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VOLUME 25.

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VANITY HARDWARE.

By ALAN MUIR.

CHAPTER XV.

MAN PROPOSES.

By this time Willie Snow was fully persuaded that his late sweetheart had been laying a snare for him. I must confess that even I, biased though I was against the girl, could have forgiven him if he had shown somewhat more obstinacy on the occasion. To be sure, he was following my advice, and I would not have seen him married to Vanity Hardware for the world; but, after his protestations of love and faith, I prepared myself for a good deal of to-and-fro work in his mind. To my surprise nothing of the sort occurred. Whether his pride was wounded, or what other sober motive prompted upon him, I cannot tell. What could not be mistaken was the harsh, even irritated tone in which he now spoke of Vanity, when he spoke of her at all, which was but seldom. Meanwhile Nancy's turn came sooner than she could have expected. Master Will did not think proper to consult me any further, but took the earliest opportunity of asking her to marry him. He called upon her at her own house one evening, and was pleased to find she was alone. Of her presence in the house he had an intimation before the door was opened to him, for, as he stood on the steps, a slight movement of the parlor curtain caught his eye. Looking up, as one does on such occasions before propriety has time to suggest that one had better look down, Willie saw Nancy peeping out. There can be no harm in recommending a visitor from behind a muslin curtain; and, on the other hand, the person placed under observation is not to blame if his eyes accidentally meet those of the one scanning him. In fact, that such things happen is generally uncomfortable. Willie felt chilled when he entered the parlor, and even Nancy looked confused.

She had been doing her accounts, and was now busy at her needle. Four or five small books spread out on the sideboard, each with a little pile of silver, seemed to whisper of thrift and punctuality, and other qualities which the world, with good reason, values highly in man or woman. The table was covered with Miss Nancy's sewing materials. No fine lace work, no toy tasks in silk or lawn, employed her active fingers; plain, tough calico was the subject of her labor, the dust of which floated in the air, discharged in that tearing process by which the muscular young woman divided her fabrics with a rapidity and straightness of blow beyond the science of the scissors. Nancy looked well enough standing there in her plain gown—an old one, wisely put on with an eye to the work in hand, but neither ugly and becoming, for all that. Other girls might have longed for a flight upstairs, a hasty ribbon or two, a smoothing of the hair, before being discovered by a young man whose admiration they desired to win. Nancy did not suppose anything particular to Willie—prudent, practical and common sense—was rather proud than otherwise of her industry. Besides, she knew she looked neat, and as for finery, when the proper time came she would whisk in silks with any girl in Hampton. So whatever flutter perked out in her manner did not appear because she was caught in a Holland pinafore and a dress a good deal the worse for wear; indeed, after her discomfiture at the window, she felt back upon her occupation, and found it a useful retreat.

Willie threw an eye around the room, with its signs of order and comfort on every side, and Nancy in the midst looking like the genius of housewifery. Dismay thought of Vanity cross his mind, looping the wild roses around her lovely head, and laughing out of her reckless, beautiful eyes. Perhaps so; but the contrast only confirmed his present resolution; for it is a weak, changing world, where what glory in one day we despise the next—the only thing we are constant to, you observe, being our own dear selves.

Nancy would not have been a woman, nor Willie the man he was, if she had not read a proposal in his manner. The young fellow was abstracted; spoke, without hearing the sound of his own voice; said "yes" for "no," and made other lapses such as are common symptoms in love and madness. All which little signs the watchful seamstress took in with eyes as sharp as her needle's point. She looked unconscious, however, and stitched on, listening and talking quite in her usual manner. "At last:

"Nancy," said Willie, in a grave voice, so that the word sounded like a minute gun.

"I am listening," replied Nancy calmly, but her heart began to beat.

"Would you—would you marry me if I asked you?"

"You had better ask me and see," replied Nancy, laughing with a sprightly air.

How often have I told you she was a clever girl! You would have called such a speech rather light; but she knew all about it. The fact was, she saw how nervous Willie grew, and thought it well to let him know in this sideling way that there was no need for him to feel as if he were going to be was led into Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace. She acted discreetly, and Willie took courage.

