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## THE VALENTINE.

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The anniversary of St. Valentine's Day, disregarded as it now is in refined society, is still a season of pleasing excitement among village lovers in humble life; and to them this almost solitary relic of ancient national customs is scarcely less precious, than when high and low throughout the land met in merry mood to choose their valentines.

It is true that the rhyming ware which formed the subject of the epistolary valentines of the English peasantry, like their Christmas carols and epitaphs, have from ancient times contained little true poetry, and scarcely any variety; nevertheless, the doggerel verses were always acceptable to whomsoever they were sent, and the meaning was by no means difficult to be comprehended.

Some years ago, when the art of penmanship was scarcely known among the peasantry, the parish clerk, if actually possessed of that rare accomplishment, was commonly employed as valentine writer and reader general to the unlettered lovers of the congregation. This, of course, proved an annual source of profit to the sagacious scribe, who never exercised his clerical skill for a smaller consideration than a silver taster, and not unfrequently received a handsome gratuity over and above, as a sort of good-luck offering, from some of the most anxious among his gentle clients. Our old parish clerk and sexton (these offices are always united in a country village) was the greatest match-maker in the district, heaven rest his soul! It was, in sooth, his interest to nurse up all love affairs to a matrimonial conclusion, on account of the fees which fell to his share, in his official capacity, for his assistance in the performance of the marriage service.

Nehemiah Dowton was an ancient bachelor, who, for the honour of the church of which he considered himself a dignitary, avoided all occasion of scandal, by dispensing with the services of a housekeeper, and performing all the domestic offices for himself; by which means he contrived to maintain an unsullied reputation, and to preserve inviolate such of the secrets of the parishioners as were confided to his keeping. In short, Nehemiah was a sort of Protestant Father Lawrence, whom any rustic Juliet among the lambs of his flock might visit and employ in the most delicate affairs with perfect safety.

Nehemiah's memory was well stored with the most approved valentine verses and their variations. An original valentine in those days was a thing of rare appearance, and when received, was perhaps scarcely so well understood or relished as the old-established formula which had descended from generation to generation. Great, however, were the cogitations and consultations between Nehemiah and his clients, if it happened that the latter were desirous of the alteration or interpolation of a couplet or quatrain in one of these standard valentines, in order to make it bear upon some peculiar circumstance or personal feeling. When this was the case, Nehemiah, being slow of study in the art of poetry, generally requested three weeks' or a month's notice to prepare his brief, for which, moreover, he always expected a double fee.

One moonlight evening in January, our rosy dairy-maid Dorcas, after bringing home her flowing pails, and setting out the milk in the red earthenware bowls with which the dairy shelves were neatly ranged, went forth a second time, and made a temporary elopement across the fields and byeways to the residence of old Nehemiah, in order to seek his counsel and assistance in a matter that required the most anxious consideration.

Poor Dorcas had been in very low spirits for the last three months. She had ceased to sing pastoral ditties at milking-time, or to move her dairy scrubbing-brush with her wonted vivacity; she had eaten no plum pudding on Christmas day, moped during the merry-makings of new year's eve, and refused to have any thing to do with drawing king and queen, or any other of the maskings any mummings practised in the servants' hall on old Christmas night, or the feast of the kings. Dorcas was a person of a secretive disposition, and therefore did not choose to relieve her mind by talking of her disquiet; yet it was pretty generally whispered "that she was crossed in love; for her young man, as she called Peter Fenn, farmer Drake's horse driver (in Suffolk, ploughmen are always styled, *hoss* drivers,) had not been to see her for more than twelve Sundays past, so no doubt Peter kept company more with Hannah Brown, Mrs. Drake's cook and dairy-maid, which, as she was his partner, was kind of to be expected, and was more convenient for Peter than walking across so many fields and pigsties after Dorcas."

