

Bachelor's Fancy

Alice Brown

Table of Contents

<u>Bachelor's Fancy</u>	1
<u>Alice Brown</u>	1

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CYNTHIA GALE sat by the window in the long shed chamber, her hands at momentary ease. She was a slight, sweet creature. with a delicate skin, and hair etherealized by ashen coverts. Her eyes were dark, and beauty throbbled into them with drifting thoughts. Cynthia was tired. She had been at work at the loom since the first light of day, and now she had given up to the languor of completed effort, her head thrown back, her arms along the arms of the chair, in an attitude of calm. Her hair had slipped from its coil, and fallen on either side of her face in gentle disarray. She was very lovely.

The room, the scene of her toil and resting, was dark with age and significant in tokens of a disused art. The loom stood well in the centre, its great upright beams obstructing the light from window to window. All about were the lesser implements of a weaver's trade: the linen wheel, the reels and swifts. On a chest were skeins of indigo-blue yarn Cynthia had dyed, and near by, the flaxen thread she had unearthed from an ancient hoard under the rafters. At last, she knew how to weave. She had walked a weary way in the pursuit of her trade, and now she had reached the first of many goals.

The stillness of the autumn day made a great world about her where everything was happy because everything was busy. A woodpecker settled on the locust outside, and began drumming. She looked out at him from the idleness of a well-earned rest, and smiled. It seemed to her a wonderful earth where there was so much to do. From first to last, she saw, creation moved and toiled, and she moved with it. Without conscious thought, she felt the strength and beauty of the twisting chain.

Cynthia had come to happiness by a long road. Her first memories were of the poorhouse near the sea, where her mother, a sad waif out of the drift of life, had been swept, to die. Cynthia knew nothing about her father, except that he drank and played the violin. People said he invented things, what things she never heard. He was clever with his hands and brain; but nothing he had was used to his own advantage. He was one of life's pensioners. Cynthia, growing up at the poorhouse, seemed to have no more to do with life as it is than he. She did the housework set her as her portion with an absent care, and then escaped into the open for some mysterious sustenance that she understood as little as the people who watched her ways. There were hours when, tramping inland, she lay prone under the pines in the pasture, smelling at life and very happy. There were more when she sat looking at a great island of fern, entranced by something she could not apprehend, and had no need to, because feeling was enough. Though she did her tasks, she was called lazy, and she lived, in a sense, apart from people until one day Andrew Gale, driving about to buy cattle, met her in the country road as she was coming home like Ruth from her gleanings, only that Cynthia's arms were piled with golden-rod instead of grain. Her eyes were brimming with still happiness. Her cheeks had a bloom over their summer tan. Andrew caught his breath and stared again. The next day, after patient watching, he found her by the sea, and again he met her when she went to gather grapes. In a month he married her and took her home to the great house where he had lived alone since his mother's death, with only old Hannah to do the work in a perfect fashion that left him lonelier than before, in the solitude made by her deaf ears.

Cynthia blossomed like a flower, and from some inner secret of being she felt like one. This was like growing in a garden with fructifying soil, the sun upon her and gentle rains, and one great tree to shade her from too strong effulgence. Andrew was the tree. He was a silent creature, the emotion in him hidden by a fine reserve; but he

Bachelor's Fancy

tended and protected her until she grew worshipful of him in a way neither of them quite realized. All Cynthia's capacity for love bloomed out in a fervor that made her vivid, with a charm added to her beauty. When they had been married a few months, old Hannah died, and then Cynthia, shrinking from a new presence in their intimate solitude, did the work alone. She threw it off easily enough, without heart or fancy, and very swiftly, to give her time to be with Andrew in the fields or during his trips over the countryside. Housework, to her mind, was a dull means to life, only made tolerable because Andrew was satisfied with everything she did. It was devoid of grace, not, like weaving, a road to happy fantasy. In spite of it, she kept the purely untrammelled habit of life which lies in a perfect freedom, with love at the end of each day's work. Again her estate seemed to her like that of the flowers of the field. She had nothing to do but live and bloom.

