

# THE BELLE OF RUBYWOOD.

CHAPTER VI.  
One morning Wynter Leigh woke with the truth flashed into his soul. He loved Muriel Holt. She was the earth's gladness, and without her life had lost its salt. To such a man, earnest, single-purposes, such a consciousness was momentous.

He carried the secret with him for three days, looked at his sheep, tramped across his fields, plucked ears of growing corn with it echoing in his mind and thrilling in his ears with each note of the birds.

On the fourth day he met Muriel, and his heart seemed to leap forth and claim her as his own.

"Well," he said, as they shook hands, "I thought you had neglected the old haunt—had grown tired of it—"

"And me," he had almost added, but stopped short.

"No," she said; "I shall never do that, but I have been busy. I am father's housekeeper, as well as his daughter."

He nodded.

Muriel seated herself on the fallen elm; Wynter Leigh threw himself down almost at her feet.

"Did I not hear the bell tolling this morning?" he said, after a few moments' silence.

"Yes," said Muriel, "for Mrs. Dorothy Heatherbridge, Mr. Heatherbridge's aunt. She died last night."

He looked grave.

"Mr. Heatherbridge has been away with her, I suppose?"

Muriel inclined her head.

"Yes, he will stay till after the funeral. I have been looking after his turkeys—that has made me so long."

"Looking after his turkeys?" he said.

"Yes," said Muriel simply.

She saw nothing uncommon or significant in the fact.

"Father promised to look after the farm, and he forgot the turkeys. Poor things! because they are ugly and only fowls they would have been neglected most like."

Mr. Leigh looked relieved.

"You have known Mr. Heatherbridge some time?" he said.

"Yes, since we were children," replied Muriel.

"Do you remember our first meeting?"

"Yes," she replied, "and how communicative I was! Do you know I thought you were Mr. Leigh until you asked the way to Hopwood, and then passed the Holme without going in?"

"Communicative," he said. "You must have thought me inquisitive. Do you know I wanted only to put one question?"

"Did you—what was it?" said Muriel.

"I wanted to ask you who you were," she smiled.

"I should have told you, and not thought you rude, either. Our manners here at Rubywood are what Mr. Vandike calls unsophisticated."

"Mr. Vandike expresses his flatter-

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ing opinions freely," he said quietly.  
"He's very good natured," she said.  
"That's high praise; how it would gratify him, or any one, to hear you say it! What are you reading?"  
She held the book back downward, and he took it from her.  
"Browning," he said, glancing at it and looking up at her thoughtfully.  
"And you understand it? Why, I wonder, when to so many it is an enigma?"  
"That is a compliment," said Muriel, with an ungrateful frown. "Give me back my book, please."  
He held up the book, and as she took it their hands met. It was the tiny hole in the outward of calm, and the tide of passion swept through.  
His strong hand closed on the book, fingers and all, and he sprang to his feet.

She looked up, innocently enough, then quickly lowered her eyes, trembling and half frightened, for it was the first time she had seen perfect love in a man's face, and there is sort of grandeur in it that approaches the awful.  
"Muriel," he said in a low, quick voice, bending over her and keeping the fingers still, though the book had dropped among the flowers, "Muriel, I cannot keep silence any longer. You have not seen the brook for three days, nor I you, but I have learned a life's lesson in that little while. Cannot you guess what it is? I have learned that I love you—love you, Muriel. Oh, that I could find words to tell you how dearly, how truly! Look at me, Muriel, dear Muriel, and see how I love you! Forgive me if I have startled you! I am a rough, awkward man, not fit to touch you, and I did not mean to speak—at least, till I had gained permission—but—but—my love has eaten me up, body and soul, and when my hand touched yours 'twas as if our hearts had met. Oh, Muriel, speak. Tell me that you are not angry—that you do not hate me—that you will strive to love me, even to like me a little!"  
He was on one knee beside the elm, and was leaning forward in an eager attempt to catch a glimpse of her hidden face; he could feel her small hand tremble in his, like the heart of a captive dove.

