

Nehemiah took up the sixpence with a significant look, and twirled it on the board, as much as to say, "You have not come down with the proper fee for that sort of business."

Dorcas understood the hint, and drawing a small red leather purse with a tinsel edge from her bosom, and turning it mouth downwards, she shook its last coin, another sixpence, into her rosy palm, and pushed it towards the greedy scribe. "It's a crooked one," said she, "and I did keep it for good luck; howsoever, as I've paid my shoemaker's bill, and bought my winter 'parel with my Christmas wages, and hasn't got a debt in the world, I suppose I'm free to part with it."

The heart of the bachelor ecclesiastic was softened by the pathetic tone in which the simple Dorcas entered into this explanation of the state of her finances, and he actually returned both the lucky sixpence and the one she had previously tendered, and professed his intention of "not only writing the valentine, but furnishing the extra poetry she required, gratis." Those who may think highly of Nehemiah's generosity on this occasion, can form no adequate idea of the extreme pains which it always cost him to compound a rhyme. Truly, if our parish clerk had been paid a guinea a couplet, it would have been hard-earned money to him. In the present instance, he was only required to produce an answering line to rhyme to this octo-syllabic interrogative, which was improvised on the spot by the distressed damsel herself.

"How can you slight your only dear?" "Well," quoth the amanuensis, after he had copied this moving query from Dorcas's dictation on the slate which he always used in original compositions, to prevent the unnecessary ruin of a sheet of paper, "what comes next?" "Why, lauk, Mr. Nehemiah, sir, that is just what I am posed about," cried Dorcas, "and what I 'spected you to be able to tell me, as you are such a s'prising scholar, and understands almost every thing." "Don't you know that it is an awkwardish kind of business to find a rhyme just at a minute's notice, young woman," replied Nehemiah, gravely. "That's a sure thing," responded Dorcas again; "for as true as I'm alive, Mister Nehemiah, I have muddled my brains for the last three weeks, day and night, to try to fish out a rhyme to that there what I just told you, and it is a mercy that I didn't forget that by the way. Howsoever, now I talks of that, I must scamper home as fast as I can, and give our poor wennil (weanling) calves their suppers, or they'll raise such a dismal dolour arter their wittles and drink, that my partners will hear the poor dumb dears bleating, and wonder what I am up to, that I hasn't waited on them afore this time a-night. And so, Mister Nehemiah, when you have made a proper consideration, I hope you'll be able to finish that there valentine what we are writing to Peter." "We, quotha!" cried the scribe, with no less scorn than the organist felt when the organ-blower talked of "our music." "If we had no more to do with it than you have, Peter would go without a valentine, I believe." "Well, Mister Nehemiah, don't fare so ugly-tempered," rejoined our Suffolk Sappho of low degree; "of course it's I what sends the valentine, and you writes it; so it is our valentine, or at least I hope it will, when you've finished it up."

Poor Nehemiah did his utmost endeavor to comply with Dorcas's request, and to finish up her valentine; but the more he tried, the farther off he seemed from the desired conclusion. Rhymes enough there were to "dear," no doubt, but none of them occurred to Nehemiah, save the very inappropriate substantives, beer and steer; and what had they to do with the jealousy and grief of a forsaken maiden, who was desirous of addressing a short pathetic remonstrance in amatory rhymes to her truant lover? So Nehemiah rejected both beer and steer as answering rhymes to "only dear;" and then he thought of clear, and hear, and fear, but could make nothing to the purpose with them. For three successive nights Nehemiah got no sleep for the mental travail he endured in this undertaking; "the Sabbath dawned, no day of rest to him," for, even when he entered upon his ecclesiastical duties, his thoughts were profanely labouring at the provoking half couplet he was expected to complete, and he committed a series of blunders quite astonishing to the vicar and congregation. Thrice did he read the parson's verses instead of his own in the psalms, twice he groaned out, "Oh dear" instead of "Amen" and once he ejaculated an audible "Amen" in the middle of the sermon.

Never was a solitary bachelor who had no experience in love affairs of his own, so perplexed about compounding love verses for others. Still it was only half a couplet after all that was required of him, but that half couplet comprised more difficulties in its brief space than Nehemiah could master. "It hadn't no reason in it," he said, and he could not make any thing of a seasonable nature to jingle with it, though he kept counting up on his fingers with every word that was any thing like a clink to "dear."

