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VANITY HARDWARE.

By ALAN MUIR.

CHAPTER IX.

ALL FOR HER.

A morning or two later a letter came to Willie Snow addressed in a woman's writing. The hand was strange, and Willie's mind was full of his sweetheart, so before he opened the envelope his thoughts flew to her. With trembling fingers he drew forth a little pink sheet, which emitted a whiff of heliotrope; he saw that the writing was genteel; and then read the short, sweet note:

"If you like to meet me this evening, one hour earlier than usual, you may. Of course this is private. Don't come unless you really wish.—Yours, S. H."

"P. S.—You had better come in any case, but you need not stay."

Poor Willie had no head for business that day. His brain was swarming with a multitude of delightful ideas; but still in the few calmer intervals that relieved his excitement he pondered what I had told him—it was of the essence of Willie's character not to expect any one his loved. Of Vanity he could think no evil. Assuring himself, however, that she must be in some extraordinary position, he resolved to be cautious.

"For her sake," thought Willie "just as much as for my own."

His foolish heart beat high as he repeated, I suppose for the hundredth time, that his might be the hand which would extricate beautiful Vanity from this unknown difficulty, which he persisted in believing was not dishonorable. And so, full of hopes and dreams, he walked up to their meeting place.

To Willie this interview was of supreme importance, and his mind was on edge with expectation. Vanity stood waiting at the gate as usual, and he remarked that she was dressed with particular care, and, so far as attire went, looked her best. They shook hands nervously. Willie, in dread of the opening of the conversation, had prepared a question beforehand which he now put with an air of gayety.

"Why does Miss Vanity Hardware sign her notes S. H.?"

"Because Miss Vanity is not Miss Vanity; Miss Vanity is Miss Susan." This odd answer she made pretty and witty with her airs.

"Then," said Willie, "why did she ever get such a name?"

"Well, you see," replied Susan Hardware, "she was so good, sir, and so demure, and so unconscious of her own merits, and blushed so, sir, when spoken to, that at first they called her Miss Modesty."

"Ah," said Willie, "that was a pretty name!"

"Quite so, sir. But, as time went on, the poor thing grew up, and changed for the worse, and liked pretty gowns and Paris gloves and ribbons, and she looked people straight in the face; then they called her Vanity."

All this was said with an air of frivolity, and yet she did not seem in a light mood after all; more as if she were used to jest even when sick at heart.

"And who," asked Willie, "gave you all these names?"

"Oh, my godfathers and godmothers. Such nice, respectable people."

"Seriously," Willie said, "who called you Vanity?"

Here the young woman, mindful of the double or treble part which it suited her schemes to play, gathered her face into a look of sorrow and scorn.

"People who know the meaning of evil names. Give me a new name, Willie."

Swing! from rakish jest to tearful earnestness in a second. Am I not right? Actress—actress from her lips chock to her heart's core! Of course I tell the tale as it was told to me, and write down gravely, "melting voice," "humid eyes," and all the rest of it. Do I believe she felt it? I believe in Mr. Punch's fatherly love when he is rocking his baby to sleep! No. I repeat, the woman was an actress; and actress is that actress does.

She repeated in the sweetest tone:

"Give me a new name, Willie."

And the lad's head went the way his heart had gone.

"What shall I call you? Beauty, Love, Truth? Anything bright, anything good?"

She smiled, then put the matter aside, and spoke seriously.

"I sent for you because I have a great deal to say. I have been thinking over our last conversation. Can you stay a long time this evening?"

Of course her time was his, at which she nodded her satisfaction. Then, resting one arm on the gate, she began, in the same earnest, self-collected voice:

"Do you really love me?"

"I do," Willie replied, not making any protestation, but speaking with a seriousness like her own.

"Why do you love me? You know nothing about me."

"Your beauty made me."

"No other reason—only my beauty?"

"Your beauty made me love yourself. I love you now, not it."

