"Old House"

Or, Dulcie's Confession

CHAPTER V.—(Continued).

"Yes, everything that went before is cancelled—naturally," she agreed.

"Naturally. Only we cannot help remembering some things, can we?"

"I do not remember anything," replied Dulcie with spirit.

"I dare say I shall forget, too—when I have another girl to kiss!"

"You are exceedingly rude!"

"I am," he replied. "But truth will out."

Herriott leaned easily against a tree, and looked at Dulcie coolly and deliberately.

"I suppose," said the girl, "you kiss every girl you go for walks with?"

"A good many of them," he allowed. "Of course there are some who do not permit that sort of thing, but on the whole I must confess——"

He broke off, smiling, and his expression made Dulcie furious.

"You boast of your conquests," she said scornfully.

"Nothing of the sort," he retorted. "But what is the use of either of us pretending to be what we are not? You know we fancied we were in love with each other a few weeks ago."

"I thought you were a gentleman!" cried Dulcie with flaming cheeks.

"And I thought you were a charming little girl," he replied, smiling.

"Both of us were evidently mistaken."

Herriott bowed.

"Now, as we have told each other what we think, shall we say good-bye or shall I pretend I am Belturbet?" he asked.

"You are beneath contempt!" Dulcie assured him. "I don't care whether you go or stay!"

She did not move, however, and Herriott's expression changed.

"Let us sit down and argue it out," he proposed amiably.

They seated themselves accordingly on a fallen tree, and quarrelled in an agreeable manner for the greater part of an hour.

"I suppose I had better do the thing thoroughly, and see you home," said Jim, when Dulcie rose to go, and as she did not take any notice of the remark he accompanied her to Blue Posts.

She did not tell Primrose that she had not seen Belturbet, but acknowledged, to account for her pink cheeks and shining eyes, that she had not enjoyed herself so much since the garden-party! It was true that Herriott had been exceedingly rude to her, and said unkind things, yet she could soon bring a satisfactory look into his face and a light to his eyes, while all her efforts left Belturbet unmoved.

"Arthur is as cold and unfeeling as a stone!" she murmured impatiently. "It is like sitting with an icicle when I am with him. And dull! Heaven only knows how dull it is!"

The girl became so irritable that Primrose wondered if she had quarrelled with Belturbet.

Three days later Herriott walked boldly to the front door of Blue Posts, rang the bell, and inquired if Miss Dulcie was at home. The small servant said in a frightened voice that she would see, and presently Dulcie came down the stairs. Jim produced a note from Belturbet, which Dulcie read.

"I suppose you know what it says?" she asked.

"I don't know how it begins or ends," replied Heriott, smiling, "but I know Belturbet has to go to London to-morrow for a few days—on urgent business. He hasn't a monopoly of the woods, you know," he added.

Dulcie held her head very high.

"Indeed?" she said.

"Yes," he retorted. "Indeed. I say, can I see Miss Primrose?"

"She is very tired—I am afraid not."

'Give her my love, then!" said Heriott. "Good-bye!"

He lifted his hat and hurried away. Dulcie bit her lips. She was longing for some one with whom to talk. Primrose—as usual—was tired, pale, and sad, while old Martha was so cross and insolent that life at Blue Posts was very unattractive. Even the thought of the time when she would be free from it all failed to console her. It was not surprising, therefore, that she wandered in her favorite woods the next day where she encountered Heriott, whose eyes twinkled as he saw her coming.

They spent a delightful hour, laughing and talking nonsense, and as Jim strode back to Old House he whistled and salved his conscience with many assurances of Dulcie's indifference to his friend.

"It is only the place she likes, not the man. 'All's fair in love and war,' and if Arthur Belturbet is in love with her, I'll eat my hat!"

He realized, however, that to make love to the promised wife of his oldest friend was not a very honorable proceeding, no matter if there were extenuating circumstances, and he did not feel very comfortable about it. He would have felt even less at ease had he known that Philippa took the trouble one day to follow him, and that she saw him sitting with Dulcie on the trunk of a fallen tree.

Miss Heriott wondered how she could turn the present imbroglio to her own account. It seemed rather difficult without betraying her brother, and although Philippa would have betrayed Dulcie a hundred times without the slightest compunction, yet with Jim it was a different matter.

There seemed nothing to be done before Belturbet's return, which came unexpectedly one afternoon half-an-hour after the receipt of the telegram announcing it. Jim was out. Philippa met Belturbet, and welcomed him cordially.

"Where is Jim?" he asked.

