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CHAPTER XXVI.

This was next door to rebuff, but Sydney, strong in her purpose, was not going to give way.

"Sneak is quite beyond me," she said cheerfully saddling herself with stupidity, "I understand your explanations so much more easily, but I am afraid that is such a poor compliment, that you are sure to refuse them to me now."

"If you really prefer them, they are at your service, Miss Grey."

Half fearing from his constraint that she had gone too far, Sydney unearthed the manuscript from the writing-table drawer, read out admirably its clear and clever pages, and then making the most of Mr. Hurst's visible gratification at her grasp of his style and subject, preferred another request.

"May I just look at the rest of the manuscripts here, Mr. Hurst?"

"If you choose. But they are not worth it, Miss Grey; they are incomplete."

"Thank you for letting me, though. 'Churches of a West County,' 'The River's Banks,' 'Before the Saxons.' Why, there must be the making of a splendid book here, Mr. Hurst."

He smiled at last. "A book? Yes, 'Splendid?' I'm afraid not. But whether or no, there can be no telling now," he sighed.

"No telling! Why?"

"Why?" he reiterated, as though the question were cruel. "Why, because, as I said, those papers are incomplete, and I have no power to shape them into what they should be. They are sketches; the frame-work only of chapters. What might have been a book, must stand like a half-built deserted house, Miss Grey. Wind and rain devour one; fire will probably devour the other."

"It has no reason to," said Sydney. "Why should the building not go on?"

"With a blind craftsman!" he exclaimed.

"With a blind master, if you please," said she, hardening her voice, "but a day-laborer under owners, who can see. Please, Mr. Hurst, suddenly changing now to frank and fearless persuasion, "if I am not too dull or too illiterate, will you let me try and put your volume together? of course only the mechanical part of it. You would direct every line."

For nearly a minute, Mr. Hurst was silent, his color rising. Poor Sydney was luring him into something beyond his old beloved world of letters. He had nearly steeled himself to wise refusal, when by way of strengthening her plea she said,

"Imagine how delightful Miss Jean would be, how proud, if your book

brought only a little fortune in." "Ah, that she would!" he said, with instant acquiescence, not entirely glad. "But," slowly, "I should not dare—I have no right to appropriate your time, your thought, in this way. I am most grateful, but it can not be done."

"You think I am not able to do my share. You dislike the idea yourself," she said, not seeking to hide her disappointment.

"The idea I should revel in, other things being equal. Your share would be better done than mine. Nevertheless, the project won't do."

While speaking, he had drawn nearer than usual nowadays. His quick hearing caught the inarticulate sound of vexation with which Sydney turned away.

"Then," she said, "I can do nothing for you but read—read—read—forever."

"Read—forever!" he repeated, gravely. "Ah! I suspected it must grow wearisome. You tire of it sometimes."

With a flash of womanly wit she saw a chance of gaining the end she was positive he desired, despite his words.

"Yes," she declared, her eyes sparkling. "I tire sometimes—a little. A change of work would be more pleasure than I can tell. Don't you think the book might be tried?"

Through another brief pause Gilbert Hurst pondered again.

Intrenched in blindness, poverty, dependence, he must be safe. This plan might ease Jean. If so, he should be a brute to reject it. Deliberating, he was lost.

"Then suppose we try it," he said, and Sydney so exulted, she was high committing another breach of discipline, and giving him her hand to seal the bargain.

Mr. Hurst had not overrated her share of the new task. With hunting up notes shaping rough outlines, sitting, sorting, accepting, rejecting, parting fact from fiction, and making fair copies of each finished page. "Round about my County," drew out and kept in full play more power than ever Sydney suspected she possessed. More than that, it lighted up the latent enthusiasm of her nature, repressed at home through all her opening girlhood. And this enthusiasm, though an invaluable adjunct in the production of the book, was, like many another powerful weapon, dangerous for every-day use.

The unavoidably constant comparison of thought brought the workers into closer communion even outside their mutual occupation, and Sydney discovered that without offending she could make Mr. Hurst share the pleasant relaxation of her own brain when their afternoon quantum was done.

Tired one February day when sunset warned them to leave off, she was fairly glad to look lazily out on the golden-tipped hills, and amuse her mind with nothing more consequential than a chattering troop of sparrows at the end of the garden.

Bobbing their brown heads about, pluming their dapper little dun-colored bodies, saying their prayers, or squabbling, or telling the day's adventures—such a fussy and incessant riot the feathered gossips kept going, that sight and sound of them set Sydney laughing.