When she had been married a year, her own individual passion came upon her. One day she went up into the shed chamber in search of an old saddle Andrew remembered as one of the family holdings, and found herself in a mysterious workshop. This was the weaving room. It had a strange look of waiting, of holding secrets it was ready to divulge, of keeping a strange silence it might some time break. Instant recognition laid hold on her. At first it seemed curiosity; then it grew into something more piquing. Thrown upon a bench, as if the last weaver had left it there, was a book written in a delicate yet unformed hand, in faded ink upon a yellowed page. She turned it swiftly. There were the patterns for weaving the old blue coverlets of which the house already had a store. The names made her breathless with their sound of homely poesy: Bachelor's Fancy, Girl's Love, Primrose and Diamonds, Chariot Wheels and Church Windows, Pansies and Roses in the Wilderness. There were full directions in the faded hand, and the patterns had been made in the careful drawing of one who rules her lines and works from a pathetic ignorance. Cynthia ran downstairs tumultuously, and unfurled the book before Andrew where he sat mending the harness.

"See here!" she cried. "See what I 've found."

Andrew looked up with an abstracted interest.

"Oh," said he, "that's Argentine's book."

"Who was Argentine?"

"She was great-grandmother Pyncheon's sister. She was a great weaver. She stuck to it when everybody else had give it up. She was goin' to be married, but he was lost at sea, an' after that she never did much but weave. Them coverlets you set such store by were all hers."

Cynthia had treasured the coverlets with an unreasoning love. Their pattern pleased her. The close firm weave awoke respect, beside more modern fabrics. New passion stirred in her from that first interest.

"O Andrew!" she breathed, "do you s'pose I could weave coverlets?"

It was not Andrew's custom to deny anything in their little world.

"I guess so," said he indulgently. "I guess you could do anything you set out to. Mebbe old Foss could put you on the road."

Old Foss lived a mile away, in a little house filled with treasures of ancient usage which he seemed to prize only because collectors came at intervals and fixed a market value in his mind. Next day Andrew hitched up and went down to borrow him; but Foss clung to his hearthstone. He could weave, he said, but weaving had gone out. He guessed with cotton cloth as cheap as it was now, there's no need of wastin' anybody's time over a loom. Next day, Cynthia herself went down with her book of patterns, and he gave her a few grudging rules. Then she started on her ignorant way, and to-day was the culmination of long desire. Bachelor's Fancy was in process of growth. It

Bachelor's Fancy

was only a question of time when she should have a coverlet of her own to hoard with Argentine's.

The silence in the shed chamber grew more drowsy with the mounting day. Suddenly Cynthia was aware that she was more than half asleep, nodding over the verge of something almost tangible, it was so deep and still. She was hungry, too, but that she scarcely knew. A slice of bread and a cup of milk had made her early breakfast, and since then this breathless achievement had lifted her outside the pale of daily needs. But now she rose and went swaying down the stairs, her eyelids heavy. The house below was still. Andrew had been away a week with the threshing machine, leaving the next neighbor to milk and "feed the critters." Cynthia had half promised to go over to the neighbor's house to sleep, but the passion for weaving had so engrossed her that now she scarcely knew light from darkness, and the short intervals in her work it seemed foolish to spend away from home. Besides, she missed Andrew less if she stayed in their familiar places, where the walls were reminiscent of him. In the bottom of her heart was always a crying hunger for him, an aching loneliness. But she could bear it. She had the weaving and a child's eager hope to bring him the work of her own hands.

Down there in the kitchen she looked about and smiled a sleepy smile at its disorder. Her plate and cup were on the table, and there was a pile of dishes in the sink. Even the milk pails were unwashed, and she did shrink momentarily under the guilt of that.

"O my soul!" said she.

Ashes had blown across the hearth, and the kitten had rolled an egg from the table to the rug. Through the open bedroom door her unmade bed was yawning. It was sweet and clean. The sun lay brightly on the tick, and the autumn breeze blew on snowy sheets. Yet it was disorder, and Cynthia knew it, as any housewife would know, or any man used to the rigor of routine. She was a slattern. Her house tattled the tale even to her own eyes. Nevertheless, she had achieved Bachelor's Fancy, and her mouth curled in a smile that widened to a pretty yawn. She stretched herself out on the lounge and went to sleep.

There was a step on the threshold, impatient, swift. Cynthia opened her eyes from deep beatitude to a flood of noon sunlight in the disordered room, and a figure standing in the midst of it. She rose to her elbow, pushing back her hair. Then she gave a cry: —

"Andrew! Andrew! O Andrew!" She was on her feet, on tiptoe to fly to him, but his face arrested her. "Andrew!" she called, "what is it?"

