

THE BELLE OF RUBYWOOD.

CHAPTER IV.
Farmer Holt rose and put down his pipe, ready to act on the moment, prompt as usual, then suddenly sat down again, reminded of hospitality and asked Mr. Leigh if he had taken tea.

"Yes," said Mr. Leigh. "I thank you."

"Let me give you a cup," said Muriel.

"Thank you," he said, and it was evident that he accepted for fear of seeming cold or churlish.

Muriel handed him his tea, and the three farmers got into conversation—of course on farming. The fact was Farmer Holt was anxious to ascertain if Mr. Leigh was orthodox—as he called it—and not a "new-notioned" man, so he put this question during a lull in the conversation:

"Now, Mr. Leigh, how do you take your courses up North way?"

Mr. Leigh answered straightforwardly:

"First year we lie fallow and sow roots, such as mongold wurzel, or turnips; next year we sow barley or spring corn; next year we take clover; next year, wheat; next year, oats, then again turnips and feed sheep."

Farmer Holt gave a sigh of relief.

Muriel, hearing and understanding that sigh, felt glad, though she scarcely knew why.

Mr. Leigh rose.

"I hear, said the farmer, "that you have been sniffing round these new-fangled machines at Hopwood. What do you think of them?"

"I haven't bought or hired any," he said, holding out his hand.

Farmer Holt rose, put down his pipe.

"Good night, Miss Holt," said Mr. Leigh.

"Good night," said Muriel, giving him her hand.

And so ended Mr. Leigh's first visit to Rubywood.

CHAPTER V.
The three gentlemen having departed Muriel took up her needlework and waited for her father's return.

He returned alone—Mr. Heather-bridge having taken the near cut to the Howe—and not in the best of humors.

"Cattle a-got all over the place," he growled. "This Mister Leigh came upon us so suddenly that I never thought of the old fences. Wish I'd bought the home as I thought of doing; I don't take to new neighbors!"

Muriel said nothing; the farmer's little burst of irritation always dispersed the quicker if left alone, and, grumbling at intervals, he finished his pipe, drank his regulation nightcap of Scotch whiskey, and retreated to bed.

A week passed and Muriel tried to persuade herself that she had forgotten the new tenant, or, at least, had lost all interest in him.

No reliance could have kept closer to his prescribed hermitage than did Mr. Wynter Leigh to his farm. If Muriel caught a glimpse of him at all it was at a distance, when he would be tramping over a meadow, riding across a field, or bending over some young lambs.

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Mr. Vandike, who declared that he meant to paint a picture of the farmhouse, with the new tenant in the foreground, gave vent to his disappointment at not being able to catch his model stationary.

"I never saw such a creature; looks as if he had all the world on his back; scarcely time to give me a civil answer, Miss Holt. Would you believe it? I asked him to give me leave to paint the left wing—the ruined one, you know—and what do you think he replied? 'Paint it off the face of the earth, sir, if you like,' said he, 'for it's sadly in the way of my barn.' He knows nothing of art."

"Quite enough if he knows farming," growled the farmer, who came up in time to hear the lamentation.

"And if he doesn't, I should think he is going the way to learn it," said young Vandike. "He is up with the ark—there is one bird under my window that takes its time from him—and the last to go to bed. And as for ramping about down hill and up dale, 'I'll back him to walk Jemmy Hershaw off his legs in a couple of days."

"And who's Jemmy Hershaw?" asked Miss Muriel.

"Jemmy Hershaw is the champion pedestrian, Miss Holt," said Mr. Vandike politely, but pityingly. "You never heard of him?"

"No," said Muriel; and as she ran indoors, "don't wish to hear."

Having received what he called his usual grace, Mr. Vandike walked off sighing.

"There's truth in what that harum-scarum chap says; young Leigh is sticking like wax, lass. He works harder than any man at the farm, and he's hardly time for a word, so much as 'good mornin'." What's more, he's out the fence up, himself, and that's uncommon polite."

The farmer made the admission, but it was a reluctant one, for on some unaccountable ground he had taken a dislike to his near neighbor; probably because he was his near neighbor and part proprietor of his precious avenue.

A fortnight passed. The ewes were lambing, and the shepherds were busy.

Mr. Leigh, being poor, possessed only one shepherd and a lad, as auxiliary; and consequently was compelled to bear a hand, which he did, adding the work to his already long list of labors stoically and cheerfully.

Thus Muriel, from her window, which overlooked the Holme pasturage, could see his stalwart figure passing among the ewes, and reprehensibly fell into the habit of leaning against the sill and contemplating it.

