THE BEAUTY OF THE VILLAGE

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Three years ago, Hannah Colson was, beyond all manner of dispute, the prettiest girl in Aberleigh. It was a rare union of face, form, complexion, and expression. Of that just height, which, although certainly tall, would yet hardly be called so, her figure united to its youthful roundness, and still more youthful lightness, an airy flexibility, a bounding grace, and when in repose, a gentle dignity, which alternately reminded one of a fawn bounding through the forest, or a swan at rest upon the lake. A sculptor would have modelled her for the youngest of the Graces; whilst a painter, caught by the bright colouring of that fair blooming face, the white forehead so vividly contrasted by the masses of dark curls, the jet-black eyebrows, and long rich eyelashes, which shaded her finely-cut grey eye, and the pearly teeth disclosed by the scarlet lips, whose every movement was an unconscious smile, would doubtless have selected her for the very goddess of youth. Beyond all question, Hannah Colson, at eighteen, was the beauty of Aberleigh, and, unfortunately, no inhabitant of that populous village was more thoroughly aware that she was so than the fair damsel herself.

Her late father, good Master Colson, had been all his life a respectable and flourishing master bricklayer in the place. Many a man with less pretensions to the title would call himself a builder now-a-days, or "by'r lady," an architect, and put forth a flaming card, vaunting his accomplishments in the mason's craft, his skill in plans and elevations, and his unparalleled dispatch and cheapness in carrying his designs into execution. But John Colson was no new-fangled personage. A plain honest tradesman was our bricklayer, and thoroughly of the old school; one who did his duty to his employers with punctual industry, who was never above his calling, a good son, a good brother, a good husband, and an excellent father, who trained up a large family in the way they should go, and never entered a public-house in his life.

The loss of this invaluable parent about three years before had been the only grief that Hannah Colson had known. But as her father, although loving her with the mixture of pride and fondness, which her remarkable beauty, her delightful gaiety, and the accident of her being by many years the youngest of his children, rendered natural, if not excusable, had yet been the only one about her, who had discernment to perceive, and authority to check her little ebullitions of vanity and self-will; she felt, as soon as the first natural tears were wiped away, that a restraint had been removed, and, scarcely knowing why, was too soon consoled for the greatest misfortune that could possibly have befallen one so dangerously gifted. Her mother was a kind, good, gentle woman, who having by necessity worked hard in the early part of her life, still continued the practice, partly from inclination, partly from a sense of duty, and partly from mere habit, and amongst her many excellent qualities had the Ailie Dinmont propensity of giving all her children their own way,* especially this the blooming cadette of the family: and her eldest brother, a bachelor,—who, succeeding to his father's business, took his place as master of the house, retaining his surviving parent as its mistress, and his pretty sister as something between a plaything and a pet, both in their several ways seemed vying with each other as to which should most thoroughly humour and

indulge the lovely creature whom nature had already done her best or her worst to spoil to their hands.

> * *"Eh, poor things, what else have I to give them?" This reply of Ailie Dinmont, and indeed her whole sweet character, short though it be, has always seemed to me the finest female sketch in the Waverly Novels—finer even, because so much tenderer, than the bold and honest Jeanie Deans.*

Her other brothers and sisters, married and dispersed over the country, had of course no authority, even if they had wished to assume anything like power over the graceful and charming young woman whom every one belonging to her felt to be an object of pride and delight; so that their presents and caresses and smiling invitations aided in strengthening Hannah's impression, poor girl though she were, that her little world, the small horizon of her own secluded hamlet, was made for her, and for her only; and if this persuasion had needed any additional confirmation, such confirmation would have been found in the universal admiration of the village beaux, and the envy, almost as general, of the village belles, particularly in the latter; the envy of rival beauties being, as every body knows, of all flatteries the most piquant and seducing—in a word, the most genuine and real. The only person from whom Hannah Colson ever heard that rare thing called truth, was her friend and school-fellow, Lucy Meadows, a young woman two or three years older than herself in actual age, and half a lifetime more advanced in the best fruits of mature age, in clearness of judgment, and steadiness of conduct.

