

• Chapter 1 •

How she loved that baby! She had prayed and longed alone for his coming, for Bennet had said from the beginning he did not like babies. They cost too much for one thing; then they squalled at night when a hard-working man needed his sleep, and you never could take them anywhere without getting lint all over yourself—even if you tried not to get near the blankets. Bennet had watched how it went with Lois and Riley Doane with two babies in three years; one for each of them to lug along to town and church, and besides them a funny-looking brown bag (that Lois herself had made out of some upholstery material) full of bottles and other baby things. But before Bennet saw how it went with Lois and Riley, he had said emphatically he did not want a baby, let alone two or three. And how Lois and Riley Doane could be so pleased with those two youngsters was beyond Bennet Armstrong.

"You can't make me believe in a thousand years," said Bennet to Annie on the way home from church one warm Sunday in July, "that Lois and Riley really wanted those babies."

"I can't believe anything else, Bennet," returned Annie, drawing a long breath and looking over the top of the hedge fence. The sad, hurt look on her young face grew more sorrowful, and her slender hand stroked the small Bible on her lap. "I know Lois too well for that. Why, her whole life is wrapped up in those two darling children."

"Dar-ling?" shouted Bennet, and the word was cut in two by a dry cough that wasn't natural.

"They are adorable, Bennet," came Annie's half-suppressed answer. "Everyone else thinks so. The little girl looks just like Lois, and the baby is Riley all over. And I know they were welcome—both of them—and I can hardly keep my eyes off them, and . . ."

"I saw you were holding the baby in your class."

"Well?"

"Well, could you hold that baby and listen to your teacher too?"

"Certainly." Annie almost whispered her answer. Her long, dark lashes swept her soft cheeks, and her lower lip quivered.

"And I suppose your best dress is covered with blanket fuzz."

"It will brush off."

They drove on past the old Ballington place where Jessica had jumped into the well one night and ended it all.

"You know what she did," reminded Bennet, not for the first time.

Poor Jessica Ballington hadn't jumped into the well because she had had three little ones who still couldn't talk clearly and two others in school. That wasn't the reason, but what was the use for Annie to refute Bennet's arguments. She had tried it a time or two, and it never changed him. His concluding remarks had always been, "I'll bet anything those five children drove Elmer crazy, and Jessica saw herself going that way too, so she did it."

So Annie Armstrong just looked with feeling at the well as they drove past, and said nothing. Bennet turned and looked down over her severely and although Annie did not look up, she felt his glance, and her body trembled. He noticed it and blinked his large blue eyes twice before he spoke.

"You think it will brush off?" he asked.

"Of course," she answered as in a dream.

"Well, Lois and Riley could have had their new hen-house built and paid for if it hadn't been for those babies."

Annie didn't answer. Bennet waited. They drove past the Tiffney place, where two boys in knee pants were quarreling over a rope swing, and another was sicking the dog on the cat which reached the acorn tree just in time.

"Look at those Tiffney youngsters," Bennet said, pointing them out with his large Roman nose. "Maybe some said they were adorable, or darling babies at one time, but they don't act adorable now. Their father should put them to work."

"But this is Sunday, Bennet."

“Sunday is right, and they are desecrating it by such conduct right in the front yard. I presume Mrs. Tiffney is busy in the house rocking little Sally May, or whatever her name is, to sleep so she can get the dinner in peace, and the rest of the children run wild. Children are expensive and make lots of bother, and they are not worth it any way you figure.”

“Is that what your mother said about you?”

Bennet was sure it was coming. Annie had asked him that same question once before—months before. It had made him quite angry then. Indignantly he reached for the whip and gave the horse a stinging crack across the back.



Annie Stokes Armstrong loved that baby like few babies have been loved. But Bennet resented that the baby was born. He told Annie to name him. He wasted no time bending over his crib or fondling him evenings after supper.

J. Bennet Armstrong was a father at twenty-three, but he was not proud of the fact. He looked in the green-framed mirror hanging beside the kitchen door and combed his thick black hair carefully. He was not a bad-looking young man. In fact, Annie Stokes had been envied by a dozen pretty girls when she announced her engagement to the handsome, ambitious son of Grant Armstrong, who promised each of his five children a thousand dollars and a team of horses when they got married. Just why Bennet chose Annie Stokes several girls never could figure out, namely Becky Cornelius and Adelaide Heathman. Both thought they were more strikingly beautiful than plain, modest

Annie Stokes, although no one could actually find fault with Annie. She did have a pretty face. Everyone agreed to that. She came from a good family, and her father was a bishop over a large congregation in Wickville. Although he was not wealthy in comparison to some of his parishioners, he was far from being a poor man. J. Bennet Armstrong married well, but some said Annie wasn't built to be a farmer's wife. Her slender form measured scarcely over five feet, and her delicate features seemed to demand not too hard a life. Annie was a refined, cultured girl, devoted to her family and her father's church. Her loyalty was wholehearted and pure, and Bennet saw all this. He saw, too, that even though Annie Stokes wasn't robust and sturdy-looking like Sara Botts, who could carry two pails of milk up a steep hill from the barn and shock wheat as fast as any man, she was nimble and quick. And more than that, she was not extravagant. That appealed to Bennet as much as Annie's sweet face, soft brown hair, and dark eyes.



The moment she looked at his tiny face she called him Joseph.

"At last I have you," she whispered, touching his soft, soft cheek with her fingertips. "I want you even though your father does not. You will soon be so sweet and dear, he can't help loving you like I do. Joseph, oh, you dear little Joseph," and Annie Armstrong buried her face in her arm. The love that the young mother lavished on her little one was what Bennet called unreasonable.