"Do you really believe," she went on, with a composure that signified careful thought, "that you love me enough to marry me, and live with me all your life long?"

"I do," Willie said, as a man says "I will" in the marriage service.

"And you consider me the woman that would make you happiest?"

"Happier!" Willie answered, with a deep, reverent sigh—"happier than tongue can tell."

"Take me, Willie," she said. "I am yours; yours this hour and evermore."

She looked grand in her loveliness. Resolution was in her face; where every feature seemed compact with the intensity of a great purpose. Inspiration shone in her eyes, as if the light of a noble future were reflected there. Force of character was expressed in the ring of her voice. A queen! a queen! she seemed to stand beside him, a docile, amiable youth.

"Oh, Vanity!" he cried, in an almost girlish ecstasy, "how happy you have made me!"

He tried to take her hand, but—

"Don't," she said, putting him back. "We are not making love. We are talking about something that will affect our whole lives. When this is settled, make love if you like."

She slid one glance of momentary playfulness at him. "Willie," she continued, resuming her gravity, "I will change the whole course of my life for you. True, it will be no great sacrifice"—she shook her head—"for, be the sacrifice great or little, I make it. Can you do so much for me? Can you give up your country and all your prospects in England, all for me?"

"If necessary, I can; but will that be needed?" The lad spoke with his own frank-spirited air.

"Judge for yourself. Now, I shall know whether you love me from your heart or not."

That she threw a spell over Willie was certain. Are there, I wonder, people born with the power of drawing others to themselves—not everybody or anybody, but particular persons—having some inborn peculiarity which attracts certain select spirits? Willie was cool enough with other girls. No doubt other young men would have been cool enough with Vanity. Just as you may draw a magnet over a heap of copper parings without moving them, while a chip of steel will obey its own nature and fly up instantly; Vanity had a kind of magnetic influence over her lover.

"First," she said, "you must put your whole trust in me. There must be no reserve. At once and forever you must believe that I am all a woman ought to be. As you think me, such shall I be." She spoke like one who saw the future roll out before her clearly.

"Trust me, Willie—trust me, whatever the cruel voices say!"

"Trust you!" exclaimed Willie, almost impatiently; "why, to love is to trust."

"But do you love me? Truly! I am not sure. If you go on trusting me, you must know all my dark doubts about my character. If you fly to me and say, 'Explain,' my reply will be, 'I cannot explain.' Will you trust me?"

"I will trust you."

"It must be trust that is more than trust. In me, thus surrounded with doubts—horrid doubts—you, my poor boy, must put a faith such as few men would put in the most tried friend. Questions may be asked concerning me which, were they asked concerning a loved and loyal wife, might drive a brave husband to frenzy. What then, Willie?"

Willie's eyes were set on the ground. His face was become like one in a trance, and replied:

"I will trust you still."

A sort of natural eloquence, springing from her own excitement, now made her speech more impressive than ever.

"Willie, you must let me blindfold you, and guide you whither I will. And while I lead you along the unseen way, voices will cry, 'Madman! Imbecile! Tear the bandage from your eyes.' Look what woman leads you! Look to what a precipice her false and cruel hand is guiding your steps!' What then, Willie?"

What then? Why, the mechanical response of a man whose sense and reason were in captivity. And, after Cleopatra and Anthony, who blames my inexperienced lad?

"You shall blindfold me! You shall guide me!"

"If you listen to the voices—if you lose faith in me—our love dies in an hour. Never more, I may turn out all they would have you believe I am. But if you trust me blindly—trust me fully—at last I shall open your eyes, and you shall see."

In the full stream of her impetuous utterance she stopped suddenly.

Then the wondering boy asked:

"What shall I see?"

"A woman you have rescued from infamy and scorn!" And as she said this she broke out in a passion of weeping.

If the proof seems as clear as the noonday sun.