A greater contrast of manner and character than that exhibited between the light-headed and light-hearted beauty, and her mild and quiet companion could hardly be imagined. Lucy was pretty too, very pretty; but it was the calm, sedate, composed expression, the pure alabaster complexion, the soft dove-like eye, the general harmony and delicacy of feature and of form that we so often observe in a female *Friend*; and her low gentle voice, her retiring deportment, and quaker-like simplicity of dress were in perfect accordance with that impression. Her clearness of intellect, also, and rectitude of understanding, were such as are often found amongst that intelligent race of people; although there was an intuitive perception of character and motive, a fineness of observation under that demure and modest exterior, that, if Lucy had ever in her life been ten miles from her native village, might have been called knowledge of the world.

How she came by this quality, which some women seem to possess by instinct, Heaven only knows! Her early gravity of manner, and sedateness of mind, might be more easily accounted for. Poor Lucy was an orphan, and had from the age of fourteen been called upon to keep house for her only brother, a young man of seven or eight-and-twenty, well to do in the world, who, as the principal carpenter of Aberleigh, had had much intercourse with the Colsons in the way of business, and was on the most friendly terms with the whole family.

With one branch of that family James Meadows would fain have been upon terms nearer and dearer than those of friendship. Even before John Colson's death, his love for Hannah, although not openly avowed, had been the object of remark to

the whole village; and it is certain that the fond and anxious father found his last moments soothed by the hope that the happiness and prosperity of his favourite child were secured by the attachment of one so excellent in character and respectable in situation.

James Meadows was indeed a man to whom any father would have confided his dearest and loveliest daughter with untroubled confidence. He joined to the calm good sense and quiet observation that distinguished his sister, an inventive and constructive power, which, turned as it was to the purposes of his own trade, rendered him a most ingenious and dexterous mechanic; and which only needed the spur of emulation, or the still more active stimulus of personal ambition, to procure for him high distinction in any line to which his extraordinary faculty of invention and combination might be applied.

Ambition, however, he had none. He was happily quite free from that tormenting taskmaster, who, next perhaps to praise, makes the severest demand on human faculty, and human labour. To maintain in the spot where he was born, the character for honesty, independence, and industry, that his father had borne before him, to support in credit and comfort the sister whom he loved so well, and one whom he loved still better, formed the safe and humble boundary of his wishes. But with the contrariety with which fortune so often seems to pursue those who do not follow her, his success far outstripped his moderate desires. The neighbouring gentlemen soon discovered his talent. Employment poured in upon him. His taste proved to be equal to his skill; and from the ornamental out-door work—the Swiss cottages, and fancy dairies, the treillage and the rustic seats belonging to a great country place,—to the most delicate mouldings of the boudoir and the saloon, nothing went well that wanted the guiding eye and finishing hand of James Meadows. The best workmen were proud to be employed by him; the most respectable yeomen offered their sons as his apprentices; and without any such design on his part, our village carpenter was in a fair way to become one of the wealthiest tradesmen in the county.

His personal character and peculiarly modest and respectful manners contributed not a little to his popularity with his superiors. He was a fair slender young man, with a pale complexion, a composed but expressive countenance, a thoughtful, deep-set* grey eye, and a remarkably fine head, with a profusion of curling brown hair, which gave a distinguished air to his whole appearance; so that he was constantly taken by strangers for a gentleman; and the gentle propriety with which he was accustomed to correct the mistake was such as seldom failed to heighten their estimation of the individual, whilst it set them right as to his station. Hannah Colson, with all her youthful charms, might think herself a lucky damsel in securing the affections of such a lover as this; and that she did actually think so was the persuasion of those who knew her best—of her mother, of her brother William, and of Lucy Meadows; although the coy, fantastic beauty, shy as a ring-dove, wild as a fawn of the forest, was so far from confessing any return of affection, that whilst suffering his attentions, and accepting his escort to the rural gaieties which beseemed her age, she would now profess, even while hanging on his arm, her intention of never marrying, and now coquet before his eyes with some passing admirer whom she had never seen before. She took good care,

