

# THE BELLE OF RUBYWOOD.

CHAPTER IX.  
Away went Mr. Heatherbridge, and the farmer, left alone, sat and touched up his plan, chuckling. His daughter would be mistress of the Howe, the squire's wife! He would have the much and long-coveted corner! Was there ever such a happy old man in the world?

The door opened and Mr. Heatherbridge stood on the raised step, looking very pale and agitated. The farmer took his pipe from his mouth and stared at him.

"What ails thee, lad?" he gasped. "Can't you speak, man? What does she say? She'll marry you and thank you?"

"No," said Mr. Heatherbridge hoarsely, shaking his head. Your daughter refuses me, Farmer Holt, and says 'No' and 'Never!'"

The farmer rose with a huge imprecation. "Muriel!" he shouted. Muriel came forward, pale and trembling, hot with a light in her eye that was lighted there by love's faith.

"Come here, my lass," said the farmer, slowly and sternly, and he took her small, cold hand. "Squire Heatherbridge, yonder, does you and me the honor to ask you to be his wife. What do you say, my lass?"

"Oh, father! father!" pleaded the poor girl, trying to hide her face against his stubborn shoulder.

But the old man drew away from her and stared pitilessly before him. "What do you say, I ask?"

"No," said Muriel. "I cannot—cannot say yes!"

Young Heatherbridge turned towards the door and opened it.

"Go from my sight!" said the farmer sternly, raising his hand and pointing to the passage door, and Muriel with bent head and trembling feet obeyed.

CHAPTER IX.  
"Go from my sight!" were the first harsh words poor Muriel had ever received from her father, and their anger and bitterness simply overwhelmed her.

Mr. Leigh, who generally saw her from a distance, tripping light-heartedly down to the meadow, and was cheered and lightened up for the day by the sight, missed her the next morning, and the next. Then he grew alarmed and repaired to Goody's cottage.

"Was Miss Holt ill?"

When he asked, Jaffer threw back his head and laughed.

"What are you laughing at, Jaffer?" asked Leigh, more anxious than before, for it was well known that Jaffer always laughed heartiest at the moment of sorrowful events.

"He! he!" said Jaffer; "Miss Muriel—a bad girl, the farmer he blows her up—blows her up like a bellows in the room upstairs, and she never came down again."

This was all that could be got, and Leigh, troubled and distressed, was in to march off and see to his cows. Soon after tidings reached him through a more reliable source. Oh, William was trudging down the avenue shaking his head.

"What's the matter, Will?" asked Leigh, who knew every shifting expression on the weather-beaten face. Anything wrong with the sheep?"

"No, Maester Wynter," replied the old man. "The sheep be all right. Heaven be praised; but I've just seen that Miss Muriel—bless her pretty face—is sadly-like, and keeps 'her room.'"

"Where did you hear that?" asked Leigh, leaning on his stick, and turning pale and red alternately.

"At 'er farm; I met 'er farmer coming through the yard like a turkey-cock, all coom-like. What's the matter with the maester?" says I. "Oh," says Will Tweed, "he be in a tantrum over Miss Muriel, as be ill indoors."

Leigh strode off without a word, talking straight for Rubywood, and did not proceed a couple of hundred yards before he saw the farmer himself, who certainly justified his queer smile.

"Good morning, sir," said Wynter cordially, and striving to conceal his anxiety he felt.

"Good morning," said the farmer. "I was coming up to Rubywood, Wynter Leigh, 'to inquire after Miss Holt; I trust she is not very ill?"

Something in his tone, the ring of almost feverish eagerness and earnestness, struck the farmer, and the moment rendered him speechless. Was this young fellow this new comer, the cause of his hitherto faultful daughter's disobedience, an ally? He looked at the handsome earnest face, and his own grew suspicious and dark.

"My daughter's well, Mr. Leigh, and I'm obliged to you," he said, eyeing him keenly; "though the gossips seem to have laid her on a sick bed. She's well, sir—but I'm not sorry to see you, Mr. Leigh; I've wanted to ask you a question or two for some day, but you're a regular will-o'-the-wisp, are and there, and over the land ho!"



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whether you're going in for cattle heavier still. I daresay you may think it an impertinent question—young men are more uppish now than they used to be in my day—and wonder what business it is of mine."

"Indeed, no," said Mr. Leigh; "I am only honored by your interest in my affairs, Mr. Holt."

"Well, I'll tell you why I ask. You see that avenue, Mr. Leigh? Unfortunately, that's common property between us two, but I take a pride in that avenue, sir; my father did before me, and his father before him, and I should like to know if you think of driving three or four hundred head of cattle up and down that avenue, because if so—"

He stopped, very red, very hot, and as his enemies might have said, looking very pig-headed.