Afterward she grew more tranquil, and still they talked. The saffron of the sunset had died off the west, and the stars were shining. Willie felt happy now in spite of his sacrifice. Vanity had been speaking freely, delighting him with her freshness, her simplicity and a curious mixture of childish pleasures and womanly good sense. Willie could not but wonder that she, free and familiar with strangers, was so modest, so artless with her affianced husband. She grew shy just when other women would have cast their shyness aside. This, of course, was her artfulness, but how could he understand that?

At last they must say good-by. Everything had been arranged; how Willie should leave his home and situation; the time and place of their marriage. They were to meet that night four weeks, at the same hour, and fly together. Willie asked Vanity no further questions about her position or its exigencies. One day, she said, she would explain all.

"And until we meet you will think no evil of me!"

"None," he cried fervently.

"If the proof seems as clear as the noonday sun!"

"I will shut my eyes."

"Remember the enchanted mountain, Willie—and the voices—and the fate of those who looked back."

"I will not forget."

Then for an instant the vision changed. The menacing, resolute woman, imperious in her beauty, vanished; love trembled on Vanity's parted lips, and she assumed an air of the most languishing softness.

"*Remember the prize on the summit of the difficult hill.*"

A dying look—a playful look—a coquettish look—which was it she gave?

He could not tell, so quickly had she flown away.

CHAPTER XI.

MISS AND I TALK THINGS OVER.

There I stopped again.

"Miss," said I, "how do you like Willie by this time?"

"Better."

"It is quite plain, miss, that the lad is doing his best to carry on things respectably."

"I suppose so." This she said in her dry way, lifting her pretty eyebrows after her fashion. Then she added, "I was not thinking of his respectability."

"No!" said I. "But, miss"—what follows I said being determined to bring her to the point—"you do like a respectable young man, don't you?"

"Oh, of course, doctor! Every woman likes a respectable young man. But what pleases me in Willie is that he begins to behave like a lover, and show courage."

"Being determined meanwhile, miss"—that I would maintain—"to carry on this respectably."

She did not notice what I said.

"No woman cares for a man who has to be urged by her from step to step. As if a knight were to be pricked on to combat by a lady's needle."

Here I found nothing to say.

"The woman looks for bravery in the man," young miss continued. "She is brave when he is brave, dares what he dares, follows where he leads, and she will not fear death itself if he will die with her."

I was going to say something about respectability again, but somehow did not see where it would come in.

CHAPTER XII.

THE PLOT IS THICKENED BY MR. GRACIOUS ME.

After his last parting with Vanity, Willie Snow spent a sleepless night. It was no easy matter to comply with Vanity's demands, and, at the same time, maintain in the eyes of the world the appearance of a rational being. "Bound to keep the facts secret, how could Willie explain his conduct to his friends? He was to throw up his situation, leave his home, settle in a foreign land, and the only reason he could allege for this tearing his life number must be Shylock's—"It is my humor." Willie reflected with some mortification that his acquaintances would say that he had gone out of his mind.

The prospect of setting out for a new country was not, indeed, without its charms. He had a small capital, and though he could not immediately decide what line of life he should pursue, he was free from anxiety. Besides, to young men the very idea of foreign lands is inspiriting; they have not sense enough to value their own. Then Vanity would be with him—he and she together, sharing sweetness and toils as only lovers can. If he could but take flight secretly, dodging all these terrible questionings with which his kind friends would be sure to torture him! If he could only disappear from England without notice, and report progress from New Zealand when it suited his convenience! But, as a general rule, the happiness of two lovers and the requirements of human society do not coincide. Life has thorns with which to torment us, even under cover of the blushing rose-leaves of wedding days.

