

Two maidens

Have you ever seen "a maiden"? I am referring to what road pavers call a "maiden," a thing used for ramming down the paving stones. "She" is made entirely of wood, broad at the bottom, with iron hoops around it, and a stick run through it at the upper, narrower end, which gives the maiden arms.

Two maidens like this were once standing in the yard shed, among shovels, measuring tapes, and wheelbarrows. Now, there was a rumor going around that they were no longer to be called "maidens," but "stamps" or "hand rammers"; and this is the newest and only correct term in road pavers' language for what we all in olden times called "a maiden."

There are among us human beings certain individuals we call "emancipated women," such as institution superintendents, midwives, ballet dancers, milliners, and nurses; and with this group of "emancipated," the two "maidens" in the yard shed associated themselves. They were known as "maidens" among the road pavers and would under no circumstances give up their good old name and let themselves be called "stamps" or "hand rammers."

"Maiden is a human name," they said, "but a 'stamp' or a 'hand rammer' is a thing, and we certainly do not want to be called things; that's insulting us!"

"My betrothed is liable to break off our engagement," said the younger of the two, who was engaged to a ramming block, a large machine used to drive stakes into the ground. In fact, he did on a larger scale the same sort of work that she did on a smaller. "He'll take me as a 'maiden,' but I'm sure he won't have me as a 'stamp' or 'hand rammer,' and so I'll not permit them to change my name."

"As for me, I'd just as soon have both my arms broken off!" said the elder.

But the wheelbarrow had a different idea, and the wheelbarrow was really somebody! He considered himself a quarter of a carriage because he went about on one wheel. "I must, however, tell you that it's common enough to be called 'maidens'; that isn't nearly so distinctive a name as 'stamp,' because that belongs under the category of 'seals.' Just think of the 'royal signet,' and the 'seal of the state.' If I were you I would give up the name 'maiden.' "

"Never!" said the elder. "I'm much too old for that!"

"You don't seem to understand what is called the European necessity," said the honest old measuring tape. "People have to adapt themselves to circumstances, limit themselves, give in to the needs of the times. And if there is a law that the 'maidens' are to be called 'stamps' or 'hand rammers,' then by that new name she must be called. There is a measuring tape for everything."

"Well, if there must be a change," said the younger, "I'd rather be called 'miss,' for 'miss' reminds one a little of 'maiden.' "

"But I'd rather be chopped up for firewood than change at all," said the old "maiden."

Now it was time for work. The "maidens" rode; they were put in the wheelbarrow, which was respectful treatment, but they were now called "stamps."

"Maid--!" they cried as they stamped on the paving stones. "Maid--!" They almost said the whole word "maiden," but they didn't finish; they had decided not to say any more about it. But among themselves they always spoke of each other as "maidens," and praised the good old days when things were called by their proper names and those who were "maidens" were called "maidens."

And "maidens" they both remained, for the ramming block, the big machine I told you about, did break off his engagement with the younger; he would have nothing to do with a "stamp" or "hand rammer"!

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