He had had a hard week. A man had failed them, and he had been doing double work, feeding the machine in dust and heat and for two days with a beard of barley in his eye. They had taken the threshing by the job and he had put it through madly, to get home to Cynthia, spurred always by the certainty of her loneliness, and half ashamed of his childish worry over her. He was dead tired, he was hungry, dirty, hot. Even his face was blackened from the dust, and little moist runners had streaked and whitened it. The sight of him amazed her, and she stood there a-wing, ready to go to him, her child's cheeks creased with drowsiness and her great eyes dark. But something about his set mouth and glowing eyes forbade her nearer greeting.

"O Andrew!" she breathed again, "I didn't think you'd come."

"You didn't think I'd come? Why didn't you?"

Instantly there flashed into her mind a story she had heard about the Gale temper. Andrew was a slow man, the neighbors said, "till you got him roused. Then you better stan' from under." Andrew had owned it to her once, with a shamefaced grin. But after his confession they had both laughed, and she had felt his arms about her in that mutual understanding which was more than human trust, but a something ineffable neither could define. Now for the first time in her life there was a barrier between them, invisible but potent. She did not dare approach him.

Bachelor's Fancy

"Why didn't you think so?" he repeated.

She faltered in her answer. "You said 't would be a week."

"It's been a week. I said I'd be here Thursday noon."

"Yes" — she opened her mouth in futile protest and then closed it. But the truth came to her, and she told it with a childlike confidence that it would be the same to Andrew as to her. "I got weaving. I forgot."

"You got weaving!" he repeated. Then he looked about the room, and its disorder made satirical commentary on her words. But Cynthia had gained courage. The mention of her new triumph reminded her that she had a joy to bring him.

"O Andrew!" she breathed, "I've learned it. I've learned Bachelor's Fancy. Mine's as good as Argentine's."

Andrew stood looking at her for a moment, her distended eyes, her pretty mouth where the smile was just beginning, and would come if he invited it. But at that moment the smile was not for him. It meant a child's absorption in a foolish game, and oblivion of him for whom there was hard work and barley beards. He turned abruptly.

"Well," he announced, "I've got no more to say."

He had taken a step toward the open door, but her voice followed him. It was sharp with quick alarm.

"Andrew, where you goin'?"

He turned upon her.

"I'll tell you where I'm goin'. I'm goin' on to Trumbull's with the thrashers, an' get a meal o' victuals."

"But, Andrew, I'll get dinner. I can, in no time. There's eggs. You like eggs, Andrew."

"Mebbe you don't remember what we said that last mornin' I set off. I told ye I'd bring Miles an' t'other men to dinner. It ain't been out o' my mind a minute. For two days I've been houndin' 'em to finish up, so's we could git here this noon. What do you s'pose I wanted to do it for? I wanted to show off. I wanted to let 'em see how well we were fixed. An' this kitchen don't look as if there'd been a meal o' victuals cooked in it sence the time o' Noah. It ain't a kitchen; it's a hurrah's nest."

"O Andrew!" She backed piteously away from him, with a sudden, alien sense of a house not her own. She seemed to herself in that instant to be not his wife, but a guest by whom his hospitality had been abused. Then again she trembled into speech. "Maybe you've done with me, Andrew. Maybe you don't want me to stay here any more."

"I don't care what ye do nor where ye go," said Andrew blindly. "I'm goin' to Trumbull's." He strode out and away down the path, and she heard him hailing the threshers at the gate. They answered jovially, and then the heavy team went grinding on.

She sat down upon the couch and looked about her. The sun came cruelly in at the window, and showed the room in all its dusty disarray. The dazed spot in her brain cleared, like a lifting sedative, and left her vulnerable to pain. She saw his house as he had seen it, and for the instant felt how he had hated it and her. With that certainty she met also the ultimate pang of youth which knows when its hour is spoiled, and says, "This is the end." There was

Bachelor's Fancy

but one thing to do. She must take herself away. She went to the cupboard and reached to the upper shelf where old Hannah used to keep her toothache drops. There was laudanum enough in them, Andrew had said, to kill an army. It would kill her. But as she stood there in the stillness with the bottle in her hand, distaste came upon her for the ugliness of such a death, and that moment, sounding in her ears, she heard the sea. Whether it was because she had begun her life by it or through some quickness of the mind, running over the possibilities of a decent death, she remembered a little mate of hers who had been playing in a dory when the anchor slipped, and had drifted out, never to be seen again. And now the sea was calling her.

