

NANCIEBEL: A TALE OF STRATFORD-ON-AVON.

(By WILLIAM BLACK in *Yule Tide*.)

CHAPTER VI (Concluded).

He was completely nonplussed. Here was the sacrifice he had nobly determined to make put aside as a thing of naught; while he was practically invited to return home forthwith; and that he could not do. Florence Kingston was there—whom he dared not meet.— Besides, how could he go away leaving the whole matter as it stood before, surrounded by all kinds of distracting uncertainties? It was for Nanciebel's own sake that he must persevere.

"To Stratford?" he repeated. "Well, you understand, Nancy, I did not think you would agree to this without some coaxing and persuasion—and I shall have my uncle to talk over as well—so I have come down to Bristol for a little while, and I am staying at an hotel there."

"Oh, for some time?" she said, "you are going to remain here, Richard?" She was silent for a second or two. "Well, it is so sudden—so bewildering. You cannot expect me to say yes just at once, even if I knew that your uncle and your mother would consent. It is so grave a step. But—but to-day is Saturday: you will give me till to-morrow? Will you come out to-morrow afternoon, Richard, and then I may be able to say something more definite? Yes, I will, I promise; to-morrow afternoon you shall have my answer."

"But I don't want to press you, Nanciebel," he urged again; for he could not in the least understand what all this meant. "I came down to Bristol for the very purpose of talking the whole thing over, and showing how it would be better and safer and more satisfactory for every one if we could arrange for this time of probation to cease. Who knows what may happen? And you may be doubtful and reluctant, of course; for it is a gravestep, as you say; but I am sure it is the best thing to do; and then there will be no further misgivings, or trusting to chance."

It was hardly the impassioned pleading of a lover; but Nanciebel did not seem to look for that. She merely begged him again to give her till the following afternoon, and she appeared to be immensely relieved—and grateful—when he assented. Nor did she beg him to stay until his uncle should return and his cousins be free. She even hinted that it might be more prudent for her to say nothing of this proposal until he himself should bring it forward on the next day. In the meantime she bade him good-bye with a very pleasant and affectionate look; and he returned to his hotel in Bristol, and to aimless cogitations which led to confusion rather than to any enlightenment.

But what happened next day drove away those puzzled surmises and substituted for them amazement and alarm. About half-past one o'clock his uncle drove up to the hotel, and came into the coffee-room, where Mr. Richard happened to be standing at the window.—The nervous little clergyman was very much excited; but he had to speak in a low voice, for there were some people seated at the table at lunch.

"Richard," said he, in a hurried undertone, "Do you know what the meaning of this is? Miss Marlow has gone."

"Gone?" his nephew repeated with staring eyes. "Gone where?"

"I do not know; she has left the house. This morning she complained of headache, and decided to remain in her own room; then when we returned from morning service, we discovered that a cab had been brought out between eleven and twelve, and that she left, taking all her things with her. And here is a letter we found lying for you."

"Yes, but what did she say when she went?" his nephew demanded in blank amazement. "There must have been somebody in the house. What explanation did she give? Where did she say she was going?"

"Not a word to anybody!—perhaps you will understand from that letter," said the clergyman—looking at the enigmatic envelope.

Mechanically Mr. Richard broke the seal; he was thinking of her strange behaviour on the previous day. Nor did this carefully written epistle afford him any satisfactory elucidation.

"Dear Richard, Saturday night.

"By the time you get this note I shall have escaped from a position which was only embarrassing to you and to me, and to others. I shall always appreciate your kindness—and never, never forget it; but what you wished was *not to be*. I had intended telling you by degrees how I had come to this resolution; but your sudden appearance here to-day has precipitated matters; and to-morrow I shall take the step I have long meditated—and I am sure it will be better for us all. And I am sure your mother will be glad. I shall always remember with gratitude the sacrifice she was ready to make; and when I read the 'Miller's Daughter' I shall always think of her with respect and affection; but she did not consider, when she gave me Tennyson's Poems, and hoped they would be my constant teachers, that there was another one far more applicable to my station. I refer to 'The Lord of Burleigh.' Do you remember those significant lines—

'But a trouble weighed upon her,
And perplex'd her, night and morn,
With the burden of an honour
Unto which she was not born.'

Ab, if that poor lady had only known in time!—then she might have avoided all her misery, as I hope to do. For why should I aspire to a dignity for which I am unfitted? Your cousins here have been very kind; but all the same it has been impressed on me every day that I was not *born in the purple*. I am not ashamed of my humble origin, for—

'Kind hearts are more than coronets,
And simple faith than Norman blood.'

but it is better for all that I should abandon a fond dream, and accept life as it is. Dear Richard, you have given me several little presents

from time to time, and these I wish to return; and I will send them to you by a safe hand. If you will allow me, I will keep your photograph—for one need not forget an old friend, whatever trials and hardships the world may have for us. Farewell for ever, dear Richard, from your still affectionate and grateful NANCY."

"P.S.—I will send you the things in a day or two."