"He went for a walk—towards Stalstead, I think," she replied, knowing that Stalstead was in the opposite direction to the woods.

"I will go and meet him," he said, but Philippa, fearing that he might encounter Jim and Dulcie, managed to detain him until past six o'clock.

Heriott did not return, however, and Belturbet declared again that he would go and look for him.

Daylight was fading before he left Old House, for September was nearly at an end. He did not meet his friend, so thought he would take a short cut through the woods, call at Blue Posts, and see Dulcie for a minutes. His letters to her had not been numerous, for her perfunctory little notes beginning "My dearest Arthur," and ending "Yours affectionately, Dulcie," had not made him feel any desire to write to her at length.

Belturbet soon reached the woods, and as he was walking along the paths, now carpeted with newly-fallen leaves, he saw in the distance a man and woman walking arm-in-arm. The light had waned so much that he could not distinguish who they were, but seeing them engrossed in each other he considerately slackened his pace in order not to overtake them. They appeared, however, to have heard his footsteps, for they vanished into a side path, and smiling to himself he continued his way.

Calling at Blue Posts he saw Primrose, who told him that Dulcie was lying down in her room with a very bad headache. Belturbet sent a polite message of sympathy, and inquired after Mr. Carwardine.

"I am afraid he is worse," said Primrose sadly, her gray eyes filling with tears, because Belturbet's voice was so kind, and she was unstrung, weary of her father's harsh tones, Martha's insolence, and Dulcie's alternate fits of depression and childish glee.

Belturbet longed to say something consoling, but could find no words—at least no words he dared utter. He became stiffly polite, said he hoped Dulcie would be well enough to see him the next day and walked quickly away with a pang at his heart. The girl's pallor and the tears in her eyes made him long to take her in his arms and comfort her.

"Oh, what a fool I have been!" he told himself angrily. "What a blind fool!"

He strode back through the woods like a man at war with everything about him.

CHAPTER VI.

Later that evening, while Belturbet and Heriott were playing a desultory game of billiards, Dulcie, with flushed cheeks, was walking rapidly about her room. She smiled at the recollection of how she had hidden in the woods with Heriott while Belturbet had walked past them, and how she had run nearly all the way to Blue Posts in order to reach home before Belturbet, had rushed to her room, breathlessly told Primrose to say she had a headache if Belturbet called, and then lay on her bed convulsed with laughter, while Primrose, considerably puzzled, did her bidding.

It really had been a delightful joke, but somehow a few hours later the affair did not appear in quite such a roseate light. Supposing Arthur Belturbet had recognized her and Jim in the woods and had seen their lover-like attitude, what would happen?

No doubt, if Arthur threw her over, there was Jim; but he had no money, not a halfpenny, and what was the use of marrying a penniless suitor? Besides, there was something about Jim she could not quite understand. Arthur, as a husband, she felt, would be always polite and considerate, even if he did not care very much for her—but Jim? Jim she fancied might be the reverse of polite if he were crossed. Sometimes she almost believed he did not think very highly of her.

"Perhaps," she told herself with a little sneer, "he doesn't think an engaged girl ought to let another man make love to her—anyhow, if I am in the wrong, so is he."

It will be seen that her thoughts were not altogether reassuring, and when Primrose tapped gently at her door, she said "Come in," very ungraciously, for she did not want to explain why she had feigned a headache in order to avoid Belturbet.

Heriott had promised to send her a note in the morning telling her if they had been recognised.

Primrose's thoughts, however, were not of Dulcie at all; and she had not the least suspicion that her sister was meeting Heriott every afternoon. Her father's illness occupied all her time, and she had resolutely thrust all other affairs into the background. What would happen to her when Dulcie married Belturbet would have to be decided another time.

But something had occurred that blanched her cheeks and shaken her nerves. Even Dulcie's eyes were quick to see the unhappiness in her sister's face.

"What is the matter?" she asked. "Is father worse?"

"No—he has been better all to-day," replied Primrose, "but Martha must have been telling tales of us again, for when I took in his tea, he commenced to find fault and grumble. I did not answer, because I feel so sorry for him lying there, with his brain so active and his body helpless. He began with the usual complaint that we were lazy, useless, and good for nothing."

"Of course," snapped Dulcie.

"And then," said Primrose slowly, "he said that we should pay for it some day, as he didn't intend to leave us his money."

"His money, indeed!" cried Dulcie, hotly. "It was our mother's money—not a penny belongs to him rightly."

