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## THE BELLE OF RUBYWOOD.

CHAPTER VII.

"You don't say so!" exclaimed the old man.

"Yes," said Leigh. "Yesterday I signed the contract to supply one of the largest London milk companies, come good, come ill, and to pay a penalty in hard coin if I fail."

"Maester Wynter, you bean't doing anything rash?" breathed the shepherd.

"No; I am but putting into practice a favorite saying of yours, Will. 'Nothing venture, nothing have.' T'is three thousand pounds, turned into cows, will yield me a large profit, and then—"

The old man gazed up into his face and caught the direction of his eyes. Affection made even old eyes sharp, and the little ones of the old man grew dim with sudden tears.

"Maester Leigh," he muttered, "Heaven speed thee whatever thy path, whatever it be cows or con-

tracts, which latter I don't understand."

"Thanks, Will; and now for the sheep."

The reader may feel rather surprised at Leigh's sudden communicativeness, but, though he would scarcely have owned it to himself, he had an object in making a confidant of Old Will.

Old Will was a favorite of Muriel, and Leigh secretly hoped and believed that at their next meeting the old man would, without betraying confidence, tell her enough to assure her of his earnestness.

The same motive, or one of a similar nature, led him up to Old Goody's cottage that evening, where he had earned himself a welcome by bringing a bottle of wine occasionally and talking in his kindly fashion to Jaffer.

To-night he sat on the old bench beside the door and drank in thirstily a long, detailed account of Miss Muriel's birth, habits, manners and virtues, to which he had, with reprehensible artfulness, led the conversation. He could not in honor see her and talk to her. The next best thing was to see and talk to one who had seen her sweet face, and heard her dear voice only a few hours before.

So there he sat, listening with all his heart and ears to petty details which to any other but a lover, might have seemed trivial, snapping up any

unconsidered trifle that related to his beautiful Muriel, and thinking even Goody's voice musical while she crooned his darling's name.

At the same time, by way of parallel, Miss Muriel sat on a heap of hurdles beside William's shepherd's cart and listened to a long account of Maester Wynter's doings, and received as much consolation and delight from it as the dotting old man could desire.

CHAPTER VIII.

Two or three days later, Farmer Holt, standing at the entrance of the avenue, was tricked with astonishment at the appearance of a large drove of cattle making, apparently, straight for him. He cleared out of the way slowly and like one in a dream.

"Whose beasts are these, my man?" he shouted.

"For the Holme Farm," replied the driver, and the farmer was about to assure him that there was a mistake, when the apparition of old William's stolid face at the tail of the procession satisfied him that his neighbor, Mr. Leigh was "going heavily into milk."

With a groan, for he could not but think of the daily transit of four hundred hoofts through his dearly loved avenue, he trudged off, pulling up, however, before he had got far away, in response to a panning voice calling him by name.

The summons proved to proceed from the aristocratic lungs of Mr. Vandike, who, very much out of breath and otherwise discomposed, came up, wiping his face with an immaculate handkerchief.

"By Jobe, Mr. Holt, how you walk! I saw you at the end of the lane, and thought I should catch you up easily, but your stride put me to shame. Awful hot, isn't it?"

"It is uncommon healthy hot," retorted the farmer, who was not in the humor to relish fashionable adjectives. "It's ripening the corn, if that be awful."

"Ah, just so; excuse me, I'm not

up to farming; and—and—by the way, can you give me a minute?"

"What am I doing now?" asked the farmer, not rudely, but with simple astonishment.

"Eh—oh?" I meant in private, but this is private enough," looking round and seeing no one but ploughmen half a mile off. "I'm going to ask a favor of you—the greatest favor for some time because—well—I'm not a good hand at this sort of thing; in fact, I've never done it before. Mr. Holt, you know my position pretty well; I'm an enthusiast at my art, and I think I may say that I stand a fair chance of turning out successful. You know they've humiliated me at the Academy this year—"

Farmer Holt stopped in his stride and stared at the aristocratic features, as if he feared their owner had taken leave of his senses.