These insinuations had the effect of saddening all the festivities of that jocund season, and indeed, of rendering every thing of the kind intolerable to the mortified damsel. It was to no purpose that the other female servants strove to comfort her. Dorcas was sullen and froward with every one in the house. "She did not wish to be pitied," she said, "and begged them to mind their own business, and not trouble themselves about her affairs." Furthermore, Dorcas forbade any one to mention the faithless Peter's name in her hearing again, by which prudent step she escaped the mortification of some malicious condolences, and of listening to many aggravating reports of his attentions to her rival; but though her feminine pride, and the reserve natural to her character, induced Dorcas to carry matters off with so much independence, the pent-up grief pressed heavily at her heart, and, after brooding over the subject for some weeks, she suddenly took the resolution of proceeding to our wise man of the parish, Nehemiah, and craving his assistance in carrying her project into execution. Nehemiah was sitting alone at his old oaken table, with an hour-glass before him, spectacles on nose, reading, for the thousandth time, Sternhold and Hopkins' version of the Psalms, when he was interrupted by the appearance of this unexpected visitor.

Dorcas looked like any thing rather than a love-lorn damsel, when she entered with the bright tints of her plump round cheeks heightened by the frosty air and the haste she had used, her flaxen hair blown into dishevelled ringlets, and her gay blue eyes sparkling through her tears. Our monk-like clerk was startled into something like an unwonted note of admiration at the agreeable vision that thus suddenly broke in upon his solitary studies. "My old eyes are quite dazzled through my spectacles, Mistress Dorcas, by those rosy cheeks of yours, that look brighter than Christmas berries to-night. Oh, lauk! oh, lauk! if I were but a young man for your sake!" cried Nehemiah, holding up his lamp, and scanning his comely visitor from head to foot. Dorcas turned away with a toss of the head. "Well, well, young woman, don't be scornful," said Nehemiah; civility is always worth a smile in payment, and I dare say now you want me to do something for you that you can't do for yourself." Dorcas placed a sheet of paper, a new pen, and a silver taster, on the old oaken table before Nehemiah, with a deep blush and a heavy sigh.

Nehemiah understood a hint as well as some persons would a succinct direction. He shut his psalter, trimmed his lamp, turned his hour-glass, reached down his ink-horn, arranged the sheet of virgin paper in the proper position on the back of a superannuated leather letter-case, that had once been, like the ink-horn and oaken-table, vestry furniture—tried the nib of the pen against his thumb nail, then dipping it into the ink-horn, motioned to Dorcas to take a seat on the carved church-chest, in which he kept his Sabbath suit of rusty black and the parson's surplice—looked the damsel full in the face, and pointing significantly to the paper, required her instructions in the following laconic terms:—"Epistle or valentine?" "Valentine," ejaculated Dorcas, in a faltering voice. "Good," said Nehemiah, referring for the day of the month to Moore's old almanac, which reposed beside his psalter, "Let me see—oh, January 21st; St. Agnes to speed; lucky day, Dorcas, for love affairs." "Ah, Master Nehemiah, I wish you may be right," sobbed Dorcas; "but, indeed, I isn't at all comfortable in my own mind; no, nor I hasn't been of a long time—not even since Michaelmas, as I may say, when that good-for-nothing hussy Hannah Brown let herself into farmer Drake's house, so that she might live partner with my young man, Peter Fenn. He has never fared like the same young man since, and she do boast that he keep company with her instead of me. I should never have thought of Peter for a sweetheart, if he hadn't come a suitoring arter me Sunday arter Sunday, and last year he sent me the prettiest valentine that ever was found, tied to the latch of the neat-house door, with three sugar kisses and a pink peppermint heart in it." "What were the words?" "Oh, Mr. Nehemiah, for you to forget them beautiful words, when you was the very person that read them for me, and writ the answer to go to him on old valentine's day in reply!" "Ah, I remember something about it now," said Nehemiah; "but, really, Mistress Dorcas, I write so many valentines, that though I have them all in my head, I seem to forget which goes to which. I am getting an old man now, pretty Dorcas, just on my sixty-six; but it wasn't always so, nor I didn't at one time need to wear 'sights,'" pursued the clerk, taking off his spectacles, and wiping the glasses on a corner of his visitor's apron. "What was your valentine last year, young woman, did you say?" "Why, Master Nehemiah, I hasn't forgotten it, if you have," replied Dorcas, "for it was a proper pretty one; don't you recollect these lines,

If you are ready, I am willing,  
All the pretty birds are billing,  
And like them, we'll both be singing,  
When we set the bells a-ringing.  
Join heart, join hand, and faith with mine,  
And take me for your valentine."