however, not to go too far in her coquetry, or to flirt twice with the same person; and so contrived to temper her resolutions against matrimony with "nods and becks and wreathed smiles," that, modest as he was by nature, and that natural modesty enhanced by the diffidence which belongs to a deep and ardent passion, James Meadows himself saw no real cause for fear in the pretty petulance of his fair mistress, in a love of power so full of playful grace that it seemed rather a charm than a fault, and in a blushing reluctance to change her maiden state, and lose her maiden freedom, which had in his eyes all the attractions of youthful shamefacedness. That she would eventually be his own dear wife, James entertained no manner of doubt; and, pleased with all that pleased her, was not unwilling to prolong the happy days of courtship.

In this humour Lucy had left him, when, towards the end of May, she had gone for the first time to spend a few weeks with some relations in London. Her cousins were kind and wealthy; and, much pleased with the modest intelligence of their young kinswoman, they exerted themselves to render their house agreeable to her, and to show her the innumerable sights of the Queen of Cities. So that her stay, being urged by James, who, thoroughly unselfish, rejoiced to find his sister so well amused, was prolonged to the end of July, when, alarmed at the total cessation of letters from Hannah, and at the constrained and dispirited tone which she discovered, or fancied that she discovered in her brother's, Lucy resolved to hasten home.

He received her with his usual gentle kindness and his sweet and thoughtful smile; assured her that he was well; exerted himself more than usual to talk, and waived away her anxious questions by extorting from her an account of her journey and her residence, of all that she had seen, and of her own feelings on returning to her country home after so long a sojourn in the splendid and beautiful metropolis. He talked more than was usual with him; and more gaily; but still Lucy was dissatisfied. The hand that had pressed hers on alighting was cold as death; the lip that had kissed her fair brow was pale and trembling; his appetite was gone, and his frequent and apparently unconscious habit of pushing away the clustering curls from his forehead proved, as plainly as words could have done, that there was pain in the throbbing temples. The pulsation was even visible; but still he denied that he was ill, and declared that her notion of his having grown thin and pale was nothing but a woman's fancy,—the fond whim of a fond sister.

To escape from the subject he took her into the garden,—her own pretty flower garden, divided by a wall covered with creepers from the larger plot of ground devoted to vegetables, and bounded on one side by buildings connected with his trade, and parted on the other from a well-stored timber-yard, by a beautiful rustic screen of fir and oak and birch with the bark on, which terminating in a graceful curve at the end next the house, and at that leading to the garden in a projecting gothic porch,—partly covered by climbing plants, partly broken by tall pyramidal hollyhocks, and magnificent dahlias, and backed by a clump of tall elms, formed a most graceful veil to an unsightly object. This screen had been erected during Lucy's absence, and without her knowledge; and her brother smiling at the delight which she expressed, pointed out to her the splendid beauty of her flowers and the luxuriant profusion of their growth.

The old buildings matted with roses, honeysuckles, and jessamines, broken only by the pretty out-door room which Lucy called her greenhouse; the pile of variously tinted geraniums in front of that prettiest room; the wall garlanded, covered, hidden with interwoven myrtles, fuschias, passion-flowers, clematis, and the silky blossoms of the grandiflora pea; the beds filled with dahlias, salvias, calceolarias, and carnations of every hue, with the rich purple and the pure white petunia, with the many-coloured marvel of Peru, with the enamelled blue of the Siberian larkspur, with the richly scented changeable lupine, with the glowing lavatera, the dark-eyed hybiscus, the pure and alabaster cup of the white Oenothera, the lilac clusters of the phlox, and the delicate blossom of the yellow sultan, most elegant amongst flowers;—all these, with a hundred other plants too long to name, and all their various greens, and the pet weed mignionette growing like grass in a meadow, and mingling its aromatic odour amongst the general fragrance—all this sweetness and beauty glowing in the evening sun, and breathing of freshness and of cool air, came with such a thrill of delight upon the poor village maiden, who, in spite of her admiration of London, had languished in its heat and noise and dirt, for the calm and quiet, the green leaves and the bright flowers of her country home, that, from the very fulness of her heart, from joy and gratitude and tenderness and anxiety, she flung her arms round her brother's neck and burst into tears.

