

WOOLING BY PROXY.

Stephen Earnshaw was a small tradesman in the village of Swallowfield. He had the reputation of being a careful, saving man, and people said he had a few hundred in a savings bank.

He was tall and handsome, having a massive frame; a torso such as Hercules might have been proud of; huge, brawny arms, more capable of wielding a smith's hammer than weighing out tea and sugar; his hair was dark brown, and curled. When he smiled, the expression of his face was very sweet, but when he frowned the thunderbolts of Jupiter might be expected.

So little did he care about a tradesman's life that he left the grocer's business almost entirely to his mother, and betook himself day after day to a little farm, part meadow land, part arable, which he rented in the neighborhood from Mr. Hewitt Langley, the owner of most of the landed property thereabouts.

Many girls belonging to the village of Swallowfield were in love with Stephen Earnshaw, but he did not pay them much attention in return for their civil glances.

It was just "good evening" and "good morning" with Stephen when he met people; but there was one notable exception, and that was Margaret Minton. Whenever he came across her in the street, he had always a kind word for her, and would find hold her little hand in his after shaking it, by way of greeting. If she was in a good temper, she would retain his hand, and if not, she would rudely away, with a "How dare you?" uttered in anything but the mildest of tones.

It was evident that Margaret did not care much about the good-looking giant, or perhaps she did not know her own mind.

If she had given him the least encouragement, he would have proposed at once, but she did not.

She smiled upon him one moment, scolded him the next, and turned her back upon him an hour afterward. Stephen was in honest fellow, blunt at times, but having a keen perception for all that, and he saw that he was being made a fool of.

Like all men of retiring disposition, he was very sensitive, and he grew angry when he thought that he was being ridiculed by the only girl in the village to whom he had shown any civility, and for whom he had openly evidenced a decided partiality.

He saw Margaret in the street one evening in July when he was returning from his work on his farm. She also saw him, but, pretending ignorance of his presence, walked on till his voice arrested her progress.

Margaret was taller than most women, very dark, wearing her hair brought severely over her temples, speaking quietly, and sometimes cleverly, looking up every movement with her eyes, and only laughing when she had said something to cause pain or annoyance.

"Have you left your spectacles at home, Margaret?" asked Stephen Earnshaw.

"I can see like a cat in the dark, so I do not stand in need of any artificial vision," she replied.

"How was it you did not see me then?"

"Perhaps I did not want to see you." "Oh, if that was the wind blowing, I'll wish you good-night, and be jogging homeward," said Stephen, a little nettled, as his rising color showed.

"And I will walk a little way with you, Stephen," she replied smiling.

"If what?" he demanded.

"If you won't tell me that I have lovely hair, and beautiful eyes, and a sweet face, and that I shall begin to think it true presently."

"I wish I could call you mine, Maggie," he said, and he looked at her.

"But you can't, Mr. Earnshaw," she answered. "I have no intention of relinquishing my liberty in any man's favor. Being one's own mistress is so charming."

"Has a matrimonial life no charms for you?"

"At present, none."

"You know what people say, Maggie," exclaimed Stephen.

"What?" she queried, fixing her great eyes on him.

"That you and I will be man and wife some day."

"People had better mind their own business, I think," said Margaret, angrily, while the color in her blood flushed her usually pale cheeks.

"Don't be angry," he pleaded, as if deprecating her wrath.

"I am angry. I don't like to hear such little things repeated. You have a right to annoy me in this way. I am glad we have reached home; and I am sorry I said I would walk with you."

Before Stephen Earnshaw could make any reply to this, a soldier, who had been left his side, and crossing the road, lifted the latch entering her mother's house.

Stephen stood looking after her for some little time, and then, with huge, hasty strides, very different from his usual deliberate walk, made the best of his way to his house, which was situated in the middle of Swallowfield, High Street.

He found the shop closed, and his mother in the parlor with Annie Ruthven—little Annie, the milliner, his friends called her.

She presented a great contrast to Margaret Minton, being short, plump, and fair; her eyes were not full and impudent, like Margaret's, though they were lustrous enough at times. Their expression was different, as to whether they were deep and cunning, but Annie was a good girl, and a general favorite.

