissed, her father's straw hat slipped back over her shoulders, and she laughed and never missed the fluffy headgear lying in her room upstairs, waiting for Poole's Woods. Suddenly she remembered that they were out in the broad sunlight, in sight of the road, and then she bethought her that all the town had gone to Poole's Woods to leave them the world alone to kiss in. She remembered, too, that old Mrs. Drake's spy-glass might be trained on them at that moment.

"I don't care," she said, and laughed.

"Don't care for what?" asked her lover, his lips at her ear.

"For anything. There! let me go. Here's some more fire in the grass."

They stamped and raked quite soberly for a moment, and then Isabel began to laugh again. She looked wild and beautiful in her fight with the earth and her own heart. Jim laughed a little, too.

"What is it, Bell?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said, in the ecstasy of happiness. "I guess I like a burnfire."

When it died still lower, they walked toward the house, hand in hand, and sat there on the steps watching it.

"Well," said Bryant, smiling at her, "you want to go to Poole's Woods?"

Isabel smiled back.

"I guess so," she said. "We can be there by luncheon-time."

"All right. I'll go home an' harness up." Half-way down the path he stopped and turned. "Say, Isabel!"

She answered from the porch on her way in to don the muslin dress.

"What is it?"

"You never told me what you were down there for."

"Where?"

"Down to Oliver's."

She shook her head and laughed.

"No, nor I sha'n't, either." His brows were coming together. "'Twas an errand," she called to him. "It wa'n't mine, either. You got to know?"

Again they stood looking at each other, this time with a steady challenge as if more things were decided than the moment's victory. Then suddenly, as if in the same breath, they smiled again, and Bryant gave her a little nod.

"Get your things on," he called. "We're goin' to Poole's Woods. That's all I want to know."