

## NANCIEBEL: A TALE OF STRATFORD-ON-AVON.

(By WILLIAM BLACK in *Yule Tide*.)

## CHAPTER V (Continued.)

"Why," you see, Nanciebel," he wrote, in reply, "my uncle and his stepdaughter know very few people in London as yet; and as he is a good deal in the city, the time would hang very heavily on her hands if the *mater* did not take her about a little. Then, of course, I have to accompany these two. I could not let them wander about London all by themselves; but do you think it is any pleasure to me to go to the Tower or to the South Kensington Museum? And then, again, when any people send them an invitation, the *mater* and I are sure to be included, as it is known we are staying with them, and it is but natural that in a strange house, if there is any dancing or anything going on, Florence should count upon me, as her cousin. I don't see how you can object; but you have such a tendency to magnify trifles! When I express regret over our engagement, or ask you to release me, then you will have a right to complain; but in the meantime you needn't grumble about nothing."

Nanciebel's answer to this was written in a dozen different moods: by turns she was indignant, rebellious, petulant, and piteously imploring.

"What is the use of keeping me here?" she asked. "What is the use of it? Did you see any difference in me when you came down that day—except in the dressing of my hair? And did you think it an improvement—an improvement worth all this loneliness and misery? Once you would have said that my hair could not be improved; once you would have declared it was the prettiest in the world; but that was long ago—that was before your cousin Florence came to England. I know you will be in a rage because I talk of misery; and you will accuse me of ingratitude, and ask what more I want. Well, I needn't attempt to tell you, for you wouldn't understand; but I can remember the time you were more in sympathy with my feelings, and when there was no fear of my being misunderstood. Once you would not have left me to pine like this; you would not have yielded to relatives; you were ready to do anything for my sake. But I suppose it's the way of the world; and you, of course, can't regret an absence that brings you so much—and such charming—consolation."

"Now, Richard, dear, don't, *don't* be angry with me—I hardly know what I have written—I only know that I just hate being alone. Oh, for the happy mornings and afternoons when I could sit and listen at every footstep on the pavement outside, and think that any moment my Richard might come in! You did not want me improved then. I suppose you never think now of the Bideford road, and the lane leading down to Shottery and the meadows. It seems a long time ago to poor me. I sit and think that never, never again there will be the long, still, beautiful evenings, and us two on the banks of the Avon, seated beneath the bushes, and watching the boys fishing on the other side, under the Weir Brake. These were happy, bappy days! Will they ever come again, Richard, dear? Do say something kind to me when you write—I don't mean the kindness I get from the vicar and his daughters, but real kindness, for I am so lonely and miserable!"

Now this appeal, couched in its artless language, made Mr. Richard not a little remorseful; and his contrition suddenly assumed the shape of a resolve to go to cousin Floss and tell her all about his engagement to Nanciebel. He did not stay to ask why that should be considered as making amends to Nancy; he only felt that he was somehow called upon to tell the whole truth; then Florence could think of him as she pleased. Was it not due to poor Nanciebel? Why should she be ignored amid all these gaieties and distractions? She had her rights. And she had not been too exacting—her last letter had been piteous rather than petulant and quarrelsome.

But this proved to be a terrible business. He chose an opportunity when Cousin Floss had gone out into the garden, to have a look at the Spring blossoms, or perchance to survey, with feminine curiosity, the backs of the artists' houses, across the low brick walls. When he overtook her, she was apparently busy with snowdrops, and primroses, and daffodils; and she was so good-natured as to pick for him a purple crocus and even to fix it into the lapel of his coat. How could he refuse this simple kindness?—he was not a boor. Nevertheless in about twenty minutes or so, he and she and the little widow were to set out for the private view of a certain picture-gallery, where they would most likely meet such people as they knew, and he would be wearing Cousin Floss's flower in his button hole. Was he going about with her, then, under false pretences? The confession had become all the more imperative.

But how was he to begin?

"Cousin," said he, with a most unusual hesitation—for, under her skilful tuition, he had come to address her in the most frank and open and unconventional manner, "did my mother ever speak to you—about—about—a Miss Marlow?"

She noticed his embarrassment instantly.

"Why, no!" she said, in some surprise. "Miss Marlow! No—I don't think I ever heard the name. Who is she?"

How could he explain? He wished that Cousin Floss had not such clear eyes, and a mouth so ready to smile.

"At present," he went on, in rather a stammering fashion, "she—she is living with my uncle Charles at a building at the Vicarage, near Bristol."

Cousin Floss laughed. "The governess?," she said.

"No—no—but I have something to tell you about her. I think I ought to tell you—for sooner or later you will hear of it," he continued—and he was blushing like a schoolgirl, because Cousin Floss was evidently amused by his timidity. "I thought the *Mater* would have told you—"

All of a sudden Miss Florence put her hand within his arm, in the most friendly way, and thereby intimated that she wished him to pace up and down the garden path with her.