"Will you marry me, then?" he asked, obedient to her direction.

"I will," replied Nancy: "I like you."

She put her needle in again, and waited for him to speak. If any endearments were to follow, he was the person to begin, she had done enough already. Somehow Willie felt a little dashed by her cool ways, and hardly thought her an object for caresses, though she was a fine young woman, you observe. So he pursued the business vein.

"We shall be able to live comfortably, I think," he said.

"I am sure we shall," said Nancy. "If I had any doubt about that, I should have said so. I like comfort, and mean to have it." She laughed again.

"You are quite right, Nancy," said Willie; "and this is much the wisest way to talk about marriage—to look at its practical side, and not go into raptures."

"Would you marry me if I asked you?"

"I said nothing against raptures, as you call them." She tossed her head, still with her laughing air, though she appeared a little annoyed. Willie felt rebuked, and could not have been thrown away upon him. He looked at Nancy. There she sat at her sewing, erect, active, a girl to be proud of, yet one who might answer a caress with a rebuff, if such was her humor. There was a tiny morsel of thread on her lip, and the lip itself was rather bleached and dry, as perhaps became that feature, in a practical woman. Somehow that morsel of thread turned the scales of Willie's resolution. He may have been afraid of swallowing it if any delicate contest ensued.

"There is a matter I have to mention to you," said Willie, after a pause, during which both looked awkward. "A young lady lives up the hill at the old farm house."

"Do you mean a person who goes by the name of Hardware?" asked Nancy, in a cold, caustic voice. "After Hardware?" She threw her utmost scorn into this last interrogation.

"Yes," replied Willie. "She and I——"

"I never wish to hear that woman's name mentioned," said Nancy, in the same freezing way. "Say nothing to me about her."

"I shall not listen to it," Nancy answered, not angrily, but with a severity that cut deeper than anger. "Don't you think me unkind, Willie," she toned her voice down to a milder note of seriousness; "you are not to speak to me of that woman. I shall never breathe her name to me; never utter it where I can hear you."

Willie was speechless, but before he could collect himself Nancy rose and left the room. In a moment or two he heard voices whispering stealthily in the hall. Then the door opened and Nancy re-entered, leading her aunt by the hand and in a wonderful flow of spirits, smiling all the face over, as we say. The aunt was an old lady, who wore two silver-white curls on each side of her face, and in a general way reminded one of a well-fed cat sitting in the sunshine on a summer day. This old lady advanced to Willie with a gratified air.

"I have heard all about it," she said, "and I am very much pleased. I believe it will make a good wife, she is an excellent girl; and you will make her happy, I am sure. I always said you were a nice young man."

Having said so much, not without difficulty, for her heart was weak and her respiration unequal, she seated herself and tried to recover her breath.

"I hope I was not too hasty," said Nancy, interposing with no lost grace. "I could not help running to tell aunt. I like to tell her everything, especially when I am happy."

She let this last word slip bashfully, and by that stroke somewhat revived Willie's spirits. These had in truth sunk a little for a sudden suspicion had darted across his mind that Nancy, the better to fix him to his proposal, had drawn her aunt in as a witness.

"She thinks me cunning enough," he reflected, and felt mortified; but what else could the young woman think. Next the thought struck him that Nancy's sharpness at this juncture would outdo any tuition fickleness in himself; he was tied now by other cords than those of love. Well he knew that in a few hours his engagement would be talked over in every house in Hampton. Nancy, as I maintain, acted like a prudent girl, looking to the welfare of both parties in view; but somehow Willie thought he detected her purpose, and he felt uncomfortable.

Nancy showed him out. The front hall was narrow and screened from observation by a cross-door, but the seclusion of the place did not suggest anything particular to Willie. Nancy slowly opened the street door.

"Good-by, Willie," she said, rather disappointed, I suppose.

"Good-by, Nancy," he replied, in no brighter voice.

Then he looked into her face and noticed her tiny morsel of thread. In our small village gossip was as bad as man, and he perceived the blunder he had committed.

