



CHAPTER I.

Nestling half way down the slope of one of our low Hampton hills stands a small farm house, which in my memory lay vacant for many years. The situation was bleak and pleasant according to the weather and season. Cold and dreary and must have been in a driving winter storm, with the snow whirling round the hills, the noise wind rattling at the casement. Spring time, however, was not long in paying back winter's debt of dreariness. Thereabout the earlier prairie blew, and the sunshine had more light in it and the air a sweeter smell around that spot than anywhere in the neighborhood. Even now I, John Book, who have kept the chemist's shop in Hampton these many years, crawl up there sometimes, and taste the breath of spring, which runs into my blood like wine, and I feel something of the young man tingling in my crazy limbs. Garden and house, windows and ceilings, were all going to the bad together, and at last we called the place Tumbledown Farm; and we used to say that even the rats knew better than to live in Tumbledown Farm.

One day, however, my boy, who was up to his eyes in gossip, came rushing in, basket in hand, and called out, "The farm's taken!"

"Tumbledown Farm?" I said. "Never! 'I've seen the people,'" cries he; "an old fellow in a nightcap, and spectacles and a young lady."

"Heard the name, Bob?"

"Hardware."

Mysterious tenants these newcomers turned out. As for the old man, he scarcely ever went outside his little garden. He was tall, decrepit, with a long white beard and heavy spectacles, and seemed in wretched health. But his daughter came into the village almost every day, and soon became a well-known character.

She was a striking young woman, her age hardly more than twenty-two, but she looked six years older. Her figure was that of one in the fullness of womanhood, her neck and head wonderfully graceful. She was mindful of the beauty of her figure, and wore her shawl cleverly so as to set herself off; and she knew that she had a pretty pair of feet, and let other people know it too. Her step was quick, and her carriage lively and alert. She had the whitest skin possible, a handsome face boldly cut, and two dark eyes easier noticed than forgotten.

I admired this young woman's appearance, something in her manner gave me a turn against her. There was wickedness in her eyes—I express myself awkwardly, but the way of putting it is this: her eyes seemed such that, when you looked into them, your own were fastened for a moment, and in withdrawing your glance you seemed to draw the wicked eyes after you.

Our rector, who made a point of calling on every new parishioner, poor or rich, very soon found his way to Tumbledown Farm. I asked him one morning who they were, and all he could tell me was the name, which I knew already.

"The young woman is his daughter, I suppose?" I said.

"She is; he calls her Vanity," replied the rector.

"Strangest name for a Christian I ever heard," I remarked. "Miss Vanity Hardware—sounds odd enough. Well, vanity is that Vanity does."

That name "Vanity Hardware" kept ringing in my ears, and made me more curious than ever to know something of the young woman who bore it. "Bide your time, John Book," said I to myself. "Everything will come to light if you wait long enough." And I was right.

Once or twice Mr. Hardware was seen in the village. He was very infirm, and used to drive in Jupp's fly. Hardware was tall, and looked venerable. He wore a brown cap with lappets over the ears and a long blue cloak with a cape. His hair you could scarcely see, but his beard was long and white; and his shoes were large, with knobs on the toes, which caught my eye as I watched him lumbering out of the carriage.

"Bunions," said I.

He could hardly rise from his seat, falling back twice, and helped out at last by his daughter and the flyman.

"Lumbago," said I again.

Then he was seized with a coughing fit that nearly shook him to pieces.

"Asthma," cried I the third time.

Almost immediately after the father and daughter crossed over the street and entered my shop, he supported himself on her arm, and leaning heavily on his stick besides. He fell into a chair with a great sigh of relief, and Miss Vanity came to the counter and made one or two purchases, the old man wheezing and mumble to himself all the time.

In my little garden there was a blossoming sweet-smelling rose, which grew close beside a gnarled withered elder bush. Do you know, Miss Vanity, dressy and handsome and young, standing beside this gnarled Antiquity, made me think of the rose and the elder?

Now begins the story proper. Just as I was thinking of the rose and the elder, a young fellow, whom I dearly loved, named Willie, Snow, stepped into my shop. He was in haste; so, with one of his easy, pleasant nods, he asked Miss Vanity to allow him to be served before her, upon which she drew aside. I marked her watching him while he stood leaning against the counter, as taking a young fellow as she would meet in a day's walk. There came over her face a look as if she would try to smother her when she got a chance. She got the chance soon; for as Willie put the vial in his pocket he turned to thank her. She smiled and, having fixed her dark eyes upon him just for an instant, withdrew her gaze with an air of tender modesty that might melt any man's heart!