"Cousin Dick!" she protested, "I won't hear a word! I know what you've got to tell me—and I can see how it vexes you—but I will spare you the confession. Oh, don't I know what dreadful flirts young men are—don't I know—but they can't help it, the poor dears, and I am always ready to forgive them—because—because—well, because there are sometimes girls wicked enough to lead them on, and pretend they enjoy it, too! Cousin Dick, why should you tell me?—do you think it would be news?"

"Oh, but you're quite mistaken, Florence!" he exclaimed. "Quite mistaken! I assure you she is not the kind of girl to amuse herself in that way at all—"

"Oh, a simple innocent, is she?" said Cousin Floss, with another little bit of a laugh. "Yes, they sometimes look like that—sometimes it is part of the game—with the clever ones—"

"Oh, but really—"

"Oh, but really," she repeated, with the most obvious good-nature, "I won't hear another word! I won't, indeed, Cousin Dick! Do you think I don't understand? You see, my dear cousin, a little girl who has lived a good part of her life in India, and a still longer time in China, and knows what a voyage in a P. and O. ship is like—well, she isn't quite a baby, you know—not quite a baby—and if you were to begin with your confessions, I might have to begin with mine; and wouldn't that be mutually awkward? I wish you had seen a young aide-de-camp, a Captain Webster, who came on board, this last trip, at Aden, and remained with us as far as Suez. He was a *dear*—and that's a fact; but papa didn't seem to see much in him—papas never do see anything in young men who have a pretty moustache but no income to speak of. So, you understand, cousin, I might have a story or two to tell as well as you; and I shouldn't like it, for blushing doesn't become me; besides, it is far safer and nicer for every one to let bygones be bygones. No, you needn't interrupt, Cousin Dick; I won't hear another word from you—not a word; we will both let bygones be bygones: I tell you, it's safer."

And as Mrs. Kingston appeared at this moment at the French window, and called to them, what could he do? He gave up the hope of explaining to his cousin. He went to the private view—wearing the flower she had given him, and if any one drew inferences from his being continually seen with her—well how could he help that?

In due course of time the visit of Mrs. Kingston and her son to their London relatives came to an end; and they returned to their Warwickshire home. But they very soon discovered that a singular change had come over the house. Woodend was solitary as they had never known it to be in former days. There was something wanting in these silent rooms: a voice, with clear laughter ringing in its tones, and joy, and audacity, was now heard no more in the hall; the garden, though all the splendours of the Spring were beginning to declare themselves in plot, and bed, and border, seemed empty now.

"I could not have believed I should have missed her so much," the widow said, sadly.

And as for Mr. Richard, he was ill at ease. His thoughts, which he knew should have been turned towards Bristol, went in quite another direction, and would hover, in spite of himself, about Kensington and the neighbourhood of Holland Park. Poor Nanciebel's fortnightly letters to himself were not looked for half so eagerly as Cousin Floss's basty scrawls sent down to her dear aunt Cecilia; and Mr. Richard would lie in wait for these, and, whenever he found one on the hall-table, he would at once carry it to his mother, with the seemingly careless question, "What has Florence to say now, *Mater*?" For, indeed, Cousin Floss seemed to find a great many things to say to the widow. She was continually writing on some kind of excuse; and she invariably wound up with pretty and affectionate speeches, and hopes of a speedy reunion. Cousin Floss did not write to Mr. Richard, of course—that was too much to expect; but in one way or another his name generally came to be mentioned; and sometimes there were tantalising and even impertinent messages for him.

"Who is this Captain Webster, Richard, dear?" the widow asked on one occasion.

Mr. Richard blushed angrily.

"Oh, he's some young idiot—aide-de-camp to a Colonial governor or something of that kind."

"But why should Florence send you this message about him?" Mrs. Kingston asked again.

"Oh, well," said he, with a fine air of assumed indifference, "Florence told me something about him before—he was on board the steamer they came home in—and as he left the ship at Gibraltar, I suppose she was surprised when she found him turn up in London."

Meanwhile the continued unrest and downheartedness that had characterised his manner ever since his return to Woodend had not escaped the anxious mother's eyes; and one evening she made bold to speak of it.

"Well, *Mater*," said he, "I don't know what it is, except that I feel I am in a wrong position altogether. I am tired of doing nothing, I want to go away. Look at Nancy: the separation that was agreed upon tells more hardly on her than on me, for she is kept apart from her friends and relatives, while I live just as before. It's hardly fair. I think I should go away from England for a time—for a considerable time—until, indeed, this period of separation ends, and then I could come back and marry Nancy, and everything would be settled and right. I am sure, if once the wedding took place, all would be well."

"I suppose," said the widow, absently, "that my selfishness must be punished in the end. It was I who have kept you in idleness, Richard, and now you fret, and want to go. I should have thought you could have found some way of passing the few months that must elapse now before the settlement you speak of. And if you find the house so dull—well, I had not intended to tell you—it was a little surprise we had arranged—but Florence is coming down to stay with us awhile."

"Is Florence coming down here?" he asked slowly, and with a strange expression of face.

Something peculiar in his tone struck her. She looked up as she said—

"Yes. It was to be a little surprise for you—"