"One minute, Nancy," he said, holding the door back; "I have another thing to say to you."

He stepped into the hall again and closed the door behind him. But Nancy, mortified in her turn, met him with frigid lips; and now-made lovers never exchanged a colder salute. Not that I object to the law, for where you have common sense in marriage, love will come in time.

An hour later Willie called on me.

"I have followed your advice, doctor."

"What?" cried, "had the young woman up-hill work to deal with?"

"Not exactly that—yet," replied Willie; "I have asked Nancy to marry me."

I whistled.

"You don't seem pleased," said he, petulently; "what ought I to have done, pray?"

"Well," said I, "I think I should have told the other first. It does not matter much, I suppose, still, you can only marry one woman, Will—at a time, I mean. Seems to me you are engaged to two."

"I wish I was engaged to neither," said Willie, in very bad humor; "nothing I do is right."

I felt for the lad; besides, I began to guess why he had been in such a hurry to propose to Nancy Stone: he feared to trust himself with Vanity, and so took this decisive step. Accordingly I dropped that part of the subject.

"You will write to Miss Hardware, I dare say?" I remarked.

"No; I must see her," said Willie nervously; "we arranged a signal which we could use in case we wanted to meet any time."

"When will you see her?"

"To-morrow evening."

"To-morrow evening?" I cried; "do you know how news travels in Hampton? Long before that time she may have heard of your new engagement."

"Impossible," said Willie, "quite impossible."

But as I looked at him the thought struck me that if before they met some stray hint of the matter were to reach Vanity's ears he would not be altogether displeased.

CHAPTER XVI.

OFF WITH THE OLD LOVE.

The summer day was drawing to a delightful close when Willie, with reluctant foot, made his way to the spot where he and Vanity had so often met. The hay had been into that year, and the mowy-mown grass, refreshed by one or two showers, looked a green as if the season were early spring. Merry children gamboled freely in the fields no longer fearful of the farmer's tongue or stick, and very pleasantly their joyful voice sounded in the evening air. It was a delicious evening for any one whose mind, like the scene around, was at peace; but as for Willie Snow, I think he would gladly have exchanged that serene sky and tranquil view for a wintry storm. He felt ill at ease, and his uneasiness was not of the sort which the hand of nature heals.

He soon left the village and its straggling outskirts behind, and found himself once more walking up the old road under the lofty arch of trees. At every step, and in spite of all his efforts, his suspicions about Vanity appeared more groundless. He had his courage, however, when he saw her standing at their own gate, for he felt that to doubt anything now would be fatal to the execution of his plan.

At sight of him Vanity bounded forward, a look of delight crossed her face like one of those sudden sweeps of sunlight you see floating over a landscape when clouds fly fast in a bright sky. And he saw—he could not help seeing on the instant—that her very expression had altered. Her beauty of course was there; but a softness, a richness, a Madonna-like sweetness appeared in her face, such as he had never before seen in any living woman. Hardness, flippancy, self-conceit—of these not a trace was left. She looked as if the deepest and purest affections had been busy in her breast, and had worked outward, softening her features and giving to them a new expression. She sight-seen a proud happy mother instead of a sweetheart, such ripe womanhood was in her face.

"Willie!" she cried, "I am glad you have come."

Willie drew coldly back. Vanity, whose whole nature was quickened into the intense sensitiveness, turned as pale as death.

"Something has happened," she gasped.

"Something wrong—something dreadful! Tell me what it is!"

In her pallor and overwhelming agitation Willie read guilt. That momentary warmth of feeling which her sweetness and surpassing beauty had aroused in his heart died out like ineffectual fire.

"You are not far astray," he said, in a cold, caustic way; "something wrong has happened."

"What do you mean?" Vanity seized his hand, for she did not yet interpret his manner.

Willie felt that he must seem very decided, and in his anxiety to be severe enough he came ruder perhaps than a person of really violent temper would have been. To feel his behavior it was not necessary that Vanity should understand it; the terrible change that had passed over him she could not mistake; and she uttered a cry of anguish like one stabbed suddenly by a friend.