Lucy was usually so calm and self-commanded, that such an ebullition of feeling from her astonished and affected James Meadows more than any words, however tender. He pressed her to his heart, and when, following up the train of her own thoughts,—sure that this kind brother, who had done so much to please her was himself unhappy, guessing, and longing, and yet fearing to know the cause,—when Lucy, agitated by such feelings, ventured to whisper "Hannah?" her brother placing her gently on the steps leading to the green-house, and leaning himself against the open door, began in a low and subdued tone to pour out his whole heart to his sympathising auditress. The story was nearly such as she had been led to expect from the silence of one party, and the distress of the other. A rival—a most unworthy rival—had appeared upon the scene; and James Meadows, besides the fear of losing the lovely creature whom he had loved so fondly, had the additional grief of believing that the man whose flatteries had at least gained from her a flattering hearing, was of all others the least likely to make her respectable and happy.—Much misery may be comprised in few words. Poor James's story was soon told.

A young and gay Baronet had, as Lucy knew, taken the manor-house and manor of Aberleigh: and during her absence, a part of his retinue with a train of dogs and horses had established themselves in the mansion, in preparation for their master's arrival Amongst these new comers, by far the most showy and important was the head keeper, Edward Forester, a fine looking young man, with a tall, firm, upright figure, a clear dark complexion, bright black eyes, a smile alternately winning and scornful, and a prodigious fluency of speech, and readiness of compliment. He fell in love with Hannah at first sight, and declared his passion the same afternoon; and, although discouraged by every one about her, never failed to parade before her mother's house two or three times a-day, mounted on his master's superb blood-

horse, to waylay her in her walks, and to come across her in her visits. Go where she might, Hannah was sure to encounter Edward Forester; and this devotion from one whose personal attractions extorted as much admiration from the lasses, her companions, as she herself had been used to excite amongst the country lads, had in it, in spite of its ostentatious openness, a flattery that seemed irresistible.

"I do not think she loves him, Lucy," said James Meadows, sighingly; "indeed I am sure that she does not. She is dazzled by his showiness and his fluency, his horsemanship and his dancing; but love him she does not It is fascination, such a fascination as leads a moth to flutter round a candle, or a bird to drop into the rattlesnake's mouth,—and never was flame more dangerous, or serpent more deadly. He is unworthy of her, Lucy,—thoroughly unworthy. This man, who calls himself devoted to a creature as innocent as she is lovely,—who pretends to feel a pure and genuine passion for this pure and too-believing girl, passes his evenings, his nights, in drinking, in gambling, in debauchery of the lowest and most degrading nature. He is doubtless at this very instant at the wretched beer-shop at the corner of the common—the haunt of all that is wicked, and corrupter of all that is frail, 'The Foaming Tankard'. It is there, in the noble game of Four Corners, that the man who aspires to the love of Hannah Colson passes his hours.—Lucy, do you remember the exquisite story of Phoebe Dawson, in Crabbe's Parish Register?—such as she was, will Hannah be. I could resign her, Heaven knows, grievous as the loss would be, to one whom she loved, and who would ensure her happiness. But to give her up to Edward Forester—the very thought is madness!"

"Surely, brother, she cannot know that he is so unworthy! surely, surely, when she is convinced that he is so, she will throw him off like an infected garment! I know Hannah well. She would be protected from such an one as you describe, as well by pride as by purity. She cannot be aware of these propensities."

"She has been told of them repeatedly; but he denies the accusation, and she rather believes his denial than the assertion of her best friends. Knowing Hannah as you do, Lucy, you cannot but remember the petulant self-will, the scorn of contradiction and opposition, which used half to vex and half to amuse us in the charming spoilt child. We little dreamt how dangerous that fault, almost diverting in trifles, might become in the serious business of life. Her mother and brother are my warm advocates, and the determined opponents of my rival; and therefore, to assert what she calls her independence and her disinterestedness, (for with this sweet perverse creature the worldly prosperity which I valued chiefly for her sake makes against me,) she will fling herself away on one wholly unworthy of her, one whom she does not even love, and with whom her whole life will be a scene of degradation and misery."