"Well done, Miss Vanity!" thinks I. "Next to being bashful, the prettiest thing in a pretty woman is to seem so."

But Willie, being not half my age, could not be expected to take the thing in this cool way. A light flashed in his soft gray eyes, surprise and pleasure mixing their rays, and the color deepened on his cheek. He hesitated.

"Good—good—morning," said he, with stammering lips. "Thank you!"

"You are very welcome."

Only four words, mark you. But how charming she looked! A thousand soft and winning beams played over her face, her voice had a melancholy ring, and her eyes drooped to the ground again. A true actress, from her pretty cheek to her heart's core!

Willie seemed struck and dazed; he passed out silently, and she turned to me

aged to meet him constantly at one particular spot where tall trees shaded the road, and from which the distant landscape could be seen in perfect beauty.

So Vanity and Willie met frequently;

he talking about weather, scenery, news, any trifles, while his heart was full of love; she, all glance and smile, letting off flights of arrowy pleasanties barbed with mock tenderness. Little suggestive sayings, laughs tipped with a sigh—all meant to insinuate "I am dying for you!" but quite capable, you observe, of being explained as meaning nothing at all.

What was Miss Nancy Steele doing all this time? Biting her finger-nails, I suppose, thinking her hair was tossed in her haughty head, touching her head, but not giving up the game for lost, no, if her name was Nancy Steele. That Willie was cooling toward her she could not but discover. But Nancy was a long-headed girl. Other girls would have flown into a passion. Not Nancy! She may have fumed and sobbed, but this was in secret. She got scent of Willie's evening walks, and thought she might take a walk herself now and then.

By this artful conduct on the part of Miss Nancy, Willie was put in a fix. When they met she smiled and chatted as usual, never reproving his coldness, even by a glance.

"Doctor," said Willie to me one evening, "I feel like a schemer. I have been rather sweet upon Nancy Steele for a long time. What must I do?"

"Marry her," I replied. "Take her to have and to hold from this day forward."

"But I don't love her," he answered, "and I do love Miss Hardware—passionately."

"Then let Miss Nancy know," I said, gravely. "Honor bright, Will."

"I will let her know," cried Willie—

"this very night."

"Steady, my lad, steady," said I; "you have not asked the other girl yet. Wait and see, Will; wait and see. Steady does it."

To be continued.

"SUGAR AUNTS AND UNCLES."

Amusing New Year's Custom Among the Children of Belgium.

All over the broad earth children display the same characteristic at New Year's—they expect gifts, says the New York Herald. Sometimes they use every art in order to make their expectations realities. Sometimes they even resort to force to gain their ends. One amusing custom is found in Belgium. There, on St. Sylvester's day, the eve of New Year's day, the children strive to secure a "sugar uncle" or a "sugar aunt," as the relative who falls a victim to their wiles is technically termed. On that day all the children of the household enter into a solemn conspiracy for the mutual good at the expense of the unwary adult whom they may entangle in the meshes of their intrigues.

They employ every artifice to get one of the older members of the household under lock and key. Early on that day the keys of all the doors in the house have mysteriously disappeared. They have been secreted by the children, who retain them, nearly for instant use whenever the occasion shall occur.

Then strictest watch is maintained, to the end that some unsuspecting one may be alone in a room. An uncle enters a room to search for the paper which he has mislaid. Presto! There comes a patterning rush of feet in the hallway, the door is slammed, and the key rattles in the lock. The alarmed uncle springs to the door.

The evening of the day upon which Willie met Miss Vanity Hardware in my shop he looked in to see me. Something was on that young man's mind, and at last the secret came out.

"Singular old man I saw in your shop this morning."

"You thought so?" I replied.

"That young woman is his daughter, I suppose?"

"So I understand."

"Pretty sort of girl," he said, with make-believe indifference. "A very tolerable girl, indeed."

"I call her a woman—full grown," said I, emphatically. "Knows more than nine men out of ten, I'll be bound."

A few days after Willie met Miss Vanity walking at her usual active pace, and looking as handsome as ever. The young man blushed like a girl fallen in love for the first time; the young woman preserved her easy air. Willie would have given a ten-pound note for any decent pretext under which he might have spoken to her. As a matter of fact, he stole only one sly glance in passing.

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