"Ay, that was the one," cried Nehemiah; "sure I ought to recollect it, as you say, when it was all of my own writing; and wasn't there the picture of a hen and a few chickens drawn at the bottom by way of an emblem?" "Certainly," replied Dorcas; "and against the hen was written, 'this here hen is you, Dorcas; when you are my wife,

Like this bird that struts in pride,  
With all these chickens by her side,  
You shall be when you're my bride."

"I know all about it," said Nehemiah; and I wrote for you in answer.

I am single for your sake,  
Happy couple we should make,  
Oh, how bright the sun did shine  
When I saw my valentine."

And the emblem I limned for you in answer to his was two hearts painted with red ink, and linked together with a yellow wedding ring, to signify as if it were gold; and the posey was,

These two hearts are yours and mine,  
When I wed my valentine."

"Ah," said Dorcas, with a sigh, "that will never come to pass now, I fear, and I am going to send him a different kind of valentine this year." "Of course you will," responded Nehemiah; "it wouldn't be no kind of use sending the same thing two years running, and you have plenty of time to choose another, you know; so now, what shall it be?" "It shall begin 'The rose is red,'" said Dorcas, with great solemnity. "Good," replied the amanuensis, writing down that most approved truism of valentine poetry. "The violet's blue," pursued he mechanically, repeating the usual continuation of the sentence; but Dorcas hastily interposed with a "Pray sir, don't say any thing about violets this year." "What, then, am I to say after 'the rose is red?'" "Why," replied Dorcas, "it must be 'the leaves are green.'" "Very true, young woman," rejoined Nehemiah, placing the tip of his fore-finger against the side of his nose; "I know the one you mean; it runs thus

The rose is red, the leaves are green,  
The days are past that we have seen."

"That's a sure thing," sighed Dorcas; "well, sir, have you wrote that down?" "All in good time, young woman," said Nehemiah, who was a slow scribe, and always formed his letters in the most methodical manner, his head gently following the motion of his pen through all his evolutions, with his tongue elongated and protruding beyond his lips, and his chin screwed up all on one side, indicating dots of i's, crosses of t's, and finishing strokes to f's, by significant nods and winks; and whenever he executed a capital letter, he testified his admiration of its appearance by an appropriate grin.

Dorcas sat meantime in a state of great mental excitement, with her mouth open, and her round blue eyes full of tears, watching with intense interest the pen of her amanuensis, and shaking her foot and drumming with her fingers on the table at the same time, as a sort of ventilation to the inward travail of her spirit. "Young woman," cried Nehemiah, "that ont (wont) do!—if you go on beating the devil's tattoo on my table, how do you think I can write your valentine? I never can spell right when any body does that." "Lauk, sir," rejoined Dorcas, "I begs your pardon; I didn't know how *nerrish* you were. But how far have you got?" "Why, as far as you told me. 'The days are past that we have seen.' I s'pose you would like it to finish,

If your heart's constant, so is mine,  
And so good morrow, valentine."

"Oh, dear, Mister Nehemiah, I wish I only durst say that," cried Dorcas, putting her apron to her eyes; "but how can I, when he hasn't been to see me for twelve Sundays past, and folks do say he keeps company with that impudent hussy, Hannah Brown." "Pooh, pooh, Dorcas, for you shouldn't give ear to all that folks say." "No more I doesn't, any more than I can help," said Dorcas; "and I shouldn't believe any thing they do say, if Peter hadn't behaved so very *neglecting* to me ever since she has lived partner with him, and I want you to put a hint of that in the valentine."