"Yes, I know," answered Primrose. "But he calls it his now. He said that we should not touch a penny of it, as he has left it all to charity, except a legacy to Martha for the care she has taken of him, and fifty pounds a year to each of us. 'It will just keep you from starving,' he said, 'and that's all I mean to do for you.' "

"He's a wicked old villain!" Dulcie declared passionately. "I don't believe the law would let him do such a thing."

"He can do what he likes with his own," was the weary reply, "only it is rather hard on us."

"Poor old Prim!" said Dulcie compassionately. "But it really doesn't matter; you must live with me when I am married."

"Do you know, Dulcie, I believe father is really very rich, for our mother had a large fortune, and since her death father cannot have spent it all. It seems unjust that he should treat us so very unfairly."

"It is horribly wicked! If we were rich we could live where we liked, and—and marry or not, as we pleased."

Dulcie's expression changed, as if a new thought had occurred to her.

"Yes," she murmured; "we could marry or not, as we pleased."

"I wasn't thinking of marrying, but of other things," said Primrose.

Dulcie nodded.

"I know," she said absently.

Her brain was busy with a new train of thought. It had occurred to her that if she were a rich woman, she need not marry either Arthur Belturbet or Jim Heriott, but—she could choose whom she liked! With her youth and beauty—for she was well aware of the latter—she might marry any one, become a lady of title perhaps, as many girls did. Why should she have to marry before she had seen the world?

She revolved this new idea slowly in her mind, and the longer she thought of it, the more it appealed to her. Could nothing be done to prevent the money which had been their mother's passing into other hands?

" 'Where there's a will, there's a way,' " she thought, and the word "will" flashed into prominence. "A Will!" That was it!

Their father must have made a Will. If she could only find it and see if he had really carried out his threat! Had he made a Will recently, so that on his death his money would not pass to Primrose and herself?

Dulcie woke early the next day, and as soon as she was dressed, slipped out of the house into the misty September morning air. She walked a little way down the road to a place in the hedge which she and Heriott had converted into a private letter-box. Between the flat stones which lay among a tangled growth of grass, quite of sight, was a sheet of paper, and on it was written: "All safe." There was no date or signature. Dulcie folded the paper carefully and put it in her dress. She stood irresolute for some minutes, then took out the piece of paper again, found a pencil, and wrote below the words already there: "Invalid worse; impossible to leave the house."

"There!" she murmured. "Now he will understand that I cannot meet him to-day."

She placed the sheet of paper between the two stones, and returned to Blue Posts.

About twelve o'clock, Arthur Belturbet called. Dulcie was watching at an upstairs window for him, and ran down quickly to prevent him knocking or ringing at the front door, so that Martha should not see him and report to Mr. Carwardine that he had called.

"I cannot ask you in," she said. "But I can come out for a little time, if you like."

Belturbet said that he would be pleased, and inquired after Primrose.

"She is quite well, thank you," replied Dulcie, glancing at him, and thinking it was a pity he did not hold himself upright; this morning his slight stoop seemed accentuated, and his face thinner and paler.

"You don't look very well," she remarked cheerfully.

"Don't I?" he asked in surprise. "I feel very fit."

"Did you have a nice time in London?"

"I should not call it exactly 'nice.' I was with my solicitors most of the time."

Dulcie nodded and then noticing his depression she exerted herself to entertain and amuse him.

Belturbet smiled at her sallies, but his remarks were few and often wide of the point, and when Dulcie said it was time for her to return, he appeared relieved.

"Good-bye, Arthur!" she said, mischievously. "You are not in a mood for caresses, so I won't kiss you!"

She waved her hand and ran away laughing.

"She is quite right," thought Belturbet, and as he walked back to the Old House his reflections were not those of a happily-engaged man.

Dulcie hummed gaily as she strolled through the garden.

"I don't mind!" she said. "If he doesn't care for me, neither do I for him, so we are quits. And dull! Could any one be duller than Arthur Belturbet? What on earth shall I do this afternoon? I wonder if Jim has seen my note?"

She went to the letter-box between the stones. The piece of paper was there, but beneath the pencilled words, a sentence had been written. It ran as follows: "Six-thirty. Stone Gap."

Dulcie smiled. Jim wanted to see her if Arthur did not. She would meet him this evening—but for the last time. It was not safe, with Belturbet home, yet it would be far more exciting than going for a silent walk with her "lover."