"You gimme a match, won't ye?" called old Nancy Hutchens from the door. "I won't come in. I'm all over muck from the swamp down there. I crossed by the willers, to save steps."

Cynthia tucked the bottle back in its place and crossed the kitchen swiftly, taking a card of matches as she went. Old Nancy stood there on the doorstone, a squat figure with one shoulder higher than the other. She had the imposing equipment of an aquiline nose and sound white teeth at seventy. Her thick gray hair was drawn back into a knot, and the lines in her brown face were crisp and deep. A life solitary in itself, and yet spent among people in a drifting way, had touched her face with little quizzical shades of meaning. Her cold pipe was in her hand, waiting to be filled.

"Here's the matches," said Cynthia.

Nancy took them with a mechanical touch, and remained looking at her.

"Law!" said she, "'t ain't wuth it."

"What ain't?" repeated Cynthia.

"What you've got on your mind, whatever 't is. Wait a day an' it 'll be a thing o' the past. If 't ain't in a day, 't will be in a year, or ten year, or a lifetime. Wait long enough, an' the whole on us 'll be underground."

"Yes," said Cynthia, "we shall be underground." But her mind was not with the old woman, but on her own preparations for flight. The tawdry room still troubled her, the slatternly picture he must find when he came home. She would leave his house in order for him. "Look here, Nancy," said she suddenly, "you stay the rest o' the day an' help me clean."

Nancy smiled satirically. She looked up at the blue sky, sown with flying white, and then over the line of upland where her fate, every day renewed, was waiting for her.

"I don't clean for myself," she said. "My bed ain't been made nor slep' in for a fortnight. I been trampin' the countryside."

"I'll give you a dollar!"

"I ain't got much use for dollars till winter time, an' then I guess I shall be provided for. I got a passel o' herbs to sell this fall." But she was searching Cynthia's face with her impersonal glance, and her mind altered. "Law, yes!" said she. "It's as good a way o' passin' time as any other. You let me pull off these muddy boots. You got a pair o' rubbers I can scuff round in? Where you goin' to begin?"

With the word, she had caught up an old pair of Andrew's shoes beside the shed door, and slipped her feet into them. Cynthia left her, and went flying upstairs with an unregarding haste. She went first to the shed chamber, and, without a glance at her precious handiwork, closed the door upon it. Then, running to the other rooms in turn, she breathed dull satisfaction at finding them in comfortable array. There was the west chamber; she had put that

Bachelor's Fancy

in order when aunt Patten had been expected, a week before, to spend the night, and the other rooms had to match it because aunt Patten would go mousing round. Cynthia had laughed with Andrew, in the doing, over so patently setting her scene for a meddler. But aunt Patten had diverged, on her visiting way, and Cynthia's pains had seemed unnecessary.

At the foot of the stairs Nancy was awaiting her. She had an air of large leisure; yet in some subtle fashion her man's attitude showed the reserve strength in her and inspired content.

"What be I goin' to fly at fust?" she asked indulgently, as at a madness not her own.

"You sweep the sittin'-room," returned Cynthia. "When the dust is settled, you can do the winders. I'll begin on the bedroom."

Cynthia did not, it seemed to her, think at all as she went about her work, doing it swiftly and still with the far-off sound of the sea in her ears. She was simply a different creature from that other happy woman who had been weaving coverlets that morning. She had brought upon herself a colossal punishment. She never stopped to wonder whether the punishment were just. It was simply there.

At one she and Nancy had some eggs and tea, and in mid afternoon they met in the kitchen, each about her task. Cynthia was baking now, cream o' tartar biscuits and custard pie, and Nancy was cleaning the woodwork with great sweeps of her lean arm.

"I didn't know you was such a driver," she said at length, as she sat on the top of the step-ladder, taking a pull at her pipe.

"I guess I ain't been," said Cynthia, her pretty brows in a painstaking frown over the scalloped edges of the pie. "I ain't done much housework."

"You like it?" asked Nancy.

