The Tenant Farmer

Waddell, Elizabeth

His lean cattle are luxuriating on his neighbor’s green wheat, and presently his neighbor will have them impounded. His fences are rotten and broken; he is not so shiftless as merely discouraged. Last year he gave one-third of his crop to the landlord and this year he will give two-fifths. His corn was late-planted because of the rain, and then it was overtaken by the drought. If the prices of grain and potatoes rise, the prices of shoes and sugar are up betimes before them. The thirteen hours of work are done, and his wife is on the last of her fifteen. She has put the children to bed, and is mending overalls by the light of the oil lamp. Her heavy eyes go shut. She blinks wildly to keep them open, and starts up after each lapse, fiercely attacking her work. It is coming on to rain and his roof will leak, and in the lowering dark a mile away his cattle are grazing, rip, rip, rip, reaping great swaths in the green wheat, for every mouthful of which he will have to pay— But he knows it not. He is oblivious to all. He has read for an hour, and now the paper has dropped from his loosened fingers. Already he with a valiant handful, himself the leader, has somehow, he doesn’t clearly remember how, taken a hundred yards of enemy trenches. He is lying in bed, an arm missing. He is exalted in soul but body-shattered, unable to move a muscle— And someone has just pinned a decoration upon his breast, and he is peeved considerable because he cannot tell and no one will tell him Whether it is the Victoria Cross, the Iron Cross or the Cross of the Legion of Honor.

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