Mr. Richard handed the letter to the clergyman, but not in silence.

"Why," he exclaimed, angrily, as his uncle glanced over the pages, "if that is not a studied piece of hypocrisy, it is the writing of an absolute fool? 'Born in the purple'—where did she pick up a phrase like that?—does she consider that I have been born in the purple?—does she suppose that I was going to bestow a coronet on her?"

"Richard," said the clergyman, gently, "you must remember that girls in her position like to write like that—they have learnt it out of penny romances—they think it fine. I should say the letter was sincere enough, even if the terms of it strike you as being artificial. And the fact remains that she has left the Vicarage."

"Precisely!" said the young man—who did not all rejoice in the freedom that had been thus suddenly thrust upon him; for he considered that this was only some kind of incomprehensible freak on the part of Nancy, and that, after an immensity of trouble and annoyance, they would all of them find themselves precisely in the same straits as before. "And now we shall have to hunt her out and convince her that her heroic renunciation is out of place! I suppose we shall have to advertise—come back to your sorrowing friends? Upon my word, it's too bad! We shall have all this trouble for nothing. I suppose she wouldn't go to Stratford—and confess to her relatives that she could not bear the burden of the honour that was destined for her. That would not be romantic enough! She will wait until the whole of our family go to her as a deputation, and beg her on their knees to accept the coronet!"

"You are angry and impatient, Richard," the clergyman said, quietly. "But there is more in that letter than you seem to see. It has been written with deliberation; it has been thought over for some time back. It is no sudden freak. Now come away out with me to Holiwell, and we will see if we cannot find out something about this very odd affair. Gertrude and Laura may help us. And we are bound to make inquiries—until we know that the girl is in safety; she cannot be allowed to vanish into space in this fashion."

As they drove away out to the Vicarage, Mr. Richard did not speak a word—his brain was busy with all manner of conjectures and wild speculations. Supposing, now, that he were to take Nancy at her word? Of her own free will she had withdrawn from the engagement which of late he had felt as a very millstone round his neck. No doubt his word was given to her; but here she had in set terms renounced her claims; and why should he not accept her renunciation? But, even as he argued with himself in this way, he felt it was all impossible. He could not be so mean as to take advantage of a fit of temper or some perverse and inexplicable whim. He knew Nanciebel; knew her contradictory moods; knew how affectionate she could be at one moment, and how petulant and wayward the next; and he could not make this fantastic letter an excuse for backing out of an engagement to which his honour was pledged. How could she mean what she said in this ridiculous message of farewell? When a girl took one of the most serious steps possible in her life, she was not likely to be quoting poetry and using sham-literary phrases. Perhaps (this was his final conclusion) Nancy had been finding her life at the Vicarage too dull and forlorn, and had suddenly resolved to break the monotony of it with a romantic episode.

Now, no sooner had the good vicar begun to question his daughters about this mysterious thing that had just happened than it became abundantly evident that they knew a good deal more than they were willing to admit. Gertrude looked at Laura, and Laura looked at Gertrude; and both were mute. Clearly they did not like to "tell." Nancy had been their comrade in a measure; perhaps she had even asked them to keep her secret; and here was their cousin Richard—how could they say anything that would lead him to doubt the constancy of his betrothed? And yet when the vicar, getting a bit of a clew, began to press home his questions, it seemed as if there was nothing for it but a frank avowal. Gertrude, as the elder, came in for most of the cross-examination; and at length, with many hesitations and shy glances at Mr. Richard, and appealing looks to her father, she allowed them to construct what story they might out of the following fragments and hints.

Nancy had always been fond of wandering about in the garden—particularly when Gertrude and Laura were at their morning exercises, and she was left alone. She had made the acquaintance of Mr. Stapleton's head-gardener—is Richard knew, a most respectable, and well-educated, and well-mannered young man. "Mr." Bruce, as Nancy always called him, was very kind to her, instructing her in botany, and lending her books. Other books beside botanical ones, too, for Mr. Bruce was a well-read young man, and had quite a library. Nancy seemed to have a great admiration for the young Scotchman. She was always talking about him—and contrasting him with others. She had cut his portrait out of a horticultural journal, in which it had appeared, along with a biographical sketch, and a list of all the prizes he had won. Gertrude had even ventured to remonstrate with Nancy about her partiality for this young man—seeing that she was engaged to be married to Cousin Richard—whereupon Nancy had laughingly replied that she liked to be appreciated by some one. Nancy had shown her a photograph of the gardens at Beever Towers, and pointed out the charmingly surrounded cottage that Mr. Bruce was to occupy when he left Somersetshire for Yorkshire. That the young Scotchman and Nancy were in constant correspondence, Gertrude had to admit that she knew; but she did not consider it her duty to say anything—say thought it would be treacherous, she said.

"But Bruce left Holiwell a fortnight ago!" exclaimed the vicar, breaking in upon the shy confessions.

"Yes, papa," said Miss Gertrude, "but he has not gone to Yorkshire, for I have seen him twice during last week."