A swift terror fled across Cynthia's face, like a beating wing. At that moment she liked housework better than anything on earth. It was not a cold routine. It had at last a poignant meaning. It meant Andrew and her home. But she answered stolidly, "I guess so."

"If you've took it on yourself, you've got to like it," said Nancy philosophically, rising and knocking the ashes from her pipe. "You hand me up that bar soap. That's the wust o' menfolks. Once you've got 'em, you got to slave for 'em. Lug 'em or leave 'em! But don't git 'em, I say. Look here, now! Fifty year ago come November, I said I'd marry a man down Sudleigh way. I went to stay a spell with his mother. Well, sir! I come home an' I broke it off. 'I ain't a-goin' to spend my days makin' sugar gingerbread,' says I. 'No, sir! Nor cuttin' it out in an oak-leaf pattern, — not by a long chalk!'"

"He likes sugar gingerbread," said Cynthia to herself. "I guess I got time to make some."

"I warrant ye the colored pop'lacion never felt freer 'n I did when I see him walkin' away down the path arter I told him 't was broke off," chuckled Nancy, moving the step-ladder along. "I never had a minute's sorrer over it, — not a second."

"I guess I'll put in a mite o' ginger," said Cynthia, stirring breathlessly. "Do you use ginger, Nancy?"

"Law! I dunno what ye do, it's so long sence I've tried any. I don't concern myself with sweet trade. I can make as good a meal as I want out o' crackers an' cheese an' wash it down with a drink o' water out o' the well. Look here!

Bachelor's Fancy

did it ever come into your head that everybody ain't called to preach, an' everybody ain't called to marry?"

"Some ain't fit," said Cynthia bitterly, her passionate mind on her own defects, "they ain't fit to marry."

"T ain't only that, — they're like a bird in a cage. You look here! menfolks think they're dull sometimes, settled down in a pint measure with one woman. Lordymighty! the women's dull, too, on'y they don't let on. Pious little devils! they go round washin' dishes an' moppin' up under the sto', and half on 'em wants to be trampin' like me, an' t'other half dunno what they want. Keep out on 't, I say! keep out on 't!"

Nancy lifted her voice in a tuneful stave, the words satirically fit, but Cynthia was not listening. The notes fell upon her like a patter of unregarded rain, as she creased her gingerbread and beat her mind back from futile wonderment over her own plight when Andrew should be here alone.

"The house has got to be jes' so," pursued Nancy. "The woman's got to be jes' so. They can come home all over gurry, but she's got to have on a clean apron an' her hair slicked up to the nines. They can set all the evenin' huskin' together an' hootin' over old stories, an' come stumblin' in when they git ready, an' find doughnuts an' pie set out complete. What's fair for one's fair for another, I say."

"No, it ain't!" cried Cynthia, suddenly awakened. She stood straight and slender in the middle of her kitchen. Defensive fires burned hotly in her eyes. "Nancy, I ain't goin' to have such talk in here. I can't stand it. You think of him gettin' all over dust an' dirt workin' like a dog. You think of it, Nancy! It's his house. It's no more 'n right he should have it the way he wants it. I should like to know if he ain't goin' to have anything the way he wants it?" Her voice choked in passionate championship of the man whose pride was hurt.

But Nancy only gave a derisive chuckle. "Law!" said she. "You needn't worry. I guess they'll look out for themselves. I never see a man yet but had time enough for that."

At five o'clock the house was in order and Nancy had started on her homeward way, a dollar in her pocket, and, despite some ruthless indifference on her part, a basket of food in her hand. Cynthia dismissed her with an unwitting solemnity.

"Good-by, Nancy," said she. "You've been a real help to me. I don't know how I should have got through it if it hadn't been for you."

"It's clean as a ribbin'," Nancy called back cheerfully. "But land! cleanin' up's nothin'. Trouble is to keep it so. Well, I'll be pokin' along."

Cynthia stood and watched her well-knit figure swinging on between the willows that marked the road. Then she turned back to her clean house for a last look and the renewed certainty of its perfect state. She walked delicately about the kitchen, lest a grain of dust should be tracked upon the speckless floor. The food not yet cooled from the oven was in the pantry. All through the lower rooms there was the fragrance of cake and bread. It was a house set in order, and finding it perfect, she made herself sweet and clean, and changed her working dress for a crisper calico. In the doing, she thought solemnly how she had once helped bathe a child that had died at the poorhouse, and prepare it for burial. This body of hers was also being prepared, and though she had no words to say so, it seemed to her the body of her love. And all the time the sea kept calling her, with its assurances of manifold and solemn refuge.