As dusk was gathering, Dulcie slipped on a long dark coat, a close cap, and stole out of the house. She knew where Heriott meant her to go. An old stone wall ran through a part of the woods, and one portion of it, broken down and dilapidated, was known as Stone Gap. Heriott was waiting for her, and as she came towards him with a sunny smile, feelings which he had hitherto kept within bounds refused to be repressed any longer. He strode towards her, caught her in his arms, and kissed her four or five times.

Taken by surprise, it was some moments before the girl realized what was happening, and then she freed herself from his embrace.

"How dare you!" she cried furiously. "How dare you!"

"I love you, Dulcie, that's why I dare."

"If you touch me I will never speak to you again!"

"I said something very much like that to you once," Heriott assured her, looking at her intently, "but it did not make much difference. I love you too much."

"Well, I don't love you!" retorted Dulcie angrily. "How dare you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Why, kiss me!"

"Don't be silly!" replied Heriott, who had got himself in hand again. "Men always kiss girls when they are in love with them."

He felt a trifle ashamed of himself, but Dulcie, who found this sort of conversation much more to her taste than anything Arthur Belturbet had ever afforded, regarded him with friendly eyes.

"Can't you find somewhere for me to sit?" she asked coolly.

Heriott found a place on the stone wall where they could sit side by side, and as it was not very safe, he slipped an arm round her waist, to prevent her falling.

"It is quite unnecessary," she remonstrated.

"Yes, but it is nice," he answered.

Dulcie sighed contentedly. Heriott was really much nicer than Arthur. At this moment he kissed her again. The pretty flower-like face so close to him was more than he could resist.

"You really must not behave like this!" protested Dulcie.

"I must," he insisted.

Dulcie became slightly alarmed.

"You must not," she said more decidedly. "You seem to forget that I am engaged to Mr. Belturbet."

"You may be," replied Heriott, "but you are going to marry me."

Dulcie made an attempt to escape, but he held her tightly.

"Look here, darling, you have only been playing with Belturbet and me, but you must be serious now, for I am in earnest. You can't care a scrap for him or you wouldn't have met me here every day whilst he has been in London." Dulcie struggled again, but the arm round her waist held her firmly. "What you have to do now," continued Jim, "is to give Belturbet his conge, and then we will get married. Of course, I know I am not as good a match as he, but, after all, love must come first."

He kissed her again with such assurance that Dulcie grew really frightened.

(To be continued.)

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And Emperors totter 'neath their divine right;
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THE DREAM.

(To an Old Englishman).

By Nina Randall.

Home is to him a clinging memory—
He dreams, while sleeping in his chair, that he
Down flings himself to kiss the blessed sod
That dearer seems to him than aught, save God.
Forgotten are all later loves and vows,
He plucks a primrose 'neath the greening boughs,
Or sits 'mid bluebells on a grassy knoll
And harkens to the old, old church bell toll,
"Ding-dong." How many a tale from days of yore!
Those wonderful enchanted days before
Adventure led him far by land and sea!
How strong were then his arms, how full his heart of glee!
And now his youth seems wafted back again,
From hedges in a hawthorne-blossomed lane;
And the same roses bloom, and welcome give
Back to the sheltering walls where he did live,
He thrills with joy at sound of skylark's song,
Gazes, until the tiny speck among
The cloud is lost; and when it disappears
He wakes to find his lashes wet with tears.

—In the Canadian Magazine for August.

Fair Proposition.

She—Papa preaches on "Love one another" this evening. Shall we go and hear him?"

Her Beau—No, let's stay at home and practice what he's preaching.

A DISTINCTIVE COW.

Sandwiched in among ordinary yields there are occasional extraordinary yields that make glad the heart of the good cow's owner because he has taken the trouble to record her actual production. While the ordinary cows in July were giving their meagre doles of seven hundred or six hundred lbs. of milk and twenty-four or twenty lbs. of fat, a grade cow in Quebec gave 1,279 lbs. of milk, testing 5.8, yielding 74 lbs. of fat.

A cow like that is surely accomplishing something. In six months of such work she would give as food for humanity more digestible nutrients than would be afforded by five average dressed steers. She is giving far more back from the energy contained in her food than the best skilled engineer can obtain from a quadruple expansion engine for the fuel consumed.

It pays to feed good cows well; it also pays any farmer to find out, by keeping records of each cow, just what each produces. In the ordinary way, the above excellent cow would be lumped in with the "average" of the district, while she really deserves a distinct niche to herself in the hall of fame. Perhaps dairy records will discover some distinctive cows in your herd. Build your herd of selected individuals.—C.F.W.

A Nature Faker.

Tommy—Why do ducks dive?

Harp—Guess they must want to liquidate their bills.

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