"Will he be to-night at the Foaming Tankard?"

"He is there every night!"

At this point of their conversation the brother was called away; and Lucy, after a little consideration, tied on her bonnet, and walked to Mrs. Colson's.

Her welcome from William Colson and his mother was as cordial and hearty as ever, perhaps more so; Hannah's greetings were affectionate, but constrained. Not to receive Lucy kindly was impossible; and yet her own internal consciousness

rendered poor Lucy, next perhaps to her brother, the very last person whom she would have desired to see; and this uncomfortable feeling increased to a painful degree, when the fond sister, with some diminution of her customary gentleness, spoke to her openly of her conduct to James, and repeated with strong and earnest reprehension, all that she had heard of the conduct and pursuits of her new admirer.

"He frequent the Foaming Tankard! He drink to intoxication! He play for days and nights at Four Corners! It is a vile slander! I would, answer for it with my life! He told me this very day that he has never even entered that den of infamy."

"I believe him to be there at this very hour," replied Lucy, calmly. And Hannah, excited to the highest point of anger and agitation, dared Lucy to the instant proof, invited her to go with her at once to the beer-house, and offered to abandon all thoughts of Edward Forester if he proved to be there. Lucy, willing enough to place the fate of the cause on that issue, prepared to accompany her; and the two girls were so engrossed by the importance of their errand, that they did not even hear Mrs. Colson's terrified remonstrance, who vainly endeavoured to detain or recal them by assurances that smallpox of the confluent sort was in the house; and that she had heard only that very afternoon, that a young woman, vaccinated at the same time, and by the same person with her Hannah, lay dead in one of the rooms of the Foaming Tankard.

Not listening to, not even hearing her mother, Hannah walked with the desperate speed of passion through the village street, up the winding hill, across the common, along the avenue; and reached in less time than seemed possible the open grove of oaks, in one corner of which this obnoxious beer-house, the torment and puzzle of the magistrates, and the peat of the parish, was situated. There was no sign of death or sickness about the place. The lights from the tap-room and the garden, along one side of which the alley for four-corners was erected, gleamed in the darkness of a moonless summer night between the trees; and even farther than the streaming light, pierced the loud oaths and louder laughter, the shouts of triumph, and the yells of defeat, mixed with the dull heavy blows of the large wooden bowl, from the drunken gamesters in the alley.

Hannah started as she heard one voice; but, determined to proceed, she passed straight through the garden-gate, and rushed hastily on to the open shed where the players were assembled. There, stripped of his coat and waistcoat, in all the agony of an intoxicated gambler, stood Edward Forester, in the act of staking his gold-laced hat upon the next cast He threw and lost; and casting from him with a furious oath the massive wooden ball, struck, in his blind frenzy, the lovely creature transfixed in silent horror at the side of the alley, who fell with the blow, and was carried for dead into the Foaming Tankard.

Hannah did not, however, die; although her left arm was broken, her shoulder dislocated, and much injury inflicted by the fall. She lived, and she still lives, but no longer as the Beauty of the Village. Her fine shape injured by the blow, and her fair face disfigured by the smallpox, she can no longer boast the surpassing loveliness which obtained for her the title of the Rose of Aberleigh. And yet she has gained more than she has lost, even in mere attraction; the vain coquettish girl is become a sweet and gentle woman; gaiety has been replaced by sensibility, and the sauciness of conscious power, by the modest wish to please. In her long and

dangerous illness, her slow and doubtful convalescence, Hannah learnt the difficult lesson to acknowledge and to amend her own faults; and when, after many scruples on the score of her changed person and impaired health, she became the happy wife of James Meadows, she brought to him, in a corrected temper and purified heart, a dowry far more precious in his mind than the transient beauty which had been her only charm in the eyes of Edward Forester.