

## WILL PROVANT'S REVENGE.

By W. T. SPEIGHT.

## CHAP. I.

When Will Provant came back to his native town of Scargill—and a very small town it was, not numbering more than between four and five thousand inhabitants—there was not any person of the many who remembered his going away that recognised him again till he made himself known. But that, perhaps, was hardly to be wondered at, seeing that he had left the town a child of five, and that he had now returned after the absence of twenty years, a strapping fellow, over six feet in height, bearded like a pard, and speaking with an accent never heard in Scargill before, which of itself tended to make him seem more outlandish than he really was.

Will's father, finding times hard and money scarce, had emigrated to one of the Western States of America; but as to how far he had prospered there, his son vouchsafed very scant information. Will's avowed object in visiting his native town was to "look up" his grandfather, old Peter Dovedridge, who lived in a small gray-stone house about a mile away on the Shulcotes Road, with a housekeeper nearly as old as himself for sole companion. Peter had accumulated whatever fortune he might be possessed of by the slow patient industry of half a century as proprietor of the chief shop or store, in the town, where almost everything might be bought, from the silk for a lady's dress to a packet of blacklead or a child's rattle. It was not forgotten among the older inhabitants that when Peter's only child married Robert Provant against his express commands, he vowed that he would never set eyes on her again, and that he "washed his hands of her" then and there for ever. He was known to be an extremely vindictive man; and that Master Will would have to smart for his mother's disobedience, those who knew Peter best were most inclined to believe. "Of course he's been sent over to see how the land lies and to try and 'soap' the old man over," said the quidnuncs to each other over their nightly grog at the *King's Head*, "but he'll be a rare sharp up if he contrives to throw dust in the eyes of old Peter."

And indeed the young fellow's reception by his grandfather might well have chilled the heart of any one less sanguine than himself. "If thou'lt come all this long way thinking to get round me, and that mayhap thou'lt come in for a bit o' brass when I'm dead and gone, thou mayest as well go back to where thou camest from," said the old man after a long silent scrutiny of Will through his spectacles. "No one of thy name or breed shall ever touch a penny of mine. Thou can have thy bed and victuals here for a fortnight. After that, if thou chooseth to stay, thou must pay for them like any other lodger."

Whatever Will Provant's feelings in the matter might be, he took care to keep them to himself. No one ever heard him whisper a syllable derogatory to his grandfather. He had not been a week in the little town before he was the most popular person in it. There was a sort of open-air, breezy freshness about him which most people found very taking. Among the men he was hail-fellow-well-met, always ready with a hearty grip of the hand and a song or a story when called on in the bar parlour of the *King's Head* or the *Ring o' Bells* of an evening; and what was perhaps more to the purpose, always seemingly more pleased to treat others than to be treated himself; for, to all appearance, he lacked nothing in the way of means. As for the marriageable portion of the other sex, they were all but unanimous in agreeing that he was the handsomest young fellow who had been seen in Scargill for many a day. He was tall and somewhat gaunt, but muscular and straight as an arrow. He had an olive complexion and thin clear cut features. He had a smile which came and went with equal facility, and which showed off to advantage his large white teeth. His eyes were dark and brilliant, somewhat overbold, it may be, when bent on a woman, but he could endue them with an expression of pleading tenderness, or Romantic passion, whenever it seemed worth his while to do so. His hair, which he wore long, was like his beard, a glossy black. He displayed a profusion of showy jewelry; and it was a well-ascertained fact that he always carried a small revolver in a secret pocket. His usual dress was a loose velvet coat over a vest made of the skin of some wild animal; while under the broad turn down collar of his fancy shirt he wore a silk kerchief of some gay colour with loose flowing ends. His ordinary headgear was a broad-brimmed Panama hat, which, however, he would sometimes exchange for a Mexican sombrero. Small wonder that half the foolish maidens in Scargill fancied themselves in

love with him. Little did they dream in their simplicity that behind that semi-romantic exterior, that under that manner so smiling, bland, and debonaire, there lurked volcanic passions, only restrained and held in check by a thin crust of conventionality, which might one day burst forth and astonish all beholders.

At the end of a fortnight Will Provant left his grandfather's roof and took lodgings in the town. People wondered and surmised, but to no one did he vouchsafe an explanation. His reasons, however, such as they were, would not have been far to seek. In the first place, even if his grandfather would have continued to board and lodge him for nothing, he was weary of the restraints which a residence under the old man's roof imposed upon him. All his life he had been used to come and go at his own good pleasure, and he found it intolerable to have his meal-times fixed for him to five minutes, and to be told that if he were not indoors by half-past ten he would be locked out for the night.

In the second place, he had fallen desperately in love with sweet Bessie Ford, who was indisputably one of the prettiest girls in Scargill. More than once before had Will suffered from the same complaint, but all previous attacks had been like so many mild outbreaks of nettlerash in comparison with the fierce fever which now consumed him. It was nothing to the purpose that Bessie was already engaged; that fact merely lent an added zest to Will's pursuit of her. He thought far too highly of himself to doubt for one moment his ability to run her sweetheart off and win Bessie for his own. The fellow in question had been pointed out to him—a great hulking, be-grimed engine-driver on the railway, Steve Garside by name. Will sniffed disdainfully, and ran his fingers through his glossy beard at the thought of their being any possibility of rivalry between himself and "Mounseer Smokejack," as he dubbed Steve contemptuously to himself.