"I don't want to give you any needless pain—even though you deserve it," said Willie.

At this point he took a hint from Miss Nancy. After the shortest pause in the world he began again in this way:

"You must be aware, Miss Hardware—by this way" this was said with marked significance—"am I to address you as Miss Hardware or not?"

Vanity responded to the sting of the question as sharply as her accuser could have hoped; she shot a look of undisguised alarm at him, and grew paler than before.

"I see," continued Willie, "Hardware is not your name. What it may be is now no particular concern of mine. You must have known that under your circumstances, whatever the particulars may be, the very notion of marriage with me was wicked."

"Who spoke about marriage first, Willie?" she asked, her head hung down. Her words could scarcely be heard; but she tones was full of suffering, and, this he did remark, without any anger.

"I asked you to marry me," Willie answered boldly. Now that he was fairly in action, the more manly part of his character asserted itself. "I was struck by your beauty. I never felt toward any other woman as I felt toward you. I was carried away captive, and I loved you passionately."

The words roused Vanity; she moved her little form to him, clasping her hands together, while the tears ran down her cheeks.

"Love me still, Willie," she said, sobbing.

"Don't give me up."

"It will be death to me if you give me up."

Willie paused a moment, then looking steadfastly at her he said: "You know we can never be married."

After meeting his gaze for a moment Vanity put her handkerchief to her eyes and began to cry. For an outburst of tears he was quite prepared, and her distress did not move him at all. Why should it?

"Let us part now," he said, wishing to end the scene.

"Part!" exclaimed Vanity. She uttered the word in a half scream.

It was wonderful what intensity of feeling this one short syllable conveyed. But there she was actress—actress to the core. "Part! tell me why. Has any one been poisoning your mind against me?"

"I cannot marry a woman with a secret which she will not or cannot explain." Willie spoke this with perfect dignity.

"Is this generous?" cried Vanity, "is it just? Did you not promise me to marry you—did you not press me again and again in the face of my own warnings on this very matter? Did I not tell you that my position was not that of most women? Did I not tell you of shame and disgrace hanging over me? You persisted in your course until you won my love. Now you cast me off for the misfortunes you knew before—casting me off to die broken-hearted—for I shall die if you leave me."

Her grief appeared extreme; besides, her remonstrance had reason in it; so that Willie began to find his resolution giving way. But he reminded himself that even now, in her very difficulty, she made no attempt to deny or extenuate the facts of her position. He was himself again.

"What you say is true," he answered; "I did persist in loving you in spite of your warning, but I had no idea then of the obstacle that lies in your way. I believed it to be something embarrassing, not dishonorable; at least I—I mean not—not so dishonorable as—as——"

"As what?" Vanity asked; "what have you discovered?"

He looked her straight in the face, and spoke with great severity:

"You know your own secret; don't ask me to describe it."

"What can you know?" cried Vanity, with symptoms of alarmed curiosity. "Why know?"

The words were ill-chosen. Willie detected defiance or audacity in what she said, and grew irritated.

"Your secret is," said he, pointing as he spoke in the direction of the Farm, "that your father is not your only companion in that house."

Vanity again started palpably. He saw he had hit the mark.

"A man comes there by night," continued Willie. "He is very intimate with you. You sit alone with him. You sing together. He takes you on his knee. You kiss him. And you promised your love to me! Who is that man? He is your secret—your disgrace—your tormentor. I dare say, and you were going to escape from him and lose the treasure of your love on me, and we were to fly to a foreign country that we might not be pursued by—*the man*. There let us part now. By this time you have heard enough to satisfy you."

Vanity stood like a statue listening to him; but as he proceeded, surprise, not unmixed with relief, took the place of grief and fear in her face.

"You have discovered my secret, Willie," she said. "But you don't understand it. I know how it has reached your ears. That wretched tipsy fellow who watched us through the window told you."

"Let me say that he watched you by accident, so far as I am concerned," interposed Willie; "I never sent him to spy you out."

"It would not be like you to do it," replied Vanity gently.

