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"Flatterers"
—OR—
**The Shadow of
the Future.**

CHAPTER XXIII.
ROCKS AHEAD!

But the seat their occupation had seemed acquiring had somehow disintegrated. When Sydney tried to win it back, reading her very best, her mind set keenly on her work, her reward was curious. Mr. Hurst would for two or even three days break through the routine, and betake himself to the riverbank, leaving her mornings purposeless and void. And if she halted to have knotty points disentangled, she was not answered at once by a clear viva voce explanation, but referred most politely, but coldly, to some authority among the tomes hard by. Heretofore was something amiss. Sydney divined. The fervor of her helpfulness was damped. Wistfully she waited, hoping every day the cloud would go by. Forbidden by instinct as by position to seek the cause of the change, never had she felt so much the stranger in the strange land as now, and she was even thankful when Miss Hurst volunteered her private opinion on the matter, wide of the mark though it might be.

They were sitting, one October afternoon, in the drawing-room that looked east up the long moor. Sydney had used her undisturbed leisure to write a letter, which was to reach Mary Elsie via Paris, where Mrs. Alwyn sojourned; and she now assisted Miss Jean to wind off links of Welsh wool, casting from time to time a glance through the opposite west window toward the orchard, where Mr. Hurst's tall form passed and re-passed on the nearer side of the fruit-berest boughs.

Miss Hurst followed one glance and smiled sagaciously.
"My brother is not quite so wedded

to his beloved 'ologies' as he was," she observed, mild exultation in her tone. "I thought it was a wonder if that incessant listening did not wear itself out soon. I must say I am glad it has."

"Oh, why?" Sydney could not forbear asking. "You seemed so gratified that Mr. Hurst should get back to his old pursuits."

"So I was. I thought it a very good thing in moderation. But lately, Miss Grey, I was getting jealous. Not of you—oh, no, no!" laughing, for Sydney opened such an astonished pair of eyes—"not that, the least; but jealousy of all those clever things I can't enter into. I was afraid he would get wrapped up in them, and presently grudge such a dunce as me any of his company. You see, Miss Grey, I have no one but him, now, to lean to. The more dependent on me he is, the more I feel him my very own. Whatever came between us, whether it was a person or a thing, I couldn't help hating!" stopping to wipe away a tear.

"I don't think," said Sydney, comfortably, "you need fear anything at all of that sort."
"No? Well, I flatter myself you are right, Miss Grey. You see how ready he is to get off his reading now, and not heeding a negative shake of the head—"we are all satisfied. For," moralized Miss Hurst, sagely, "the very best of books cannot completely satisfy a man's wants. No books; for instance, can talk to Gilbert as I can! And it's a great comfort to me to find he realizes this. Have you not noticed lately how much less he seems to care for 'remains,' and 'roots,' and goodness knows what stuff? And how often he'll turn the conversation to the apples or the weather, or something he knows I feel an interest in? And have you observed how often he says now, 'Are you not coming to sit down, Jean?' Don't be long away." Science and art are all very well, but they're not a man's sister, Miss Grey. Honestly, I rejoice at poor dear Gilbert's finding out it is me he wants most of all!"

Not a syllable of this was Sydney able to gainsay, however intuition might question the self-satisfied ultimatum. So, closer and closer did the spinster-lady hug her happy idea, and never hesitated to strain this dependency of kinship to its very uttermost. To wit: An open letter lay on the breakfast-table one morning when Sydney came down. Miss Hurst had just ended reading it aloud. Her brother, with the unusual relaxation of anticipated pleasure on his features, was saying:
"It would be capital to have him here, Jean. You don't recollect much of his stay at our old home, but if you had seen him with me at Pritchard's when the verdict went against me, you'd like him as I do. And I promise you he won't expect to be treated with ceremony. He will suit himself to our accommodation in a moment."

Something unprecedented—a visitor seemed impending. Less to Miss

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Hurst's satisfaction that her brother's thought. The lady, with an air of being much put upon, clattered the breakfast equipage, sighed noticeably, and then said, slowly:

"Oh, if you wish it so very, very much, Gilbert, pray have your friend. You ought not to be put off out of consideration for me."

"Why, Jean, a night's lodging to my old chum won't put you out, will it?" Another sigh, with a dejected smile at Sydney, that said, "Oh, the denseness of male creatures!" Then an avastive "Oh, never mind; when do you want him to come, Gilbert?"
"Why, next Monday, according to what he says, is it not?"
"And this is Thursday. Then I'll go into the attic to-night, and give time for my room to be got ready."

"Jean, you shall do nothing of the sort. I could change, or anything will do for—"

Miss Hurst interrupted with sad severity. "No, Gilbert, you know I should never suffer you to move. And 'anything' will not do for a guest. But leave it to me. As you are so anxious to have him, make your mind easy. Everything shall be ready."

Another mournful inspiration temporarily closed the topic. But at the dinner-table it was revived.
"On your visitor's account we dined later on Monday, Gilbert."

"There's no necessity, Jean."
"Oh, but there is! We dined at half-past six when he was with us at the dear rectory. I shouldn't like him to consider that we've, as it were, gone down; though—to Sydney—"as I told you before, late dinners, as a rule, require more experienced servants than I can afford. But I can help all the morning, and we'll make the effort for once. Oh! and should you consider, Gilbert, my orchid-trees want pruning this month, or could I put it off till January?"

"I'm not wise on such matters," confessed Mr. Hurst. "Suppose you ask Davis."

"Oh! he's certain to say, 'Do it directly,' because he likes getting here to work. But, you see, if we are to have this Mr.—"

"Now, Jean," protested her brother, with wonderful good nature, "don't try to make me believe a solitary man stopping here a single night can possibly interfere with your tree-pruning!"

"But, Gilbert, it does!" cried Miss Hurst, sharply, "and I'll show you how. You are so unimaginative as Rebecca. She was telling me this morning we had mice, and that we must have a cat to kill them. 'A cat,' said I, 'Rebecca! a trap, you mean. They are the things for mice. A trap doesn't break plates; a trap doesn't jump up the larger shelf and steal the fish; a trap doesn't run away with one's young chickens, nor require a pennyworth of milk to drink every day. A penny a day comes to thirty shillings and expenses in a year. Rebecca,' I said, 'and if I waste it so, I shall not have it to spare for other objects. We'll have no cat!' And just the same, Gilbert, with receiving company. I can't do that and prune the orchid. For before I have a stranger here I must get—socketing each article off on her fingers—a new door-scraper; fresh carpet on the landing; a new lid to the soup-tureen—I shouldn't cut off a friend who was such a friend that he could even go through that trying work at the oculist's with my poor brother, without soup—and to get these things I must journey to Hereford. Also, we should be compelled to have the front garden done up. All of which take more than—"

Mr. Hurst just lifted his hand as if deprecating this torrent of items.
"I understand," he said; "we'll settle this presently, Jean. I am apt to forget how much you have to think of."

Something in his manner silenced Miss Hurst's jog-trot outpour. She looked at him askance.

"You will have some more beans, Gilbert?"

"No more, thanks, Jean."

"Oh, but they are the last this season. I have not touched them myself on purpose that you should have them."

"Good Jean," he answered, but pushed aside his plate, and Miss Hurst set up what he noticed, with the air of a victim to masculine caprice.
(To be continued.)

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