

THE BELLE OF RUBYWOOD.

CHAPTER III.

As Miss Holt started and dropped from the stile she turned to the stranger with that expression of shyness and injury which every one wears to the individual who has started them.

The gentleman raised his hat, and with a quiet smile made his apology.

"I am afraid I have startled you. The corner is so abrupt and the grass so sodden that you did not hear me approach. I am very sorry."

Muriel Holt blushed and hastened to reassure the courteous gentleman.

"Pray do not apologize. I did not hear you coming, but still there was no reason to be startled. Nor should I have been had I not been perched on that stile."

He smiled at her expression, "perched," and no doubt as he glanced at the young, sweet face thought that she was a beautiful kind of bird, fit to perch anywhere. But he remarked, sensibly enough:

"You were looking at the old house yonder?"

"Yes," said Muriel, not at all afraid of the strange gentleman, and no doubt gaining courage from the reflection that her impropriety, if any there was, was lessened by the fact that her father was within hearing; "yes, and thinking of Doctor Johnson's lines:

"Let observation, with extensive view,
Survey mankind from China to Peru."

The stranger looked rather astonished. He was not expected, perhaps, to find so self-composed a young lady in such an out-of-the-way place as Rubywood, or one acquainted with Doctor Johnson's resonant lines.

"Not a very extensive view, after all," he said. "Not anything but a small portion of mankind."

"You can see Holmwood Chase from here; the Oaks, and the thicket from here, and, by mounting that stile yonder, three counties lying, as one may say, in the hollow of a man's hand. That's extensive, is it not?"

"Yes, after a fashion," he replied, leaning on his stick and hoping that perhaps this pretty, innocent bird would stay singing thus a long while. "Yes, after a fashion; but as to the mankind part of the prospect, will you be so gracious as to inform me how much one can see of that?"

She smiled, and, with her hand upon the stile, pointed to the Howe.

"That house there, half hidden by the tall elms, is the Howe. It is the grandest, oldest place in the neighborhood, and it belongs to Mr. Alfred Heatherbridge."

"And you, to speak so warmly in his favor, must be intimately acquainted with him," said the stranger.

Muriel Holt smiled.

"I do know him, and—love him," she said quietly.

Then her face lighted up into fresh beauty, and she pointed to the farmer himself, who, prodding two fatted heifers in the sides, could be seen in the straw yard.

"See, there he is! Does he not look all I have said?"

The stranger looked and smiled.

"I will trust your word even before my eyes," he said, gravely. "And I thank you for your information. May I ask one other favor to thank you for? Will you tell me the nearest way to Hopwood?"

"Hopwood lies yonder," she said. "Straight through the wood by the footpath—you must not go off it, please."

"Do not fear," he said. "I am a respecter of farmers' footpaths and all their other rights."

"Straight through the wood until you reach an open space; that is Hop Common; turn to your right, and that will lead you to the village."

"Thank you," he said, lifting his hat and revealing a well-shaped head.

"Thank you very much. Good day."

Muriel Holt dropped him a stately, demure little courtesy, and the stranger strode on.

Muriel Holt looked at him curiously; called Snipe, and went on her way. Her destination, decided on while she had been talking at the stile, was a cottage at the end of the lane, where an old woman, much afflicted by rheumatism and an undying thirst for Farmer Holt's old port, dwelt.

Old Goody Cropper, as the old lady was called, was one of Miss Holt's pensioners, and was aged enough to remember Miss Holt's great-grandmother, or, if she was not, was untruthful enough to say that she did.

"Well, Goody," said Muriel in her clear, sweet voice, "how are the rheumatics to-day? Better, I hope."

"They'll never be better this side of the grave, Miss Muriel," replied Goody, who always spoke of her complaint in the plural, and persisted in clipping Muriel's name of half the middle syllable, making it something very like "Mule," to which animal her father, in loving fun, likened her.

"Never be any better nor this side of the grave, Miss Muriel. It's my cross my dear, and I must wear it. All on us has our crosses. Here's Jaffer's got his cross, which is not so afflictin' a one as to be annoyin'."

Jaffer was her grandson, an ungainly youth of eleven summers, whose affliction mourned by Goody was an incurable habit of laughing at the most awkward and unaccountable and even serious things.

He had greeted Miss Holt's entrance with a loud guffaw, he received his grandmother's assurance of her long lease in rheumatism, with another guffaw, and now, at the sound of his own name, gave vent to a loud laugh that would have shocked and alarmed any one unacquainted with his "cross" considerably.

But Miss Holt knew Jaffer and his peculiarity well, and his guffaws took no effect upon her beyond eliciting a good natured smile.

"And how is Jaffer?" she asked, laying her hand upon the boy's head.

"Oh, he be pretty well," replied Joody, "barrin' his leanness. Miss Muriel; I don't think as nothin' u'd ever make him fat. Farmer Tomkins, from the Farm End, took him for three weeks to make what he called a leanness, but it weren't no any use. He ate the good farmer out o' house and home, and coom back thinner nor ever; didn't ye, Jaffer?"