Turning matters over in his mind, Willie came to a prudent conclusion. He reflected that, after all, the secret difficulty which so much disturbed Vanity might be to a great extent imaginary. After their marriage, when she confided all to him, its dimensions might be much reduced. Accordingly, he decided not to break with England and home at all once. He resolved to ask for three months' leave, of absence, judging, like the careful young man he was, that if, when Vanity and he were man and wife, there still appeared a necessity for emigration, then would be the time for giving notice to his employers. This plan relieved his mind immensely. It screened him from that severe cross-examination which so startling a step as leaving England forever must have drawn upon him. Still better, it postponed the step itself to a time when cooler judgment and clearer sight would be possible. So Willie steered through the rocks and rapids of his present course.

He had another trouble. His promise to me bound him to disclose all he proposed to do; and he told me like an honest young fellow, though his cheeks were pale, and once or twice tears stood in his eyes. Now, what was poor old Dr. Book to say? Of course, I advised, argued, scolded, even pretended to lose my temper, which did no good in this world. Indeed, when I watched Willie pleading for his sweetheart, protesting his confidence in her, I felt as if she must be better than I thought. But they were the fools. However, when Willie begged me to keep his secret I promised to do so—reluctantly, I confess.

There lived at this time in Hampton a man named Clock. You call that an odd name, perhaps; but you have only heard half the oddity; for, behold, his other name was Gracious, the whole amounting, as I am a sinner, to Christian, Name Gracious Clock. If you doubt me, refer to Hampton parish register, under date of November 2, 1817. There you will read that Gracious, son of Thomas and Martha Clock, was christened privately on that day. Myself, I did not be lieve the name to be real until I hunted it out with my own eyes, the parish clerk, an old friend, helping me. There it stood—the name, Gracious Clock—as plain as ink could make it, excepting that the latter was somewhat faded.

I fancy many who knew the man never heard the whole of his lawful name. In this way. The father of Gracious Clock, who was a brewer's drayman, used to call his son "My Gracious," and at other times "Gracious Me." The last name stuck. For years and years the man was known as "Gracious Me," and nothing else.

Gracious Me was a little man, with one even and one limping leg. He had a very large nose, crooked on one side, to keep the leg company. His daily dress was a show for shabbiness, and his red eyes, red cheeks and red nose made him the picture of a dingy drunkard. He was a man-of-all-work in a furniture shop, and might be seen any day carrying small articles of wooden ware through the streets, a dab of paint here and there on his coat. On Sundays his habit was to appear in a new black suit; and then he would look as fresh and glossy as a pea newly turned out of a pod. The weekday clothes never looked any better, and the Sunday clothes never looked any worse; but it was curious the difference the two suits made in the real face of Gracious Me. Meet him on Saturday night, and you will conclude that his color was got in a tap room; meet him on Sunday, you would refer the same to a sound back parlor, and would, perhaps, find yourself trying to guess how much port wine went to finish that respectable ruby nose. For in his Sunday clothes Gracious looked quite the gentleman. He had no friends, no children, no wife, and I never knew for certain that he had any home, though he must have had a peg somewhere on which he hung the second suit. He looked as ugly as sin, and between you and myself much uglier than many sins; and ugly looked that ugly was.

I never found out why Nancy Steels suspected, at this particular time, that something very important was going forward between Willie Snow and Miss Hardware. Perhaps the news that hardworking Will meant to take a three months' holiday set her thinking; perhaps she read the facts in his face. A jealous woman will erect a whole edifice of conclusions on the foundation of some trifling incident as fine as the point of her own needle. However that may have been, Nancy guessed rightly the actual state of the case. Knowing that mystery hung around the Hardwares, and deciding in her own mind that they were not likely to have any secret which could be a credit to them, she resolved to set a watch upon the house, and so, perhaps, find out more about her rival Vanity than would be to that lady's honor. But who was to keep the watch? "Gracious Me," said Nancy to herself the instant that question presented itself. "Gracious Me will do it!"

A rat is happier in a sewer than he would be in any clear, daisy-bordered brook; and Gracious Me, who would have felt excessively uncomfortable if Nancy had sent him on any mission of charity or mercy, relished this undertaking beyond measure. He was sincerely moved, and shed a timidly tear or two when he pledged himself to absolute secrecy. The reason he gave for this inviolable secrecy may sound to the ear somewhat irrelevant.