"He works from morning till night, and often from night to morning again, and takes no pleasure. Indeed, where is he to get it, without a soul to speak to in that old house, and not a voice to cheer him? Poor Mr. Leigh!"

Meanwhile, poor Mr. Leigh, quite unconscious of the pity his industry had awakened in the tender bosom of his neighbor's daughter, toiled on, and very likely would have forgotten her existence had not an incident occurred which brought about a meeting.

Muriel was queen of her own dairy, and made the best butter in the county—so said the farmer, and, though a too partial judge, he was a duly qualified one.

Women, even in matters of strict business, must have their little favoritism, and, of course, Miss Holt had a favorite cow.

Daisy Spot, so-called, it is presumed, from a white star upon the patient creature's bony forehead, was milked by her mistress's own hands—an honor which Daisy so little appreciated

that she never lost an opportunity of overturning the pail.

One afternoon, in the second week of Mr. Leigh's arrival, Muriel had carried her pail down to the paddock, milked Daisy, and stood with one bare, shapely arm resting on its broad back, and the other strained at the full pail, ready for the start home.

In this attitude Mr. Leigh came upon her. However curt he might be in his intercourse with men, there was no remission in his politeness to the gentler sex. His head was bared in an instant, and he turned from the path, down which he was speeding, hat in hand.

Muriel extended her hand across the cow—Daisy refused to move—and, with a smile, he took it.

"Good evening, Miss Holt. A full pail?"

"Very," said Muriel; "see." He nodded.

"A good cow," he said, scanning Daisy's points with his calm, gray eyes. "And your favorite, doubtless. Are you going to the farm?"

"Yes," said Muriel, lifting the pail. "Let me carry it for you," he said.

"No, thank you," said Muriel. "I am used to it; it is no great weight—"

But very gently, but also very firmly, he took the pail from her and walked along as if he were carrying a paper balloon.

"You are very busy now," said Muriel, walking at his side and wondering why men should be so much stronger than women.

"Yes," he said. "I am short-handed, and the lambs are troublesome."

"Are they all doing well?" asked she.

"Yes, very," he said. "No fault to find with the cattle," he added gravely.

She noticed the emphasis and the distinction.

"Is the land not satisfactory?" she said.

He laughed a short, curt laugh. "No; far from it," he replied. "It has been starved. I can scarcely believe, looking at that field, nodding at some tubywood wheat, 'and that,' waving his hand to a piece of the Holme land, that they lie so close together."

Muriel sighed softly.

"It will be hard work for you," she said.

"Yes, that is a comfort," he replied. She looked up, surprised.

"A comfort?" she repeated. "One generally counts that a trouble."

"No," he said, "not to me. Work is only pleasure, and the harder the better. An idle man is an unhappy one—"

"And one too hard worked is a very one," interrupted Muriel gently.

"All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy," he repeated, smiling. That proverb's not unqualified truth, Miss Holt; there are a few things you can take to excess that will do you less harm than hard work."

"I can't argue," said Muriel, "but do not confess myself convinced."

"No," he said, "that is the vanquished's privilege. But how is it that you, who are an advocate for less work fall to carry out your doctrine in practice? This pail is too heavy for your hands," and he glanced gravely at the small fists grasping the milking stool.

She shook her head.

"You underestimate my strength," she said. "I can carry that pail easily. I wish you would let me now. I am taking you from the Holme."

"No," he said. "I can cut across by

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the footpath; and I would rather carry it, please. A magnificent sunset. The marquis's trees over yonder are turned to gold, if he but knew it."

"You are an admirer of nature?" said Muriel.

"Yes," said Mr. Leigh. "An humble one. Who is not?"

"Farmers, very often," replied Muriel. "They grow accustomed to all the varying changes, and view them from a money-making light. The clouds mean nothing to them but showers for the young wheat, the moonday sun but the ripening power or the full ear, the thunder storm counts as nothing more than a destroyer of blight, and a sunset—well, I suppose that, being of little palpable use in agriculture, passes unregarded."

Mr. Leigh was guilty of a prolonged, genuine stare. Was this the laughter of a country farmer?

"There are farmers and farmers," he replied, after a pause, during which he allowed his astonishment to politely evaporate. "I am not an enthusiast—one in a neighborhood is sufficient; and you have Mr. Vandike—but I love nature; indeed, I have nothing else to love."

A strange speech, savoring of effeminacy from a strong, healthy man's lips, but it had nothing ridiculous about it, coming from him; for it was simple, solemn truth, and was spoken as truth should be—gravely and without strain for effect.

Muriel looked straight before her, and then up at a startling.

(To be continued.)

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