"Bless the man!" he exclaimed, shaking his head, as if the puzzle were too much for him. "Hung you at the Academy? What on earth do you mean?"

"I mean my picture, of course," explained Mr. Vandike, more confused and embarrassed than ever. "I mean

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my picture, of course—and that's a great honor for a young artist, sir. The critics, too, speak well of it, and I have made a step forward in my career. I'm not a poor man, either as times go, Mr. Holt, and, in short, I am come to ask you to give me your daughter, Miss Muriel."

Farmer Holt stopped as if he had been shot in the back, pulled round and confronted the artist as if he were some monster in a show.

"Give—you—my—Muriel!" he repeated slowly. Then tramping on again as he spoke. "Young sir, you are mad as a March hare."

Mr. Vandike, too astonished at the reception of his proposal to speak for a moment or two, almost ran at his side, silent.

"Well," said Farmer Holt, turning to him, "haven't you gone yet? Give you my daughter Muriel? Not if there weren't another man in the country. Mr. Vandike, I don't mean any offense, but when my girl marries she'll marry a farmer. That's a sort of man I understand; he grows corn and trees, and owns fields and arms. I'll never consent to her marrying a man who only paints 'em."

Mr. Vandike opened his mouth and shut it again.

"Are you serious, Mr. Holt?" he said, fumbling for his glasses.

"That I am, and no doubt of it," said the farmer. "But look you here," he added thoughtfully, "don't take any offense, for, on my honor, I don't mean any, and you know it. Simply, I don't understand artists and artist's ways. My girl's a simple country lass—true of heart, mind you, and as good as a parson—but she don't understand them, either, and I know she wouldn't be happy with them, so think no more about it. Because I tell you I won't give my consent, and I know her too well to ear she'll marry without it."

"But," urged the enamored artist, surely, you will let me try my fortune with Miss Holt, sir; if—if I have had the good fortune to gain her cart, you will at least give me time? I'll turn farmer if you like—anything—but let me hear from her own lips hat there is no hope for me."

The farmer thought for a moment. "Well, so you shall," he said quietly; "on one condition, and that is, if Muriel says no, you pack up and make studies of cows and trees in another country. Come, it is not a very hard bargain, young man." And he looked the artist full in the face.

Mr. Vandike without a word turned off to the farm.

He found Muriel sitting at the window working—or, rather, resting from work, for her sweet face was leaning upon her hand, and her eyes were fixed on the table thoughtlessly.

Mr. Vandike fancied that he saw ears in them, but Muriel looked up so merrily, and smiled so happily that he was sure he had been mistaken, and put the fancy down to his embarrassment.

"Miss Holt, I've just seen your father," he said, fumbling for his eyeglass, which, from the first moment of his proposal, had slipped over his shoulder and added to his confusion. "He sent me to you—"

"Yes!" said Muriel. "Has he left anything behind? What is it?"

"No, not," said Mr. Vandike. "I asked him a question, and at first he said no, but afterwards he agreed if you would say yes, he would change it to yes, too."

"Well," said Muriel, taking up her work, all unconscious. "And, pray, what was it? Do you want to take my new colt?"

"No," said Mr. Vandike nervously. "No; I want to take you, my dear Miss Holt."

"Me!" said Muriel. "I can't spare the time, you know, for a full-length picture, Mr. Vandike."

"Not for a picture, but for a wife, dear Muriel," said Mr. Vandike, leaning on the table.

Muriel dropped her work and looked up, pale, troubled and sad.

"Oh, Mr. Vandike," she said in her low, grave voice. "I am so sorry! Oh, say you are not in earnest; it is only one of your horrid jokes! Don't look so serious! You cannot tell how grieved I shall be if you are unhappy! But you are not serious, are you?"

(To be continued.)

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