Many were the clandestine visits that Dorcas contrived to make to Nehemiah, to hear "if he had finished up their valentine," but all were fruitless; a fortnight glided away, and still the unfinished couplet remained on Nehemiah's slate, without an answering rhyme, hanging up behind the door. At last, in the middle of his master's sermon, a thought popped into Nehemiah's noddle, which he considered so felicitous, that, lest it should es-

cape again, and be for ever lost to Dorcas, Peter, and the world, he, with a trembling hand, stole forth his brass pencil case, and privily booked it on the fly leaf of the parish prayer book, though it was even in his own opinion a positive act of sacrilege. But the temptation was too great to be resisted. It was impossible to lose this precious line,

"To court another, as I hear,"

which made so pretty and applicable a conclusion to the first line of the couplet,

"How can you slight your only dear?"

Dorcas, however, was not satisfied with it; she protested "that it had no particular signification. She wanted to give Peter a hint who it was that he slighted her for," she said.

Nehemiah was highly provoked at the dissatisfaction of his fair client, and told her, "if she did not like that ending, she must finish it herself, for it had been more trouble to him than twenty christenings with deaf god-fathers." Dorcas replied, "that it wasn't of no use sending it as it was," and passionately besought him, as it still wanted a week to valentine's day, that he would make a further consideration for the purpose of finishing up the valentine. Nehemiah found it impossible to resist the entreaties of such a buxom nymph as our love-lorn dairy-maid, so he fairly suffered himself to be hag-ridden for nearly another week with "the confounded couplet," as he called it; and it was not till the very eve of St. Valentine, just as Dorcas was lifting the latch of his door to make a last almost hopeless inquiry, "if he had finished up their valentine?" that another bright idea popped into his head. "Come in, Dorcas, dear!" he exclaimed, in his ecstasy; "I have thought of it now." "Well," cried Dorcas, fixing her round blue eyes upon the inspired clerk in eager expectation, "what is it?" "Hand me the slate that I may put it down, and then I'll tell you. No, I won't tell you, but I will read it all together," continued he, as he inscribed the parish-valentine slate with the precious morsel, which he called "a very 'spectable finish-up to the long-halting lyric." "Now, then, for it!" cried he, and, after clearing his throat with "Hi! ha! hum!" he read in a pompous chanting recitative,

"The rose is red, the leaves are green,
The days are past that we have seen,
How can you slight your only dear,
For one who lives so near?"

"That will do!" cried Dorcas, snapping her fingers, and by no means missing the two lacking feet in the metre, in her extreme satisfaction at Nehemiah having hit upon something that would fulfil her intention of giving Peter an intimation that she was aware of the proximity of the rival whose wiles had supplanted her. The valentine was duly transcribed on the sheet of paper without any accident of blot or blur, folded up, sealed with the top of Dorcas's thimble, and wrapped in a scrap of brown paper, addressed "to Mister Peter Fenn, hoss driver, at Mister Drake, farmer. With speed."

This billet was discovered by Peter on the morning of valentine's day, reposing in the corn measure out of which he was accustomed to deal the first feed of oats to his horses. He secured it with much satisfaction, though the contents of course remained a mystery to the unlettered swain. According to his own account, however, "it made him fare very comfortable all the morning, for he took it to plough with him in his waistcoat pocket, but thought it must have burned a hole there, he did so long to know who it came from, and what it was about, but he durstn't loose the horses till noon while they were basking," and then he lost his own dinner by running off to the clerk's house to get his valentine read.

Nehemiah protested he was quite hoarse with reading valentines that morning, there had been such a power of young people up with their valentines for him to read, and some that did not belong to the parish too, and who brought valentines that were very hard to make any sense of; however, those young people who had a parish clerk that could not read writing were certainly objects of charity, and he did all his possibles to make out all he could for them. At length, his harangue being at an end, he extended his hand for Peter's billet-doux, and gratified his longing ears by making him acquainted with the contents.

Peter was greatly touched by the tender reproach contained in the hopping couplet that had so long baffled Nehemiah's powers of rhyming. "Apray, Mister Nehemiah," said he, "doesn't that come from Dorcas Mayflower?" Nehemiah calmly replied, "I believe it do." "Well, master," rejoined Peter, seating himself on the old church-chest, "I don't think I have used that gal well." "That is a sure thing, young man," said Nehemiah, "but you know your own business best, I s'pose." "I can't say as how I do," replied Peter, in a doleful whine; "for I have got into a sort of hobble between Dorcas and another young woman." "Whose fault is that?" asked Nehemiah. "Why, I s'pose Dorcas thinks it be my fault," responded Peter; "but that other gal would not let me be at quiet, and was always axing me for my company, and making so much of me when I came in at meal times, that, somehow or other, I was forced to stay at home with her on Sunday evenings, instead of going to see Dorcas, because she always went into high-stericks if I talked of going after Dorcas. But I tell you what, Mister Nehemiah, I am

right sick of her nonsense; for as true as I'm alive, I do think she henpecks me all the same as if she were my wife." "Sarve you right, young man, I say, if you are fule big enough to put up with it." "Why," responded Peter, "I wouldn't, if I could get my neck out of the collar, as the saying is. But what is your advice?" "You hain't paid me for reading that there valentine yet," observed Nehemiah. Peter drew out a yellow canvass bag, capacious enough to have served the squire, and disbursed the expected sixpence.

