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THE BELLE OF RUBYWOOD.

CHAPTER VIII.

"Oh, yes I am," said Mr. Vandike, shaking his head with a sigh. "Don't you say no; please don't. I'm such an unlucky fellow always. The thing never will come right when I want it, and I never can get the shadows in; there's always something comes and spoils my picture. Now I've got hung at the Academy, you won't spoil my pleasure by saying no, Miss Muriel, surely!"

Muriel, with the instinct of her womanhood knew that the wound was only skin deep, and that his love for her was of that kind which, in artistic jargon, he would have called "half tint," so she acted on the impulse of the moment and wisely.

"Mr. Vandike," she said, "I'm a simple country girl, a farmer's daughter; you are the nephew of a lord, a gentleman and an artist. Look me in the face and tell me as a gentleman and an artist if you think in your heart of hearts I am a fit wife for you. There is nothing in common between us. You would tire of me—before a month had passed, and would sigh for a proper companion in one of the great London ladies, who under-

stand your life and its purpose. Am I speaking too wisely for such an ignorant girl? I can only say what I feel. Dear Mr. Vandike, I have been so happy together, but if I thought you really loved me I should be miserable for every merry hour we have so enjoyed. You don't love me—no, you won't make me unhappy by pretending to be very much hurt when I say what dear father has said already."

Mr. Vandike looked out of the window. Muriel laid her hand gently on his.

"You have forgiven me for speaking so forwardly," she said, "and we shall part as friends?"

"That we shall," Miss Holt, said the young gentleman, suddenly removing his gaze to her face and grasping her hand. "And—I shouldn't be acting honorably if I didn't say that I think you're right, after all. Not that you are not worthy to be the wife of a king, but—but that I don't love you half so well as you deserve, though if I stayed here within sight of you another day," he added earnestly, "by Jove! I should love you all that and a trifle over. So I'll go, and I wish you a better man. Miss Holt, good-by."

"Good by," said Muriel, and she struggled against her fears, for she knew the worth of the heart that beat beneath the veneer of fashion and London manners—"good-by. We shall meet again, I feel sure, and then be better friends than ever. You will be

a great man, whom your wife will be proud of, and I shall cry over every success you make—so, there! I'm almost crying now. Good-by."

"Good-by," said Mr. Vandike, shaking her hand again, and away he went, stopping, however, at the corner to look back and mutter:

"I'm half afraid I do love her now, by jingo! I wish I had a study of her in sepia to cry over."

Muriel, though she had no sepia sketch of Mr. Vandike had a good cry, not over her departed lover, but for him who was near at hand, and for herself, who was so unhappy as to have so many proposing suitors when the favored one was compelled to hold his peace.

In came the farmer and found her, not in tears, but scarcely recovered from them.

"Well, lass," he said, eyeing her earnestly, "that artist fellow is packing his traps and is off to London. Has he been to say good-by?"

"Yes, father," said Muriel, and her tears threatened again.

"Hem!" said the farmer, chuckling. "See what it is to have a pretty face, lass. Every idiot on the highway fancies himself in love with it. But dry your eyes, my dear, there's good corn among the weeds. Heaven be praised, and a fair sample is coming this way. Alfred comes back to-night!" she said in that absent way one uses when speaking because speech is expected of us.

"Yes, Mr. Heatherbridge," repeated the farmer, coming behind her and laying his hand on her head. "But why so cold and stately, lass? A little while ago it was 'Alfred,' sweet and kind like, now it's Mr. Heatherbridge, prim as a parish clerk. What's that old song your poor mother used to sing, something about the milking pail? Here, by the bye, that sets me off again. What'll you think, lass, of our neighbor, young Leigh?"

Muriel's heart leaped, and her head dropped lower over the needle.

"What has he done, father?" she said in a low voice.

"Took a drove of stock, a hundred cows if there was one, tramping down the avenue like the beasts out of Noah's Ark. Oh, why didn't I buy that farm and so be rid of it?"

And he groaned.

"Why didn't you, father?" asked Muriel, afraid to remain silent, yet knowing not what to say.

