

THE BELLE OF RUBYWOOD.

CHAPTER X.

"My Darling,—I may call you mine now, if I have not you I have nothing, Providence having seen fit to deprive me of all earthly possessions. Buoyed up with the hope your sweet lips gave me, I have striven and battled with fortune for the greatest prize man ever fought for.

"Man fights, but Heaven awards the victory where it wills. I have lost the battle, and as I write to you now am a ruined man. In this, which must be the darkest hour of my life but for you, I turn like a drowning man to my love, my star, my hope.

"Muriel, will you still pledge me your love? Will you still give your heart to a penniless, homeless wretch? Wretch, indeed, for asking you; but, oh, my darling! I love you so that I can not—I can not give you up without one prayer!

"I implore you to act as you think right, but, for Heaven's sweet sake, have mercy on me! Send me one word to say that I may still hope—that you will not take your love from me because Heaven has taken everything else.

"Be merciful, Muriel, and send me word to lighten the darkness which has fallen upon me. I have kept my promise; now, though I am still more unworthy of your love than ever, I implore you to keep the promise which your eyes gave mine. And yet—and yet—I know, selfish wretch that I am, that I have no right to ask you for your love or your pledge—nay, that it is cowardly, unmanly, to do so.

"Send me no word, Muriel, but let the messenger go without a sign from you that I may know you will be happy with some better man, and forget that one Wynter Leigh ever loved you or crossed your path. Farewell, dear Muriel, no longer mine; Heaven's blessing rest upon you night and day.

WYNTER LEIGH.

He dared not read the cold words after he had written them, but with lips tightly set, walked down to old Goody's and called Jaffer from the cottage.

"Jaffer," he said, "you can climb the court wall at Rubywood?" "Ees," said Jaffer, laughing with ecstatic glee.

"You are a clever fellow, Jaffer," said Leigh, with a sad smile. "Can you take this note to Miss Muriel where she sits in the court without any one seeing you give it to her?"

"I think I can, Maester Leigh," said Jaffer, with another guffaw.

Leigh gave him the note and a shilling.

"I can trust you, Jaffer," he said, "because you are quicker than people think, and you love Miss Muriel, don't you?"

"That I do," said Jaffer, "and so do you, don't you, Maester Leigh?"

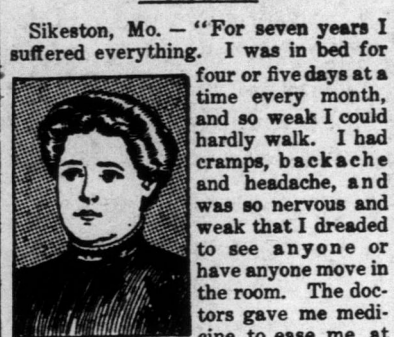
And Jaffer roared with merriment.

"Aye," said Leigh solemnly. "There do run off. Remember, you are to take the note without any one seeing you, and you are to run back to me and tell me if Miss Muriel says anything to you—word for word, Jaffer—and then there will be another shilling for you."

Jaffer laughed more heartily than before, seized the note, secured it in some complicated corner of his fustian coat, and looking stily up the lane to see if the coast was clear, darted off.

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Leigh looked after him with a fast-beating heart.

"Have I said farewell to all the world holds dear to me? If so, I have said farewell to hope. I love her with all my heart—all my life—and if I have lost her, life is over for me. What will she say? Will she send the answer I was craven enough to implore her? Oh, shame on me! I ought to have crept out of the world rather than ask her for her love—a penniless adventurer—homeless, friendless! Ah, but I love her so—I love her so! And that is where love makes us weak! Will she send the word? Will she send me a note?"

Asking himself this one question, he passed up and down the lane, each moment growing more excited and feverish. The boy seemed to have been gone hours already, though Leigh knew that he could not yet have reached Rubywood.

Ages seemed to pass, and then he saw Jaffer's long, awkward figure swinging across the fields on a jog trot.

Jaffer came on and halted before him, breathless, but chucking with satisfaction.

pierced it till the blood ran down. "Nothing!" he said hoarsely. "Think, Jaffer! Not a word!"

"Not a word," said Jaffer, laughing, but rather dimly. "I asked her as if so be as there wasn't any message, and she shook her head like this and never said a word."

Wynter Leigh turned his face up to the sky and stood in the blazing sun like a man turned to stone, then with a slow movement, as of one being dead brought back, with pain, to life, walked away, leaving Jaffer looking after and laughing heartily.

Next day at noon Mr. Heatherbridge knocked at the door of Farmer Holt's small office, and without waiting for permission to enter, burst in.

"Alfred," exclaimed Farmer Holt, "what's happened?"

"Haven't you heard?" said Mr. Heatherbridge eagerly.

"What should I ask for, then?" asked the farmer, who detested suspense of any kind.

"Indeed, no," assented the young man, with a little less exultation.

"Wynter Leigh has disappeared. Left the place like a—thief. And they say that the cattle are down with the new disease, and that the balliffs are in at the Holme."

Having solemnly pronounced that Mr. Wynter Leigh's troubles had been vouchsafed him in the shape of a special judgment, Farmer Holt asked himself the question whether it would be better to impart the news of the young man's disappearance to obdurate Muriel or keep her in ignorance of it until Mr. Leigh had time to get quite out of the country.

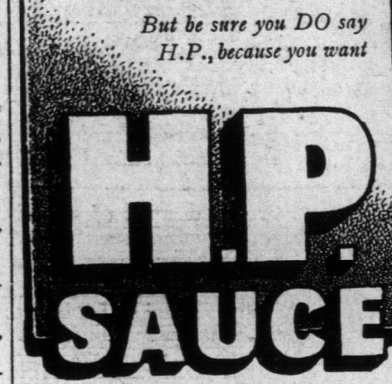
Alfred Heatherbridge thought for a moment—he was very anxious and embarrassed, and could not look the farmer in the face—then said:

"Tell her at once, sir. Muriel's too sensible a girl to give anything else in the world, excepting hard cash and good land, fearing that he had given her her deathblow; but ere he could touch her she put up her hand to keep him off and said firmly:

"I don't understand, but I know that he has done nothing wrong." "Lass, you're a fool!" he said. "Never did I think that a Holt would be such poor blood as to fling stones after such a weak-witted ne'er-do-well as that as has given thee the slip. Done wrong! It's wrong enough, I think, to borrow money ye can't pay and then cut from the balliffs."

"Gone!" breathed Muriel. (To be continued.)

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Muriel, who rose from her seat by the window, and stood pale and tremulous, but inwardly firm and determined.

"You've brought your pigs to a fine market, young lady. This comes of setting your own father—a fond old fool—at defiance. It serves you right, but I don't say that I am not sorry, my lass, for it stands to reason that girls running shorter o' brains than men, and being taken with queerer fancies, takes it to heart when things run crossways for 'em."

Muriel looked up paler than ever.

"What has happened, father?" she asked, in a low voice.

The farmer looked her full in the eyes.

"Young Leigh's gone all wrong and fled the place."

Muriel sank into the chair, and for the moment the father, who loved her better than he loved anything else in the world, excepting hard cash and good land, feared that he had given her her deathblow; but ere he could touch her she put up her hand to keep him off and said firmly:

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