Bessie Ford was a slender, blue-eyed, yellow-haired girl of twenty, whose manners and appearance would not have discredited a far higher position in life than the one she filled; for Bessie's father was merely the foreman porter at the Scargill railway station, while she herself was an assistant in a shop. The shop in question, which called itself an "emporium," was devoted to the sale of periodicals, newspapers, stationery, and fancy articles of various kinds, and had, in addition, a small circulating library attached to it, in which the newest novel was at least half-a-dozen years old. This shop, which was kept by a widow, and in which the only male employed was a youth of sixteen, began to have Will Provant for a customer most days of the week. It was remarkable how frequently he found himself in want of note-paper, or envelopes, or some other of the numerous articles purveyed at the emporium. And then he began to enter on quite a course of novel-reading, changing his volumes as often as three times a week; and when he happened to have Bessie to wait on him, it was singular what a difficult matter the choosing of a book became. Before long he found out the particular half-hour when Mrs. Fountain and the other young-lady assistant went up-stairs to dinner and Bessie had the shop to herself. After that his visits were nearly always timed accordingly.

As a matter of course, Bessie was not long in discovering that she herself was the magnet which drew Provant so often to the shop. There was no mistaking his glances of admiration, which were considerably bolder and more outspoken than anything she had been used to, nor the way in which he tried to hold her hand for a moment whenever she had to give him change, which was very often, till at length she found it expedient to place the money on the counter and leave it for him to pick up. Bessie was but a girl and a pretty one, and dearly as she loved Steve Garside in her heart, she could not help being flattered and pleased by the unstinted admiration accorded her by the handsome dark-eyed stranger, about whom there was a flavour of romance which added not a little to his attractiveness. But Bessie was a prudent girl, and when Will began to haunt the shop whenever she was alone in it, she was careful never to emerge from behind the safeguard of the counter. If he wanted a book at such times, he had to go into the back shop and choose it for himself. Still, she could not turn a deaf ear to him—nor, indeed, had she any wish to do so—when he perched himself on one of the stools in front of the counter and began to chat to her, brightly and pleasantly, about places he had been to and people and things he had seen, and to narrate to her romantic episodes of which he had been the hero, in that strange, far-away world from which he had come, almost like a visitant from another sphere, and to which he

would doubtless go back ere long. It was all very fresh and fascinating to the country-bred girl, whose imagination often flew away with her far beyond the narrow limits of her every-day surroundings. And then, having discovered that she was passionately fond of flowers, Will rarely failed to appear without one in his button-hole, of which he made a point of begging her acceptance—flowers, too, of a rarer kind than Bessie had ever seen before, whose names she did not know, and which could only have been procured by some occult process from Squire Denton's hot-houses, where, as was well known, the choicest flowers were grown and sent off by rail to the London market. Surely, Bessie argued with herself, even though she was engaged to Steve, there could be no harm in accepting so simple a thing as a flower from Mr. Provant and wearing it in her dress: and although she might not consciously do as he sometimes asked her to do, which was to "think of the giver," she could not help being aware that, while in no way disloyal to her sweetheart, he began to fill a very prominent place in her thoughts.

Still, she was not one whit less unfeignedly glad to see Steve when he made his usual weekly appearance at her father's house on Sunday afternoons, nor did she derive any less pleasure from his society when they went for their customary walk through the meadows by the banks of the Windle. Steve's duties compelled him to lodge at Eglington, a great manufacturing town eight miles away, where were the local headquarters of the railway company, so that it was only on Sunday that he could get as far as Scargill. The engagement between the young people was now a couple of years old, and it was merely the fact of Steve having had a bed-ridden mother to keep which had delayed their marriage for so long a time. But Mrs. Garside had now been dead for some months, and Steve was putting away every shilling he could spare towards furnishing a little home for his bride. August was now here, and the young engine-driver had won a shy consent from Bessie to their marriage taking place in Christmas week. Steve was a tall muscular young fellow, with dark-gray, honest-looking eyes, a fringe of golden-brown beard, and a by no means uncomely presence. He was still young in years and experience, and at the present time he was employed as driver of one of the local goods-trains: his secret ambition was to rise in his profession till he should one day be entrusted with the driving of one of the main-line great passenger expresses.

Scargill railway station was a good mile and a half from the heart of the town. To those people who wondered why the two had not been brought nearer each other, the answer was that engineering difficulties had stood in the way, and that, as the railway could not be brought closer to the town, the best thing the latter could do was to move itself nearer the railway which it was proceeding to do, after a fashion, by gradually stretching out an arm, which at no distant date would reach to and include the point in question.