She was an orphan, and lived with an aunt, to whose slender resources she contributed by working with her needle.

Only herself knew that she had a secret love for Stephen. She had never breathed a word of this love to any one, and dared hardly confess it to herself in the privacy of her own chamber.

Both Stephen's mother and Annie saw in a moment that something had occurred to ruffle his temper. He cast his hat in a corner, and, sitting down before the empty grate, leant his elbows on his knees and his head on his hands.

"What's the matter, Stephen?" said Mrs. Earnshaw.

"Nothing, mother; but I don't like being laughed at," he replied, bitterly.

"Who in this place dare laugh at you? There isn't a man or boy."

"It isn't a man at all, mother!" said Stephen, cutting her short.

"Then it's that Margaret Minton. Who is she, I should like to know, to give herself airs? A trumpery piece of goods."

"It's no use talking, mother," he cried, interrupting her again. "You standing in the river wouldn't stop the stream, would it?"

"I don't suppose it would."

"Then all your talking won't make Margaret Minton more civil to me," he said, with the same bitter air.

"Perhaps I might do something for you with her, Stephen!" exclaimed Annie Ruthven, who had sat all the time as silent as a mouse.

"You!" he said, in surprise.

"Yes, I may be very silly and insignificant; but Margaret and I are great friends. I help her make dresses, and I will give her any message from you, but

you must tell me to-night, for I am going soon."

"Going. Where?" he asked.

"To America," she replied. "I am tired of being here. I must go into the world, and try to make my way."

"Well, I wish you luck, I'm sure," Annie exclaimed Stephen Earnshaw, heartily adding, "you do your best for me, Margaret, and I'll give you a dance in the barn at the back of our house before you go."

"It's a bargain!" cried Annie, clapping her hands delightedly.

In reality, Annie Ruthven was delighted to hear that Stephen Earnshaw was not in favor with Margaret.

"Oh," she thought, "if he would only love me as he loves her, what would not do for him? His every wish should be anticipated. I would live for him alone. He is so handsome, so good and so fond of his home."

Her little heart fluttered as she thought of what the future might bring forth. If Margaret remained obstinate, Stephen Earnshaw might look favorably upon her.

A miracle, though, must be worked, she thought, before the handsome Stephen could fall in love with her.

Was she not going to service? Would she not be miles away instead of living close to him, and enjoying his society, while visiting his mother?

She now regretted having made up her mind to go into the world, but, having arrived at such a determination and made it generally known, she could not very well cancel it.

As she looked on, she looked in upon Margaret about tea-time, ostensibly to show her a dress she had finished for the doctor's wife, but really to talk about Stephen.

"I have heard the dress, and said, 'I wish I was a lady, to be able to have a dress for every day in the year.'"

"That would be extravagant," laughed Annie. "Would not every week in the year, you mean?"

"Yes, or every month; but there is no chance even of the latter," said Margaret with a sigh.

"Why not marry Stephen Earnshaw?"

"Annie, in a voice that trembled in spite of her.

"He has never asked me," she replied. "He has done almost as good, though, hasn't he?"

"I can scarcely tell, my dear. I like a man to have the courage to say what he means," answered Margaret.

"Some men are timid, Margaret," continued Annie. "They do not like to expose themselves to a rejection."

"I am not a timid person," said Margaret. "I am a woman whose pride would be terribly mortified if women had the power to go about and say that they had refused them."

"What's Stephen Earnshaw to you that you should talk about him to me?" asked Margaret.

"Nothing—only—"

She hesitated, and paused abruptly. Her face became crimson; and if Margaret did not read her secret then, she was either preoccupied or duller than the average run of women.

"What—only what?" said Margaret, looking intently at her.

"I don't like to see him treated badly when he really loves you," replied Annie Ruthven, summoning all her courage to her aid.

"The next time he wants to woo me," exclaimed Margaret, laughing heartily, "let him come in here, and I'll tell him to go."

"I'll tell him to go, and I'll tell him to go, and I'll tell him to go," said Stephen, a little nettled, as his rising color showed.

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