"Thank you, young man," said the clerk; "and now I'll tell you what I would do if so be as I were situated as you are; I would just have my banns put up with Dorcas next Sunday." "Oh, lauk!" cried Peter, "that won't do, for I'm letten to master till Michaelmas, and he wont approve of my entering another sarvice, and a pretty life I should lead with Hannah in the house with me all the time the banns were being axed; and then I'm not quite sartain that Dorcas would consent to that, for she holds her head properly high when we meet now, and I can't say as how I like the thoughts of humbling to her, she is such a proud toad." "No wonder," said Nehemiah, "for half the young fellows in the parish are ready to hang themselves for love of her; and if you don't take care, you will be left in the lurch while you are playing fast and loose, and halting like an ass between two bundles of hay; for Dorcas isn't a girl that is reduced to go a-suitoring to a young man like your partner Hannah. If you were to know all the sixpences and shillings I have taken for writing valentines to her this week, you'd begin to look about you." "For writing valentines to my Dorcas!" whined Peter, in dismay; "why, apray, who did you write them for, Mister Nehemiah?" "That isn't fair to ask," said the scribe, "because I might get into trouble if I told tales out of school."

Peter sat and bit his nails in a profound fit of meditation for several minutes; at last he rose up with a foolish grin, and said, "I'll tell you what, Mister Nehemiah; I'll send Dorcas a valentine myself, and you shall write it for me." "Against our valentine's day, I s'pose you mean." "No, but I doesn't; I means this blessed young St. Valentine's day," quoth Peter; "our fellows like you may wait till our St. Valentine's day, but I'm for the young saint, if so be you can make it convenable to get it down against I take my hosses off at six in the evening." "That depends upon circumstances," replied Nehemiah; "and what sort of a one you want to have." "Why," said Peter, "my grandmother had a bootiful one sent to her by her first husband when she fancied he slighted her, and I dare say she would lend it to me for you to pattern after." "I dare say I know your grandmother's valentine," said Nehemiah, "if you can tell me how it begins." "I think I can," said Peter.

"The rose is red, the violet's blue,
I swear I never loved but you;
The turtle never doubts her mate,
Then why should you, my bonny Kate?"

"That won't do," interrupted Nehemiah; "for Dorcas can't stand in Kate's shoes." "No, but we might change the sense, and I really do think I shall turn a pôte." "It isn't quite so easy to turn pôte, as you call it," said Nehemiah; "however, I'll get my slate and write down all the pôtory you can say." "Then," said Peter you must put down

The turtle never doubts the dove,
Then why doubt me, my only love?"

"That isn't out of your own head, Peter?" cried Nehemiah. "Never you mind that, old fellow, but put down what I bid you, for there's more in my head than you thinks of, 'praps," said Peter; "only I must go and see arter my hosses now, for it's time for our second journey, but I will stop here at half-past six, and tell you the rest; and if you get it fairly written out for me, and two doves, with a wedding ring in their bills, drafted on to the paper, I'll tip you a whole shilling, and show you that I'm a capable pôte, in spite of all your cisums."

Nehemiah, who was by no means disposed to cherish an infant muse in his own parish, treated these indications of Peter's dawning genius with a certain dry sarcastic acerbity, which shewed that nature had intended him for a reviewer, not a bard. Peter, however, like most youthful rhymsters, was too much taken up with his own newly discovered powers of jingling, to allow his poetic ardour to be chilled by the discouragement of an elder brother in the art. "Now, Mister Nehemiah," cried he, when he burst into the clerk's cottage as soon as he had finished his appointed tasks in the field and the stable, "what do you think of this for a finish to our valentine?"

'Tis you alone I mean to marry,
Then why, sweet Dorcas, should we tarry?
The birds have all chosen their mates for the year,
But I'm not so happy—I wait for my dear;
My heart is still constant, and if you'll be mine,
Say 'Yes,' and 'for ever,' my own valentine!"

"Think!" said Nehemiah, "that it's well worth half a crown to write down such a lot of out-of-the-way stuff, Peter; and I don't believe your grandmother ever had such a valentine in her life." "Why, she sartainly hadn't any thing about my Dorcas in her valentine, but I kind of patterned arter her's for all that in mine, and the rest of it what spit my own case I made while I was at plough." "No wonder all the parish make a mock of