



## CHAPTER XII.

The summer day was drawing to a definite close when Willie with reluctant feet made his way to the spot where he and Vanity had so often met.

At the sight of him Vanity bounded forward with 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.

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

"Something has happened," she gasped, "something wrong—something dreadful! Tell me what it is!"

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

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

"Love me still, Willie," she said, sobbing. "Don't give me up. It will be death to me if you give me up."

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

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

"I cannot marry a woman with a secret which she will not or cannot explain."

"Is this generous?" cried Vanity; "is it just?" Did you not press me to marry you—did you not press me again and again in the face of my own warnings on this very matter? Did you not tell me 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."

"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 meant not—not so dishonorable as—"

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

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

"What can you know?" cried Vanity, with symptoms of alarmed curiosity. "My secret—my real secret—you cannot possibly 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. A man comes there by night. You sit alone with him. You sing together. 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 bestow the treasure of your love on me, and we were to fly to a foreign country that we might not be pursued by—this man."

Vanity stood like a statue listening to him, but as he proceeded in 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 all this reached your ears. That wretched tipsy fellow who watched us through the window told you. 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—that in spite of all appearances of evil you would trust me. Trust me as you promised to trust me. Your reward shall be the devotion of my life. But don't cast me off because you suspect me of deceit and selfishness."

"Then explain who your friend is. Tell me his 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."

"Then we part; we part forever."

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

"I 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, but stole a backward glance just as he was leaving the field. 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.

## CHAPTER XIII.

The morning but one after his interview with Vanity he received the following letter:

"Dearest Willie: I am grieved—out to the heart—by what you said to me yesterday, but not angry with you. I know you have reason on your side. What was told you might very well make me seem black in your eyes, and the difficulty even now is that I cannot explain anything. I am bound by the most solemn promise to keep the explanation of the scene which appeared so wicked to you a secret—even from you. The day will come—it is not indeed far off—when you shall know all. In the meantime, will you not accept my solemn assurance that the evil you saw in it is not really there? Meet me this evening at the old place. I can say what I cannot write. When we have talked things over calmly you will see all in a different light. Dearest Will, I know how I love you, and I believe your heart is as dear as mine. Ever your loving,"

"S. H."

There is no need to spin a little incident into a long story. Willie did not go, he spent that evening with Nancy Steele. Three days later he received a second letter, beseeching him to grant another meeting. He made no reply of any sort,

stealing up unseen, came between the two.

"Miss," said he, "you have got some one hid in yonder house who is wanted."

"Wanted? For what?"

Erect, haughty, brushing her tears off but no more afraid than if he had been a beggar asking for a penny.

"Burglary, miss."

Not the quiver of an eyelash, not a change of color from red to white or from white to red, not the slightest tremor in her voice; only a kind of interest, as if the man, in doing his duty, had made an amusing mistake.

"Anything besides burglary, sir?"

"Murder."

Miss Hardware became serious in a moment, but not the least sign of agitation appeared.

"You are making a great mistake," she said; "but you had better come in and see for yourself. I am sorry you have been misinformed. This way."

"Thank ye, Miss Barnitt."

"I see," she said, with the most easy air, "you are altogether mistaken. My name is Hardware."

"It was Barnitt, however," reported the detective coolly, "and is so entered in the books of Mrs. Luck, dressmaker, Carlisle. Silk frocks and trimmings, ten pounds ten; discount for cash. No, Miss Barnitt; this won't do. UP is the word, I tell you. All UP!"

The happy couple took a full measure homewards of four weeks. During their journey I heard certain reports bruited in the village about the Hardwares. One story said that on a particular evening a stranger passing by was startled by loud cries coming from the farm house. When he went to the door to listen, he heard a man shouting and swearing furiously, and a woman sobbing and crying out as if she were struck. Concluding that it was an ordinary case of wife-beating, the stranger pursued his way. Another report declared that old Hardware found the climate of the village disagree with his asthma, and that he had bought a house at Burnham. It was soon ascertained to be a fact that they were leaving Hampton, and, indeed, I learned the early day of their intended departure. By an odd coincidence the same day was fixed for All UP's return.

The day before Willie returned from his wedding trip a strange man walked into my shop. This personage was tall and stout, shabbily dressed, and, indeed, he looked the picture of a bagman. He bought sixpennyworth of black currant lozenges, and putting half a dozen in his mouth at once, seated himself before the counter.

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

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

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"You describe him as if he was your twin brother," I answered.

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