Presently she was ready to go. She had made the clothing she had slipped off into a little bundle, to leave none but fresh things behind her, and now she took it in her hand and stepped out at the front door. That she closed, but the windows were still open. It was better that storms should invade the house than that he should find it inhospitably shut. Day and night could be trusted with their welcome to him. But turning from the door, she smelled her

Bachelor's Fancy

garden, and its autumn bitterness of breath awoke in her a final pang of homesickness. She laid down her bundle and hurried round to the well, to draw bucket after bucket of water and drench the roots she had kept tended since the spring. It was a separate good-bye to every one. Here were the delicate firstlings whose day had long been over, and the hollyhocks that had made the summer gay. Dahlias and asters were the ones to keep this later watch, but she sprinkled them impartially, whether they were to bloom again or wither till the winter's spell. The moon was rising behind the wooded hill, and there was suddenly a prophetic touch of frost in the air. She stood for a moment listening to the stillness, recognizing life as if it all came flooding in on her at once, only to retreat like a giant wave and wash some farther shore. Her brain apprehended what her tongue could never say. She understood the meaning of service and harmonious living. It was no more dull to her now than daily sunrise. She looked at Andrew's house, builded by another Gale over a hundred years ago. It meant more than a shelter. It was the roof of love, the nest of springing hopes. Yet being a child at heart, she could not stay after he had found her for one day unworthy, and she was too young to know how storms may pass.

The man came heavily along the darkened road and reached the gate as she did. She saw him and dropped her bundle in the shade of the lilac at the fence. Andrew did not speak. He threw open the gate, stepped in, and put his arms about her. He held her to him as we hold what is almost lost us through our own lax grasp; but when he spoke to her, she did not hear, and when he loosed his clasp to look at her, she sank down and would have fallen.

"Cynthy, for God's sake!" he cried, and his voice recalled her. Then she gained her feet, he helping her.

"What is it, dear? what is it, dear?" he kept saying, and she answered him with her tremulous breath upon his cheek. Presently they went up the path together, and in at the closed door. "By George, don't it smell good!" said Andrew. His voice, in nervous joviality, was shaking, like his hands. "Le' me git a light, honey. I've got to look at you. Got to make sure you're here!"

The blaze from the shining lamp struck full on her, and Andrew caught his breath. Cynthia looked like the angel of herself. Her tired face, overlaid by joy, was like that of a child awakened from sleep to unexpected welcome. She seemed an adoring handmaid, incredulous of the beauty of her task. Andrew felt the wistfulness of her air, the presence of things unknown to him. He went over to her and drew her nearer.

"You knew I'd come," he said. "You knew I couldn't stan' it after I'd been ugly to you. Look at this house! You fixed all up, an' made it neat as wax. I started just as they set down to supper, an' put for home. I've been scairt 'most to death all the afternoon. I dunno what I thought would happen to you, but I had to come."

"I've cleaned the house," said Cynthia, like a child. "I got old Nancy."

"Yes, dear, yes," he soothed her. "You knew I'd come. You knew I wouldn't stay away a night after I broke your heart. You tell about your weavin', dear. I want to hear it now."

"My weavin'?" repeated Cynthia vaguely. The words roused her a little from her happy dream, and for one luminous instant she felt the significance of all the threads that make the web of life. She laughed. "'Twas only Bachelor's Fancy," she said. "I learned it, that's all. There's lots o' things I'd ruther do. You go in the pantry, dear, an' look."

Andrew left her with a kiss that was like meeting, not good-bye. But as he took the lamp from the table, Cynthia slipped out at the front door.

"Where you goin'?" he called.

"Only out to the lilac," she answered throbbingly. "I dropped somethin' there."

Bachelor's Fancy

While he lingered for her, she came back and, as she ran, tossed her little bundle into the closet under the stairs. The hues of youth were on her face. Her eyes were wet and glad.

"I'm terrible hungry, too," she told him. "Come! there's sugar gingerbread."

Alice Brown.