"Why, bless your heart, miss," said he, "I knew your mother!"

But Gracious did not set up for a logical mind.

As to succeeding, of that Gracious had not the slightest doubt. He went away with something in his hand which bound him faster to Nancy's service than all the promises he could have made in a twelve-month, as she, no doubt, well knew, being a prudent lass, you observe, and worldly wise.

All that Gracious Me saw and heard and his adventures at Tumbledown Farm, came to my ears after a time; and I relate the whole here in the order of events. His instructions were to keep himself out of sight of the Hardwares; and for several days he skulked behind hedges or lounged in the fields in the neighborhood of the farm, taking many a snug nap, I dare say. He saw nothing whatever, and had to return to Miss Nancy after dark; and he no sooner adopted this plan than discoveries ensued.

About 10 o'clock one night he crept slowly into the farm garden, with a lie in his mouth ready, in case he should be surprised, he was a wayfarer who had lost his road, and he was coming to inquire if he must turn to the right hand or to the left.

It was cloudy and dark, and about 10 o'clock heavy rain began to fall; so that after shivering up and down the road for half an hour, without hearing or seeing anything human, the little man resolved to break off for home, a beam of light fell across his path; he looked up and saw that it shone through the Hardwares' parlor window.

"Now for it," thought he; "now or never for a peep inside."

Stealthily he crept into the garden and up the walk, eyeing the front door fearfully, lest any one should be about. The door was shut and Gracious passed by it, and falling on his hands and knees the reptile crawled under the window and slowly raised his head to bring his eyes up to the line of view.

One flap of the shutter had fallen open, and the greater part of the room lay exposed to view.

No person was to be seen, and the old man's long nine o'clock nerve against the door. Two lighted candles stood on the table, and beside them a huge gin bottle, with a tumbler half filled close to it. The room appeared to be in great disorder; the table was thrust aside against the wall, and one chair lying on the floor, which led Gracious to believe that the place had lately been the scene of a scuffle. A shawl and a large white straw hat, gayly trimmed, were tossed carelessly into an armchair, and a large pair of boots, very muddy, lay upon the carpet. The owner might have just kicked them off his feet. The window was partially drawn up, and the candles flickered and guttered to the wind.

While Gracious was making these observations he heard a hoarse shout, and immediately the parlor door was flung open and a man staggered in. He was tall and of powerful build, decidedly handsome, with an appearance of intelligence and even of good breeding which his drunken clamorous did not wholly conceal. Nose drew the line between "man" and "gentleman" with more shrewdness that persons in Gracious Me's rank of life. He at once set the stranger down as a gentleman, and began to feel himself on the path of discovery, indeed. Meanwhile the tall man reeled into a chair, and, snatching up the tumbler, drank its contents greedily and filled the glass again, the neck of the bottle clattering against the rim through the trembling of his hand. Then he threw himself back and sung something in a foreign language—French, Gracious thought, it must be—and at last rolled off in a loud, angry voice:

"Vanity!"

"Yes," replied she from another room, "coming—coming in a minute."

"It has been better than a minute," said the stranger, in a deep, thick voice, "one minute and not ten."

Vanity entered the room. Her dark hair hung loosely down her shoulders and her dress was a little disarranged, as if she might have been making ready for bed.

Her quiet, passive manner struck even Gracious Me, whose faint remnant of manhood paid an involuntary tribute to her loveliness. She looked fearfully pale, but came in with a laughing face.

"Where have you been this half hour?" asked the stranger ferociously, half rising from his chair as he spoke, but checking himself, perhaps, with a tipsy consciousness that his legs were not to be trusted. "Where—have you—BEEN?" ending in a roar.

"Sitting in my room," Vanity replied, "listening to the rain."

"Oh—for