"Why, eh? Because I didn't," said the farmer. "Perhaps I had something else to do with the money, lass," and he stroked the beautiful head. "Perhaps I'm a fond old idiot—indeed, as Alfred 'ud say, most like I am. But there, you love your old father, lassie, dear, don't you?"

Muriel turned and threw her arms round the old man's neck without a word. She could not trust herself to speak. It seemed so hard to love him so dearly and yet keep a secret—such a secret, too—from him.

"Ah!" sighed the squire, "I don't like my new neighbor; young men—farmers especially—are so pig-headed there's no trusting them. What's he want a hundred cows, for? What will he do next? Something unpleasant and awkward, I'll be bound."

"Oh, father!" said Muriel in a low voice. "Tis not like you to be so unjust. Mr. Leigh has never done an unkind or unneighborly thing to you yet. It was not pig-headed, surely, to take so much trouble about the straw yard, the first night, too, and so late. He has had so much trouble that makes him quiet, and he works so hard, and for all the annoyance he gives us the Holme might be empty now."

"Holy-toity!" exclaimed the farmer, sinking into his chair with his usual violence. "Mr. Leigh's in your good books, lass! Quite the champion, I do declare. But nobody's finding fault with him, as yet; plenty of time to pity him when they do. I'm only agrieved over the avenue, and you know it's a sore point with me."

"Why do you not make some arrangement with Mr. Leigh? Buy the avenue if it is his to sell. He would make another entrance—do anything—rather than give you a moment's pain!"

"Hem!" said the farmer, looking at her till he forgot to light his pipe, and the wisp of paper was burnt out. "You seem to know a deal of young Leigh, most of his mind included. Have you seen much of him?"

Before Muriel could reply the dogs set up a warning bark, a tap came to the door, and glad of the excuse to hide her sudden flush, she ran to the floor and opened it.

Mr. Heatherbridge stepped in. "Hullo! Alf, my lad!" exclaimed the farmer, setting down his pipe. "Welcome back—quiet, you dogs—welcome back, my lad; it seems an age since I saw thee!"

Mr. Heatherbridge shook hands then turned to Muriel, who stood glad and yet sorry, to see her old playmate back again.

"Not a word for me, Muriel?" he said half reproachfully.

"Yes, a great many," said Muriel, and shook hands.

"Sit down—sit down," said the farmer, "and tell us the news. Muriel can ring for a jug of ale and a pipe."

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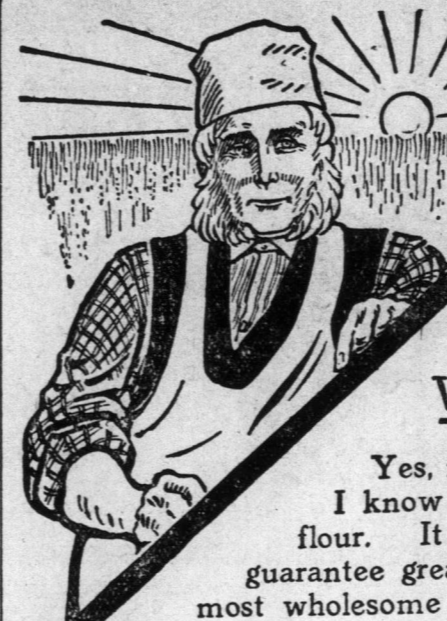
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When Muriel, instead of ringing, fetched them with her own hands, Mr. Heatherbridge opened his budget of news.

As he had expected, his aunt Dorothea had left him the farm and all the money she died possessed of. "Unto those that have much shall be given." But, though it was as plain as a pikestaff, the lawyers managed to find a hole in the will, and Mr. Heatherbridge had been mending it in London at no small expense.

While he told his tale his eyes wandered constantly to where Muriel sat, and a smile grew on the farmer's face as he noticed the errant glances.

"And so it's all settled, Alfred," he said. "Fill your glass, lad; I'm almost as glad to see you as the father was the prodigal son—and you're quite a wealthy man. Fancy the Howe and Mrs. Dorothea's, what a responsibility! Ha! ha!"