"What is it, Miss Grey?" Mr. Hurst asked from his end of the room.

"Oh, I beg your pardon," she answered, feeling guilty to be amused at what he was cut off from. "It's nothing but a comical party of sparrows."

"Why beg my pardon?" he said, getting up and coming to the window himself. Miss Jean was receiving a caller in the drawing-room. "I used to think sparrows fascinating fellows. Are they on the tallest larch?"

"Yes," beginning to enjoy them again, "they are arranging their evening toilet."

"Just as they used to do! Many?"

"Ten, fifteen, thirty—oh! I can't count. They are making the boughs swing. They look so droll. The light is so clear, and their little fluffy figures against the sky—oh!" as the flutter of fifty pairs of wings filled the air, "they are frightened; they are gone! No, here they come back; they are settling again. And," excitedly, "one has a long straw in his beak. Three others are trying to pull it away. But," breaking off once more, "what nonsense this must sound to you, Mr. Hurst!"

"Go on, go on," he said; "it sounds like a song I have been wanting to hear for ages."

"Ah! another has come to help him, and the thieves are defeated. And off he goes with his straw to his nest under the eaves."

"Happy little rascal!" said Mr. Hurst, with first a laugh and then a sigh. "Thank you, Miss Grey, for a glimpse of the outer world again."

And after that Sydney fell into the habit of chronicling for his benefit such common things as spring skies; or the first coming of the primroses, or the unfurling of the hart-tongue's tight-packed brown-fringed fronds, and all such insignificant minutiae as his sister had stowed carefully out of hearing; which, with her brother's growing enjoyment of the same, might not exactly have secured Miss Hurst's approbation, but about that time the good spinner's attention was diverted from its heretofore chief object, and settled on a more absorbing one—herself!

CHAPTER XXVII.

Perhaps, though, that assertion is hardly fair. Certainly, the lady in question would have repudiated the imputation. It was not exclusively on herself Miss Jean's interests centered, but also on other individuals, who, as already heralded, appeared early in the year at Capel Moor, and who, with their environments, became of immediate and fast-growing importance to the mistress of Wynstone.

The first fortnight in January had been a time of restlessness and ill-concealed excitement to Miss Hurst. She was exceedingly active, and very fidgety; found a multitude of small requirements about the house, made a variety of small changes, brought out of seclusion a quantity of her late cousin Miss Hammond's choicest possessions, hitherto stowed away for high day and holiday use, and altogether rejuvenated her little establishment to an amazing extent. Another alteration, once pronounced impossible, suddenly became feasible.

"Gilbert, dear, as the days get longer, I have been thinking we will return to old habits and dine at seven," said the mistress, making the announcement as though it really was, what she possibly deluded herself into imagining, the outcome of special deliberation on his behalf. "You seem to feel the evenings long. Oh! don't say 'no,' because I've observed it, and you can't deceive me! I am sure you walk miles round that garden between seven and nine, to pass the time away, of course, and that shows you feel dull. Now, dinner will make a nice long break, and you must be sociable enough to stop in-doors afterward and talk to me and Miss Grey. The servants will have to be trained, of course, but I will undertake that. I can't have you growing gloomy and eccentric, you know, that would never do!" And, having thus ingeniously regained the more correct



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another new departure in the matter of personal appearance.

Hitherto her wardrobe had seemed chiefly maintained out of Cousin Priscilla's excellent but antiquated stock, and if alteration in the fashion of the same involved cutting to waste, then the garment would be worn in its original skiminess or amplitude, rather than infringe Miss Jean's rigid law of economy. Hence ensued such costume as would have driven Leonora Villiers into hysterics, and required some schooling for even Sydney to look upon without a smile.

But now a revolution of modes took place. A dress-maker came up from the village and stitched a whole week through in one of the attics. Miss Hurst was perpetually vanishing to be fitted; continually consulting Sydney as to shades and shapes; and rehabilitated by this conclave of industry and taste, presented soon an improved appearance, which she sheepishly apologized for by a series of circumlocutory excuses, in the midst of which lay the one small transforming grain of truth.

"I ought to have seen to all this before you came, Miss Grey, but I was out of spirits; Gilbert had worn me very much, not that I complain of him, but I was getting fagged with him. But as the year turns, why, one likes to brighten up. And when one's rooms look fresh, one has to polish up one's clothes to match. Not that any polishing will make me young again. Still, I don't want to look quite like the old woman when—when—on Sunday morning! You will hear Mr. Babington then, Miss Grey. Oh dear! I wish I were cleverer at trimming bonnets."

(To be Continued.)

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