Wynter Leigh colored for an instant. No man had ever spoken to him before like this in his life. He looked hard at the old farmer, then quietly, slowly and earnestly said: "Farmer Holt, I answer your question as candidly as it was pronounced. I do not intend purchasing any more cattle, simply because I have no further capital with which to do it; but I had I still should refrain from doing so because I would sacrifice more than you can imagine to gain your good will and esteem. As to the avenue, if any other road can be made by which the cattle can reach pasture, it shall be made, and in return for so small a matter I venture to do as a favor."

"What's that?" asked the farmer not at all propitiated by the generous offer.

"Only this," said Leigh, "that there be any other matter which may give you pain or annoyance, in which I can relieve, that you will instantly inform me of it. I am a bachelor so far as sociability goes. Mr. Holt, but I am heartily anxious to prove myself a good one by seizing any opportunity of removing anything on the farm or about it that may be inconvenient to you or give you trouble."

The farmer, taking all this as confirmation of his suspicion, grasped his stick and nodded grimly.

"Oh, I thank you, but I am not man to take advantage of fine words. I wish you good morning, Mr. Leigh, and, with a touch of his broad-brimmed hat, he trudged off.

Leigh, with a pained look on his earnest face, turned and strode towards the Holme.

Muriel, his beautiful, true-hearted Muriel, was not ill; that was a great relief to him, but there was something wrong, nevertheless, and as he stood on, wondering what it could be, he heard a horse's tramp, looked up and solved the problem in a moment. Before him was Mr. Heatherbridge's grey mare, and on her was the young squire himself, with a gloomy bow and downcast eyes.

Leigh gave him good morning, quietly. Mr. Heatherbridge started from his reverie, saw whence the salutation proceeded, and with an angry flush put the mare to a trot and rode by without any response.

"So," he said, "my darling! This is the mystery, is it? My friend would carry off by force of arms, and the old man would help him by force of will. Poor Muriel! also poor Wynter, too, for how can my sweet darling have strength enough to resist her father and the wealthy squire?"

Then he entered his comfortable house, made a pretense of eating his solitary meal, and, striding up an- low the worm-eaten, but still polished floor, thought over his love.

Absence makes the heart grow fonder, if true love has once thrilled it, and Wynter Leigh's heart beat with the truest love man ever felt for the beautiful girl who had crept into its aching void, and filled it with sweetness and consolation.

"I have read of love," he muttered, "and have laughed as I have read. Could such heartburnings, such longings, such intolerable pain at separation be natural? Ah! I endure them all now, and I know that love such as I feel can not be over-painted; it is indescribable. Six months, I said—it seems an age, an intolerably eternity. Six months! It will be harvest; the land is turning one better than I expected. I will keep my promise; she Leigths do not break faith though their hearts may break under the restraint. With the corn in, and all things, please Heaven, prospering, I

"I'm always at home in the evening," said Leigh quietly, adding, for naturally he wished to conciliate the man he desired for a father-in-law, "and I would have waited on you, Mr. Holt, had I known you wished to see me."

This simple piece of courtesy heightened the farmer's suspicion.

"Hem!" he said. "Well, I was going to ask you about the cattle; you're purchasing pretty heavy, Mr. Leigh."

"Rather!" said Leigh, and his heart beat quickly. Could this be a favorable chance to show the farmer a glimpse of his hope.

"Rather!" repeated the farmer. "We don't call a hundred head 'rather' down South here, though you may think nothing of it up North, Mr. Leigh. What I wanted to know is,

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Get some now, this minute, and forever rid yourself of stomach trouble and Indigestion.

will go and beg for her—aye, beg for her as the starving man begs for his life."

The resolve made, he would keep it out it was hard to be firm.

In the first place, he saw nothing of Muriel—for a very good reason. Farmer Holt, having taken his suddenly formed suspicion to his heavy- ad tramped off straight from Leigh and turned the key in Muriel's door, so that she was a prisoner, and could see no more of her lover than a distant view of his stalwart figure through the latticed window, and even that scarcely for her tears.

Secondly, Leigh made the discovery that the attitude of those about him had changed most suddenly and strangely. Squire Heatherbridge had cut him on the road, and now his own men showed disinclination to work for him. Three men came up and gave him notice early in the morning following that of his meeting with the farmer. Before noon four others had followed suit.

"What have you to complain of, my men?" he asked. "Is it more money you want?"

"No, Maester Leigh," stammered the spokesman.

"Have you found me so hard a master that my service is unendurable?" said Leigh sternly.

The men shook their heads and murmured denial in concert.

"What is it, then?" asked the master, eyeing them curiously and keenly.

"Well, you see sir," said the spokesman, shifting about uneasily and twisting his hat. "We be all tenants of the young squire's, and when he's got a lot o' work and he wants hands, why, we see, we be bound to go wheresoever we do happen to be."

(To be continued.)

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(To be continued.)



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