Bessie's usual walk, morning and evening, to and from business was along this rather dreary stretch of road, in which more or less of building operations were always going forward. But there was another and much pleasanter walk along the banks of the canal, albeit a little longer, by means of which she could get between home and business, and during the summer months that was often the way she took. The walk was screened by a fringe of trees, which shaded it pleasantly from the sun, and gave it at the same time an air of semi-seclusion.

Bessie hardly knew whether to be pleased or annoyed when, one evening as she was on her way home, she encountered Will Provant leaning over the stile which gave admission to the footpath by the canal. Was he there accidentally, or on purpose to intercept her? was the question she asked herself; but it was one she was unable to answer. In any case, he greeted her with his frank-seeming smile, which displayed his gleaming teeth through the black rift of his moustache and beard, and turned to walk with her, as if it were the most natural thing in the world that he should do so. She could see that his eyes took note of the flower in her belt, which he had given her earlier in the day, and she was afraid that he might draw certain inferences therefrom such as was far from wishing him to draw. His talk was easy and animated, as it always was. Presently he brought round to a topic as to which he had hinted more than once already; to-day, however, he spoke openly. Such a charming girl as Bessie was far too good—"far too rare and precious"—to be buried alive in such a "dog-rot" place as Scargill, where she was unappreciated and altogether out of her proper sphere. Her true home ought to be in America,

more especially in one of the glorious Western States. In Kansas or Arizona, for instance, she would at once be elevated to her proper position—that of a "Society Queen"—whatever that might be—and have all the "chivalry" within a circuit of fifty miles "worshipping at her shrine"—and so on, and so on, in a similar high-fluting strain. Bessie listened in silence, her bosom rising and falling a little more quickly than usual, but finding not a word to say in reply. Will departed from her at the point where she had to turn off to home. As he held her hand for a moment and lifted his soft broad-brimmed hat there came a flash into his eyes which caused hers to flutter and fall on the instant, and left her blushing and trembling as he turned to go back by the way he had come.

Bessie Ford was not without some of the weakness of her sex. It was impossible to resist deriving a species of sweet satisfaction from the knowledge that more than half the young women of the town envied her her undoubted conquest of the "handsome American," as Will was called, despite the fact of his being a native of the place. Two evenings later she found Will waiting at the stile again. Again he kept her company to within a short distance of home; but Bessie felt that if this sort of thing were to go on, it could not fail to come to her sweetheart's ears. She and Will had been seen together by more than one person who knew of her engagement to Steve, and gossip flies fast in small country towns. So for the next few evenings she shunned the dangerous path by the canal, and went by the omnibus which plied between the *King's Arms Hotel* and the railway station.

A week passed without Will troubling her in any way, and then, with the inconsistency of her sex, she began to long to see him again. She missed his bright talk and the flowers he used to bring her. His visits to the shop had made a pleasant little break in the monotony of her life, and the cessation of them affected her like a loss. The fact was, although, of course, Bessie was unaware of it, that Will had been away for four or five days attending a race meeting in a neighbouring county. There came, however, a certain noon when he found his way once more to Mrs. Fountain's shop. It was during the half-hour when he knew that, in all probability, he should find Bessie alone. The sparkle in her eyes and the blush that suffused her cheeks avouched to him that she was not displeased to see him again. And how lovely she looked! Nowhere among all the great ladies on the grand stand had he seen a face which in his eyes was at all comparable to Bessie's. He was carrying a bouquet of choice orchid-flowers more strange and exquisite in their tropical loveliness than any Bessie had ever seen before.

"For you," he said as he touched the flowers lightly with his lips and then placed them on the counter in front of her.

"Oh, how lovely!" broke involuntarily from her lips. Then a moment later: "But, indeed, and indeed, Mr. Provant, I can't accept them."

"Can't?" responded Will with a lifting of his heavy brows. "If you have a reason, I should like to hear it."

Bessie hesitated, and the colour in her cheeks deepened. How was it possible to explain that there had suddenly come over her a consciousness that she was in some sort wronging the man whose promised wife she was in accepting flowers from another unknown to him? No such thought had ever struck her before. Will was watching her with an amused smile, under which, however, lurked something veiled and sinister. He could give a pretty good guess at the feelings at work in her mind. "Reason or no reason," he went on to say, "I've brought them purposely for you; and if you won't accept them, why, I'll just scrunch 'em under my heel and— But that's nonsense. Take them, they are yours." Then without giving her time for any further disclaimer, he said: "So, you little witch, you have taken to going home by 'bus, eh! One would have thought the footpath by the canal, with the sunlight shining through the leaves, was a far pleasanter road these autumn evenings."

"I suppose this is a free country, and that I can go home whichever way I please," answered Bessie with a toss of her head.

"Of course you can, my blue-eyed darling," responded Will composedly. Bessie stared at him; he had never addressed her in such a strain before.—"I am not so stupid as not to know your reason for going home by 'bus; but you won't find it quite so easy to get rid of me as all that." He hitched the stool on which he was sitting a little nearer the counter, and resting his arms on the latter, fixed his dark glowing eyes full on Bessie's face. "I think it's about time that you and I came to an understanding," he said. "Six weeks from now I am going back