"Aye," assented Jaffer, with a sharp guffaw like a pistol crack. "I be stricken thin."

"You be," croaked the old lady, shaking her head.

"Never mind," said Miss Holt. "Jaffer will get fat some day. I dare say. He must come up to Rubywood next Christmas and eat some pudding."

Here Jaffer burst with a loud explosion into a prize guffaw.

"Come and eat some pudding and some beef and drink some port wine, won't you, Jaffer? That reminds me, Joody, have you any more wine left?"

Old Goody courted.

"No, Miss Muriel. Bless your good heart, I don't think there be Jaffer, see if there be any more in the cupboard."

Jaffer made inspection and reported stores exhausted.

"Well," said Miss Holt, "I'll send you some more this evening. But do you know, Goody, Doctor Thorne says that port wine is very bad for you, and that I ought to give you medicine instead—his medicine?"

"Don't you believe him, miss!" exclaimed old Goody eagerly. "The doctor don't understand my complaint, I be sure, he doesn't. The port wine don't do me no harm, miss; it do me a sight o' good. Ah, miss, that old doctor bein' got any sense in him left, he be so old."

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"I know the name," said the gentleman quietly.

"Yonder—that old house so tumble-down and dilapidated—is the Holme, empty, as you see—poor old place! It is pretty from here, all the prettier for its broken shutters and weedy court. In the valley there is Rubywood Farm, which belongs to Farmer Holt. Do you think that is pretty?"

"Very," said the stranger, "and—looking at the well-tilled ground—'excellent soil. That farm is well kept. I should say."

"It is," said Muriel with quiet but amused emphasis.

"Worked on the old plan," continued the stranger, thoughtfully, his eyes still wandering over the broad acres. "Ah, the old system!" he added to himself. "What such a farm as this would produce if farmed on the new!" Then loud to Miss Holt: "Farmer Holt, I think you said? May I ask for some information without seeming rude or unjustifiably curious?"

"That depends upon what the information may be."

"Let me ask you then, if Mr. Holt—"

"Farmer Holt, he calls himself," interrupted Muriel softly.

"Farmer Holt, then—if Farmer Holt's generally liked in the district?"

"Sir!" exclaimed Farmer Holt's laughter, then remembering that she was as much a stranger to the stranger as he was to her, she corrected herself, and replied gravely, instead:

"Pardon me; the question seemed so singular. Farmer Holt is the best-liked man in Rubywood; there is not a woman, child or dog, for ten miles round that does not love him. Liked! Oh, sir, you do not know him, indeed—"

"And you, to speak so warmly in his favor, must be intimately acquainted with him," said the stranger.

Muriel Holt smiled.

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Then her face lighted up into fresh beauty, and she pointed to the farmer himself, who, prodding two fatted heifers in the sides, could be seen in the straw yard.

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years to old Goody's age.

"Well," said Miss Holt, laughing, "you ought to know what does you the most good, so you shall have the wine."

"Bless your good heart, Miss Muriel, Jaffer, make your bow—make your best bow to Miss Muriel, Jaffer."

Jaffer complied by placing his hand at the back of his head and jerking it forward twice in half a minute.

Muriel parted the boy's head, smiled a good-by to the old woman and left them revelling in benedictory exclamations.

By this time the sun had got quite hot, and the larks flitting upward congratulated each other on the beauty of the weather in joyful bursts of song.

Muriel Holt paused at the open door to gaze upward, shading her eyes with her hand. As she stood thus she made as beautiful a picture as any of Mr. Vandike's patrons could desire to see, and an old man, bent with age, and dressed in a shepherd smock, passing up the lane, stopped to look at her, touching his weather-stained hat as she turned to look at him in return.

"Good even, miss," said the old man.

"Good even," returned Miss Holt.

"Can ye tell me which be the Holme Farm?" said the old fellow, uncovering his head and wiping his wrinkled forehead with a cotton handkerchief, colored with all the hues of the rainbow, and a few more invented by the manufacturer.

(To be continued.)

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ST. JOHN MUNICIPAL

WHEREAS the St. John Council by Resolution 6th day of February, A.D. 1912, did certain rules and regulations to Cabs and Cabmen published in the Royal Gazette of the 10th day of February, 1912, and whereas by notice on April 9th, A. D., 1912, the Royal Gazette of the 10th day of the said rules, and the Tariff or Schedule thereunder was from time to time.

And whereas the said Schedule has since been amended.

Notice is hereby given that the said rules and regulations and the Tariff or Schedule hereinafter set out, adopted at a Regular Meeting of the Council held on the 10th day of September, 1912, and are in full force from this date.

The 1st day of October, 1912.

JOHN L. SLATTERY, Secretary.

Regulations

1. No person shall ply any cab without