"Yes, indeed," said young Heatherbridge, glancing at Muriel nervously. "Almost more than a young fellow can manage—alone."

"Not more than he can enjoy," laughed the farmer. "Well, we've taken care of the farm for you, lad. There's Muriel, there, been a mother to the chickens, and looked after the bids as if they'd been her own."

"I'm very grateful to Muriel," said Mr. Heatherbridge, looking round at her tenderly. "I know she'd be kind enough—she is all kindness and thoughtfulness."

"No, I'm not," said Muriel. "I am all forgetfulness, for to-night's Saturday night, and I've forgotten the clothes. Have you any more news? If so, please save it until I come back." And, with a smile, she took up a candle and left the room.

Mr. Heatherbridge rose to open the door and stood looking after her for a full minute. Then he came back and seated himself at the table, and commenced fidgeting with the black studs at his wrist.

"I'm glad to get back," he said presently.

"No doubt—no doubt, my lad," said the farmer. "A farm's ill-gadding without a master."

"Aye, but for more reasons than the farm," said young Heatherbridge. "Farmer, did Muriel ever tell you of a conversation we had before I went away?"

"No," said the farmer, puffing hard at his pipe; "no, lad."

"Well, I thought perhaps she had. I asked her to be my wife, farmer; MINARD'S LINIMENT FOR SALE EVERYWHERE.

indeed, I've loved her a long time."

Farmer Holt's heart beat fast and his eyes winked.

"Yes, lad," he said, "and what did she say?"

"She gave me no answer," said young Heatherbridge nervously; "indeed, she ran away." And his face clouded.

"Ha! ha!" laughed the farmer; "she did, did she, the mix? Don't look so down, lad; you don't understand 'em; they're coyer than you think. Run away, did she? Ha! ha!" And he laughed at such an excellent joke as any girl running away from the owner of the Howe, Mrs. Dorothea's farm, and ever so many thousands in the County Bank.

Mr. Heatherbridge's face brightened.

"You don't think she meant to give me the cold shoulder, farmer?"

"Not she," retorted the farmer. "Haven't you been boy and girl together since ye were girl and boy? Ah, lad, ye don't know 'em. If she'd topped I'd a' said things looked awkward, but she run away. Ha! ha!"

"And what do you say, farmer?" asked Mr. Heatherbridge eagerly. "You know me and my affairs; you know I'm as fond of Muriel as I can be, head over heels in love with her, and that I'll do everything that's handsome in the way of settlement, if you'll give your consent, and she'll give her hand, I'll lay down twenty thousand pounds for her—or more, farmer, if you think it well!"

"No, no; that's plenty, lad," said Farmer Holt, beginning to draw a plan on the table with his finger.

Twenty thousand pounds is a splendid sum; but mind, it's not a penny more than the dear lass' due, and, to show you I say no empty words, look you here!" And he leaned over the table and looked eagerly at the other, a fair opposite him. "The day she marries you, lad, I'll hand you ten thousand pounds as her dowry."

A rich man always wants more, and ten thousand pounds, unexpectedly seemed delicious.

"Aye, aye!" said the farmer triumphantly. "I'll do it, lad. I promise you, and I'll ask you only one thing in return."

"What's that?" asked young Heatherbridge. "though you needn't mention it, farmer, for I say 'Yes' to it whatever it is—if you'll but give me Muriel alone."

"Yes," said Farmer Holt, and he pointed to the plan on the table. "This corner—you know it, lad? Often and often have we—your father and I—baggled over it. That corner I must have if you have my Muriel and be dowry!"

Mr. Heatherbridge held out a hand that trembled like a leaf.

"A corner!" he breathed eagerly. "You shall have it all, farmer; every inch; only let me have Muriel!"

"Done with you," laughed the farmer, "for the corner alone, lad. And now go and try your fortune; the dear lass is in the parlor, and here's good luck to thee!" And he raised his tankard and drank it at a draught.

(To be continued.)

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