"Oh, speak, Muriel!" he pleaded, putting up one hand to her arm. "Only a word—one word to tell me I may hope—"  
Muriel stopped him effectually. She rose, put both hands up to her face and sobbed.  
Aghast, and positively white, Wynter Leigh bent over her, grasping her hand and struggling manfully with the fearfully strong desire to clasp her to his heart.  
Muriel choked back her tears and sank down again; she even uncovered her face, and sat, blushing and sorrowful, gazing downward.

Wynter Leigh bent over her, his heart beating fast.  
"You have forgiven me?" he whispered; "you will say yes? Muriel, you know I love you!"  
And as he spoke his hand tightened on her arm.  
She turned pale, and her head dropped low.  
It was not saying "yes," but Wynter Leigh interpreted it rightly, and, with a sharp, quick sigh, caught her to him.  
"Oh, my darling, my darling," he whispered, "I never thought I should be so happy! You are more than life to me. You cannot guess how I love you. Will you not say you love me? Think what joy it would give me!"  
"I do love you," said Muriel in a tone almost too low for him to hear.  
"But—"  
"But what. But nothing!" he ex-

claimed hotly. "If you love me ever so little, I care for nothing—no one else. There is no one who can ever part us. I will go up to Rubywood at once, before the sun sets, and beg for you—aye, as a man pleads for his life!"  
"To-night?" she said, wistfully and sorrowfully.  
"Yes," he said eagerly, struck by her manner. "Why and what do you fear? Surely," and he turned white, "surely you are not promised to any one else?"  
"No, no," she breathed quickly; then turned her head away, her eyes filled with tears.  
"No? What then, my darling?" he murmured, striving to draw her to him. "Do you fear your father?"  
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"Not for myself," said Muriel, turning to him at once, her soft hand upon his arm, and sending a thrill through him at its touch. "Not for myself—you know that—but my father. Oh, you do not know him! He is so good so kind, but—he never goes from his word or his wish, and—and—"  
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"I know," he said, "and I had forgotten. Nay, I remember nothing but my love, and I can scarce think of anything else even now. Do you think I love you the less for refusing to give the shadow when your father holds the substance, my darling? for you are mine, though the whole world rose and stood between us. You are mine, Muriel; my very own, if Heaven's love counts as part of us—mine whether I win you from your father or not. Mine! Oh, Muriel, do you know what a strong man's love is! With that word graven on my heart, I could go to the grave for you! How much more fearlessly can I go to ask him for you! Don't fear, my darling; no man could win such a priceless jewel without a struggle for it; no man deserves to take it who would shrink from the battle. I'll go to him to-night—I will tell him the truth."  
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"No, no," she said, forced to speak in her agony. "No, no; do not go to him. It will be useless. You do not know him. Oh, what will you think of me for speaking like this? But I cannot help it. He will send me away—he loves me better than anything in the world, but he is so firm, so stern, and I know—I know—he will not say yes."  
She did not cry now, her heart was too full of despair, for she knew the truth, the bitter truth.  
Wynter Leigh's dark eyes were bent upon the ground for a few minutes. They were moist and tremulous, but infinitely, passionately tender when he lifted them to her face again.  
"My darling," he said, "I understand believe that I understand; if you uttered no words, my love is so great that my heart would glean your meaning from your face. I know all you

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He took her hand and lifted it to his lips. It was his first kiss, and no knight could have given it with more reverence.  
"I know," he said, "and I had forgotten. Nay, I remember nothing but my love, and I can scarce think of anything else even now. Do you think I love you the less for refusing to give the shadow when your father holds the substance, my darling? for you are mine, though the whole world rose and stood between us. You are mine, Muriel; my very own, if Heaven's love counts as part of us—mine whether I win you from your father or not. Mine! Oh, Muriel, do you know what a strong man's love is! With that word graven on my heart, I could go to the grave for you! How much more fearlessly can I go to ask him for you! Don't fear, my darling; no man could win such a priceless jewel without a struggle for it; no man deserves to take it who would shrink from the battle. I'll go to him to-night—I will tell him the truth."  
Muriel's face grew white; she knew what a bitter mockery the truth would be, with all the strength on one side and not the ghost of a chance for the weaker one.

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