She remained silent for a moment, and then began again in a quiet, reasoning voice:

"On the whole, my mind is relieved by what you have said. What has been told you is quite true as a matter of fact; and of course you think it very strange. But I assure you solemnly that all the suspicions you have founded on it are imaginary. Remember the promise I asked you to give me—which you gave—that in spite of all appearances of evil you would trust me. Why did I ask that promise but because I knew that this difficulty in some shape or other might arise? Now, I know the demands I make on your love, but still keep that promise. Trust me as you promised to trust me. Your reward shall be the devotion of my life. If for any other reason you want to break with me—if you think on further consideration, that our marriage would be imprudent—don't fear that I shall upbraid you. I shall bear my sorrow in silence; but don't cast me off because you suspect me of deceit and selfishness."

"A little indignation—a faint shade of disappointment—inflected these last words.

"Can vice speak with the voice of virtue?" asked Willie!

"What!" cried Vanity, with a flashing look. "But her fire only inflamed his.

"If you are angry with me," he replied fiercely, "justify your anger. Explain who your friend is. Tell me your name—tell me his relations with yourself—say how he can be so intimate with you, if you are free and blameless."

"All that," replied Vanity slowly, "is my secret."

"And you will not disclose it?"

"I cannot; I am bound."

There followed a moment's silence, and then Willie spoke, not making any show of anger, but with a sorrowful regret, which indeed under his circumstances was hardly to be expected.

"Then we part; we part for ever."

Vanity looked at him as a wounded deer looks at a huntsman, her eyes big with an agony she had no speech to explain.

"You will not trust me?" she said.

"I will not," cried Willie, furiously. "I shall never speak to you again. I will see your face no more."

Without another word he turned away and left her. She made no movement while he walked hastily across the field toward the road. He half expected to hear her footstep behind him, and finding she did not follow, he stole a backward glance at her just as he was leaving the field.

She had turned round and was looking after him. When she saw him glance back, she put out her arms imploringly, beseeching him in this silent way to return to her. He answered by a cold shake of the head, and then vanished out of her sight.

TO BE CONTINUED.

HABITS OF PLANTS AND INSECTS.

Some of Their Peculiarities—Taking on New Habits—Curious Cases.

We are accustomed to think of the habits of plants and animals as fixed, the same to-day as they were 100 or 1,000 years ago, and to remain the same for an indefinite future. Such a supposition is incorrect, and can not be held by those familiar with the life histories of plants and animals. It is a common occurrence for animals and plants to take on new habits—a change usually caused by a change in the surroundings. In the case of animals, it is often brought about by new food being presented, on which they obtain more congenial subsistence. The common notion that nature provides for animals the food most congenial to their growth, finds here a strong refutation. Every farmer's boy has observed that birds and rodents forsake their natural food for more congenial fruit or grain. They may also have noticed the same with insects.

One of the most marked instances of an insect thriving and rapidly multiplying on new food, is that of the potato beetle; confined to the wild solanums of Colorado, the potato beetle increased slowly and was scarcely known, even to entomologists. The insect was found for years ago by Dr. Say, who made a journey across the Rocky mountains, and for many years it was considered one of the rarest of our insects. When the cultivated solanum (the potato) reached Colorado, the obscure beetle found more congenial food, and it multiplied amazingly. An instance nearer home is that of the apple maggot, which in many parts of the eastern states attacks the apple in much the same manner as the codling moth, or apple worm or codling moth. This insect has long been known as living on the wild thorn apples, but about twenty years ago it suddenly attacked the cultivated apples on a Vermont farm. It spread rapidly, and is now widely distributed. It is probable that the insect had never known the superiority of the cultivated apple as an article of food, until by chance some individual strayed to the orchard. From that time a new habit was taken on.

Another instance is that of the dreaded "buffalo grub," which attacks carpets in the eastern states. In Europe whence this insect was introduced, it was never known to attack carpets. In this case we can not determine just why the insect has taken on its new habit, for carpets are probably no better articles of food than clothes and leather, on which the insect feeds in Europe. There are perhaps peculiar surroundings or parasites which prevent it from attacking carpets in its native home, or when the