

Mrs. Betts's Suitors

A Comedy of Rustic Courtship
by GERTRUDE INCE

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IF Mrs. Betts's appearance were not exactly that of a Cleopatra—she being stout, red-faced, and uncommonly short—yet in the matter of suitors she might almost have been said to hold her own with that royal and famous lady.

Her empire was undisputed from the very first, when—soon after Mr. Betts's departure for another sphere—she bought that desirable little property "The Vines"—really bought it out and out—that is, not practically rented it, by paying interest on a mortgage—and settled her tubby little self in our village.

Certainly it was an attractive place—"The Vines." A small greenhouse, containing a vine, which produced at least five or six bunches of grapes annually, projected from the south wall, while all down one side ran a good-sized strip of garden, where potatoes and cabbages grew in a long patch, bordered by pinks and chrysanthemums. The very place, in short, for a man to spend the rest of his days in peace and comfort.

Then, too, there were the accumulated savings of the late Mr. Betts—a yacht steward by profession—and the sum awarded to his widow by way of compensation when he took it into his head to fall overboard one night in a running sea.

"Three hundred pound—no less," the village crone who had helped Mrs. Betts to settle in, was heard to say while engaged in choosing a bit of mutton—cheap on account of its doubtful freshness—at the butcher's. "Ah, she can afford to buy of the best, which I can't, and that's all about it!"

Now, it so happened that Mrs. Betts herself was much exercised in mind that morning—not about her suitors, but about her potato patch. The potatoes had been growing fast lately, and wanted "earthing up" badly, but the widow felt no inclination for the task. From whatever point she viewed the problem, however, there appeared but two solutions: either she must do it herself, or hire a man to do it for her; so, after much consideration, she donned a neat, black bonnet and sallied forth.

At the top of the village street she ran against Mr. Fletcher—an elderly army pensioner, many years her senior, but still "sprack and spry," as she would have put it.

He raised his hat impressively—a tribute usually reserved for the vicar or the ladies at the Hall—and his grey-mustachioed old face brightened at sight of her.

"Good-morning, Mrs. Betts! Fine day, ain't it?"

"Lovely," agreed Mrs. Betts, coming coyly to a standstill. "Though I'm that worried, I don't seem to take no notice of the weather like."

"In-deed?" Mr. Fletcher took his pipe out of his mouth and regarded her with interest. "And what may it be that's a-worrying of you, Mrs. Betts?"

"It's them pertaters." The widow wrinkled up her still comely brows in a distressful manner. "They wants earthin' up somethink dreadful; 'they're a-growin' all over the place. You see, it's like this, Mr. Fletcher." Mrs. Betts lowered her voice to a confidential whisper. "If I has one of these 'ere young chaps to do it for me, 'e won't do it under a day or more, and I'm but a poor widdow woman, when all's said and done. I can't afford to throw money away. The pertaters ain't worth it. You follers me, I 'ope, Mr. Fletcher?"

"Ye-es." Mr. Fletcher seemed to be slowly evolving some idea out of the depths of his mind. "Yes, I quite holds with you, Mrs. Betts. I knows what these here young chaps is."

He paused to raise his hat and scratch his head reflectively a moment.

"I've done a bit o' gardenin now and again for Mrs. Morris—where I lodges, you know, ma'am. If you like, I'll come along this evenin' and do some of them pertaters for you—friendly like, you understand."

"And I'm sure it's a true friend you'll be, Mr. Fletcher!" the widow gushed delightedly. "I'll have a cup o' tea ready for yer, and one o' them meaty pasties I used to make in service, afore ever I married poor dear Betts."

It was a winsome prospect, and Mr. Fletcher smiled till he looked positively ten years younger, as Mrs. Betts, her mind happily set at rest, went beaming on her way.

True to his word, he turned up in the

cool of the evening, carrying fork and spade over his shoulder, and wearing his second-best suit instead of the one in which he usually did his gardening. "Wimmin always thinks a deal of a chap's clothes," he told his smirking reflection in the little cracked old glass, perched upon his chest of drawers, as he laid aside the old suit. "Besides, I be to have tea wi' her arterwards, and 'tis best to be a little extravagant-like courtin'." She'll not mind old clothes when we comes to settlin' down together."

So it was with quite a gallant, well-groomed air that the old pensioner presented himself at "The Vines." Mrs. Betts received him with enthusiasm, and set him to work without delay, and for the next two hours, Mr. Fletcher, hot and weary, but stimulated to exertion by an exhilarating view of castles in the air of the most enchanting description, worked unceasingly at earthing up Mrs. Betts's potatoes—blissfully unconscious of the advent of a rival suitor at the back door, which was on the opposite side of the house.

Thither came Mr. Chapman, bringing with him a tasty little bit of lamb, in the hope that the widow would not only buy, but also be pleased at his zeal on her behalf.

"It'll eat lovely, ma'am," he affirmed optimistically, as the lady poked at the livid, flabby piece of meat with a podgy forefinger and a somewhat disparaging air.

"Um—" Mrs. Betts's tone implied doubt. "Seems to me he ain't as fresh as he might be."

"Not fresh!" Mr. Chapman's aggrieved surprise almost overcame him. "I do assure you, ma'am, this here bit o' meat have only just come in! Why, direct'ly I sees he, I says to myself, I says, 'This here meat be the very thing for Mrs. Betts's eatin', and I went for to bring he down straight away!'"

He paused to recover himself at the thought of such unappreciated devotion; but Mrs. Betts making no reply, beyond pursing up her lips in a sceptical manner, he broke forth afresh. "I'll tell you what, ma'am: if you don't believe me, I'd sooner make you a present of this here bit o' meat. Then you'll see for yourself how he eats."

A present! Mrs. Betts's eyes began to sparkle, and, reaching up with surprising agility, she withdrew a plate from the tiny rack over the sink.

"Well, now, really, if you puts it that way, Mr. Chapman, why, I'll take it suttinly—with pleasure—and thank you kindly, too, I'm sure." She rapidly transferred the joint from the basket of the slightly reluctant butcher to the plate, and patted her prize lovingly.

"It ain't such a bad piece after all, now I comes to look at it," she conceded graciously. "I'm sure I'm that obliged to you, Mr. Chapman, I don't 'ardly know what to say."

The bewildered Mr. Chapman, who had not expected such a prompt acceptance of his offer, which, after all, had been intended merely as a figure of speech, watched her carry it away with feelings of mingled dejection and hope. Never before had he ventured so much as to hint at a gift to Mrs. Betts, and her ready acceptance seemed a favorable augury in his eyes.

"I suppose, now, you wouldn't be thinking of going for a walk next Sunday, ma'am?" he ventured to insinuate humbly when she returned, and—though still smiling amiably—had begun gently to rattle the door handle in a manner suggestive of closing it.

Alas! the change in the widow's demeanour was instant and terrible. The smile vanished, and Mrs. Betts positively glared as she drew herself up to her full four feet ten.

"Go for a walk next Sunday! Suttinly not, Mr. Chapman. Whatever do you mean for to ask me? I never heard of such impudence? Here, I'll just fetch you back that bit o' meat again!"

"No, no; please don't, Mrs. Betts! I didn't mean no harm!" the unhappy man besought in a panic, mopping his forehead with a torn and dingy handkerchief he had tried to wash that morning himself, but with scant success.

"Didn't mean no harm!" repeated the outraged Mrs. Betts, continuing to glare unappeased at her unfortunate admirer—without, however, making any further reference to his gift. "No, I should think you'd better not mean any harm, Mr. Chapman. Good-afternoon!"

She slammed the door, and the crest-fallen butcher carried away his empty basket with a sense of bitter failure gnawing at his heart.

WOMAN'S BEAUTY

Is impossible without good health. To bring back the brightness of eye, the rosiness of cheek, the springy step of buoyant health, no tonic is better than

BOVRIL

It is the concentrated goodness of Beef.

Meanwhile the assiduous Mr. Fletcher had managed to earth up more than half the rows of potatoes running across Mrs. Betts's garden; and that lady, coming out to see how he was getting on, was pleased to express her approval in the handsomest terms.

"Bee-you-tiful! It's beeyoutiful, that's what it is," she informed the gratified veteran. Then she cast a doubtful eye towards the remaining rows, and it was easy to see that some carking anxiety weighed upon her mind.

"I reely 'ardly likes to ask it of you, Mr. Fletcher—" she was beginning, when the gallant old pensioner interposed with as jaunty an air as his stiff and aching bones would allow.

"Don't go for to trouble yourself over they other rows, Mrs. Betts. I'll be pleased to come in another evenin' and earth 'em up for you. 'Twill be no trouble at all—to do it for you, it won't!"

"I'm sure I'm that obliged to you, Mr. Fletcher, I don't 'ardly know what to say. But there—as I always says—Mr. Fletcher he have the kindest heart as ever I did see! I'll not forget this, Mr. Fletcher; no, that I shan't!"

Her sharp little eyes beamed affectionately upon him, and the happy man, delighted at the progress his suit was making, ventured a gentle experimental pat or two upon the hand resting on his arm, smiling indulgently when the widow hastily withdrew it.

"I'll bustle in now and make the tea, which I'm sure you needs bad, Mr. Fletcher," she exclaimed. And Mr. Fletcher, as he gazed after her and noted the desirable little greenhouse, the neatly curtained windows adorned with pots of pink and red geraniums, and flerily lit up by the rays of the setting sun, felt his heart warm at the prospect which lay before him in his declining years.

But alas for human hopes!

Mrs. Betts was certainly charming at tea-time, and listened with absorbed attention to tales of his former exploits; but when he turned up again the next afternoon, carrying fork and spade, and quite ready for work, an unaccountable chill seemed to have crept into her manner.

Mr. Fletcher, though still stiff and sore after yesterday's exertions, had finished the remaining rows of potatoes, and, leaning on his spade, was conning over the proposal he meant to make during tea, and wishing Mrs. Betts would come out, when that lady made her appearance in her best Sunday dress, with her bonnet and mantle on.

"It's never but what there's something a-happening," she remarked sagely to the bewildered veteran. "Here's a leg come off my kitchen chair, and I'm down to Mr. Williams for to have it mended. I can't a-bear broken things messing about."

She glanced shrewdly round the neatly tidied garden, and was pleased to nod approvingly. "I've put a cup o' tea handy on the stove, if you'd like a drop afore you goes, Mr. Fletcher," she proceeded airily; "and I'm sure I'm that obliged I 'ardly knows what to say."

Poor Mr. Fletcher, more disappointed than he ever remembered being before, and mourning over his carefully prepared speeches, nevertheless pulled himself together gallantly.

"I knows what I'd like you to say, Mrs. Betts," he ventured to insinuate humbly, but the widow was already halfway down the garden path, and took not the smallest notice.

"Mind you shuts the gate after you when you goes out, Mr. Fletcher," was all she said; and the unfortunate suitor, left alone with the rows of neatly-banked-up potatoes, felt his heart sink as the sound of her footsteps died away down the lane.

After a disconsolate tea at home he could not resist strolling out again, past the little, white-painted gate he had come to consider as soon to be his own.

Yes, there was Mr. Williams—a supposed misogynist, who seldom had a pleasant word or look for anyone—walking round the garden with Mrs. Betts and talking genially while the widow hung enraptured upon his words.

Mr. Fletcher, seeing him point toward the potatoes, immediately inferred, with a swelling heart, that he was deriding the way in which they had been earthed up; and a great bitterness filled his soul as

he watched the faithless Mrs. Betts pick a big bunch of sweet-smelling pinks and present them to the carpenter, and accompany him down to the gate. Though he walked on hastily, Mr. Fletcher could not help hearing her parting words:

"Well, good-bye till to-morrow, then, Mr. Williams. I'm sure I'm that obliged to you I don't 'ardly know what to say!"

The favored Mr. Williams came swaggering down the lane, casting—so it seemed—a glance of scornful pity at his rival as he passed, and Mr. Fletcher, trembling with indignation and mute with wrath, shook one of his gnarled old fists at the retreating back of the triumphant carpenter.

Next morning Mr. Williams, planing wood in his workshop, and whistling away gaily to himself—a thing he had never been known to do before—was interrupted by a sepulchral voice from outside.

"I wishes to have a word with you, Mr. Williams, if you please."

Mr. Fletcher entered with deliberation, and for a few moments the two men glared at each other in silence.

"Yes," said the visitor, coming nearer, and clearing his throat in a premonitory manner. "I've a plain question to ask of you, Mr. Williams, and I expects a plain answer. Be you a-courtin' of Mrs. Betts or no?"

Mr. Williams's natural moroseness reared its head in an instant.

"And what's that to you, I'd like to know?" he demanded savagely. "Ain't you nothin' better to do at your time o' life than to come pokin' where you ain't wanted—no, nor likely to be neither—arskin' of your questions?"

Mr. Fletcher drew himself more stiffly erect than ever.

"I've a right to ask," he asserted with dignity.

"No, you ain't!" retorted the other.

"I 'ave!" repeated Mr. Fletcher, beginning to get heated.

Mr. Williams advanced his bulldog head threateningly.

"I tell you you ain't!" he roared.

Things were certainly looking serious, and might have ended in a deplorable manner, had not a passer-by at that moment looked into the shed.

"I say, mates," he called, "can you tell me where Mrs. Betts lives?"

There was a sudden lull in the dispute, and the two belligerents turned to stare at the questioner.

"The—the fourth house on the left," volunteered Mr. Fletcher at length, scanning the newcomer curiously.

He was a big, rather fat man, dressed in navy serge and a peaked cap, and he carried a prosperous-looking bag.

"Thank ye, mate," he answered cheerily. "Truth is, I'm in a bit of a hurry to get home—see?"

"Home!" Mr. Fletcher's jaw dropped, and Mr. Williams took a step forward, as if uncertain whether he had heard aright. "And who may you be as calls Mrs. Betts's place home?" he inquired ironically.

The stranger laughed good-humoredly.

"Why, I'm Mr. Betts, as was thought to be drowned. Some natives picked me up, d'y'e see, and now I'm come home to my lawful wife—" An idea seemed to occur to him as he looked from one gloomy face to the other. "She ain't gone and got married again, have she?" he inquired anxiously.

"No—not yet—she 'aven't," Mr. Fletcher answered heavily.

"But you're only just in time," added Williams, with a malevolent glance at his rival.

Mr. Betts appeared thoughtful. "Fourth house on the left, ye say?" he remarked. "Well, so long, mates!"

Off he tramped, and, without another word, Mr. Williams returned to his planing, while Mr. Fletcher, after regarding him sternly for a moment, strolled out with as great an assumption of indifference as he could muster.

There was nothing to be seen at "The Vines," though he took as long as he could in passing the gate. But the next day—Sunday—the village congregation were electrified to see Mrs. Betts—looking greatly subdued, so the gossips said—enter the church meekly in the wake of a big, sailorly-looking man, while, in place of the crape bow which had hitherto adorned the front of her bonnet, there now nodded a large pink rose!