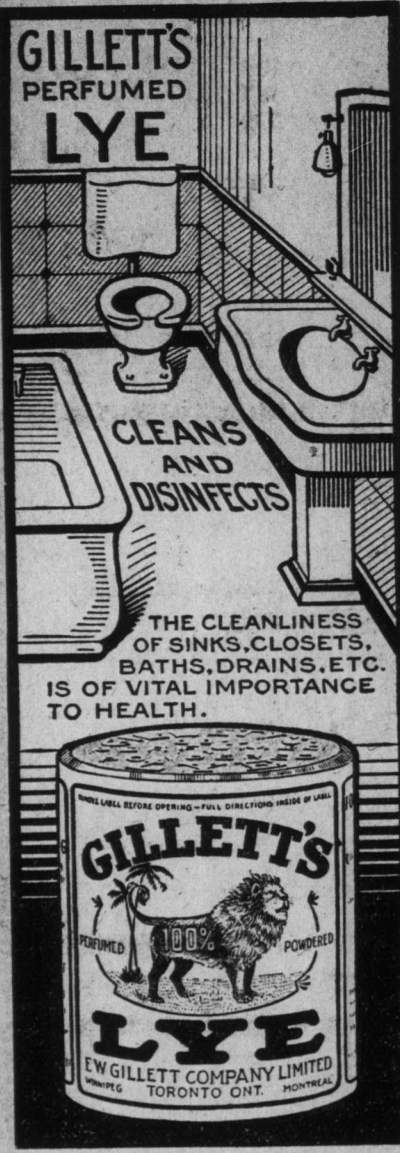


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CHAPTER XIX.

Which took place about an hour later, when Sydney had disposed of her belongings about the exquisitely neat, prim little room allotted to her, and then she learned not only some of her new duties, but much of delicate rules of conversation and behavior laid down by Miss Hurst for her brother's behoof.

"For," said the lady, taking an easy chair herself, and motioning Sydney to be seated, "I look at things in this light. I say, 'Here is my poor brother, who has lost the power of enjoying fine scenes, and, of course, every time these things are talked about he feels the deprivation more.' So I make a point of never speaking of them, or make believe I don't care about them. If he asks about the woods, I answer, off-hand, 'Oh, they're much as usual—green, or if he talks of—well, sunrises or sunsets—he used to watch things of that sort—I say I haven't any time to look at them. So I draw him off from enjoyments he can not share. You perceive?'"

Sydney bent her head silently. It was not a plan that commended itself particularly to her taste, but she must follow it, unless she found a better.

"It is intensely sad to think of what Mr. Hurst has to bear," she said, "and difficult to realize. He looks only short-sighted."

"No. Which is a mercy," Miss Hurst agreed. "I often tell him that he has much to be thankful for. I say, 'You don't look the least unpleasant Gilbert. Some people afflicted in this way I couldn't sit down to table with. They seem to glare at one, or their eyes look like cats' eyes just as they're going to sleep; most disagreeable. But you, I say, 'are precisely the same good-looking man you always were. He really is nice-looking, Miss Grey.'"

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"Very," Sydney acquiesced.

"So I cheer him up in a sort of playful way, which you'll hardly be able to imitate at present, but, no doubt, you'll help him somehow."

"I hope so."

"He's clever, as you will soon find out. He paid most of his way at college with coaching other undergraduates and getting prizes. I expect, poor boy—he's five years younger than I, Miss Grey, he worked too hard. But necessity knows no law, though I need not enter into that now. He was to have been a barrister, but it became needful for him to earn his own living without loss of time, so he did anything that brought in an income. He never grudged his earnings to his poor father when he was living, or to me, so I willingly share everything with him now. He was tutor at a public school, and worked half the nights through at some book he meant to write. That helped the mischief with his eyes. Then, through a college friend, the Geographical Society sent him to Egypt. I can't explain what, but it brought travelling through all seasons, and more writing. He never should have gone, but poor papa had to resign his living, and depended on Gilbert. So he kept abroad till papa died, and then came back with his sight ruined. A cousin of ours had just left me this little place, and I said to poor Gilbert, 'Come to Wynstone directly. Cousin Priscilla's money is not very much for two, but you shall have half and welcome,' and so," finished Miss Hurst, wiping away the moisture that suffused her mild, light orbs, "here we are. And I've told you all this, Miss Grey, so you may understand why I'm economical, and can't offer you much."

"Oh, please don't mention that," said Sydney, unbusiness-like enough to wish she could have declined all payment. "Thank you for telling me, and let me begin whatever I am to do."

"Then come down-stairs, Miss Grey, and we'll hear what my brother wishes. It's a great thing that you like reading. I don't like everything domestic, and I assure you it was no joke to be bound down to clever books that I didn't understand, when cooking was going on, and perhaps I could hear my maids gossiping, and smell my cakes burning, and my heart was in the oven, so to speak! Oh, it was trying!"

"That I can relieve you of," said Sydney.

"And I shall certainly let you. Will you excuse my asking, but can you spell?"

"Spell? I—hope so."

"Another advantage! I can't mean anything out of the common. I wrote a little paper out for Gilbert once, for a magazine, but it was rejected, and I do believe all because of my spelling. There were marks pencilled under ever so many words. And I'd spelled architecture with a k, and somehow got three r's in paragraph. I never dared tell Gilbert. Not that he's hasty now. I dare say he wouldn't blame me. Still, I'm glad you can spell."

For some time, however, this educational power was not called into play. Miss Hurst informed her brother privately, that the useful person was prepared to act as amanuensis, but he was too reticent or too shy to give her early opportunity of doing so.

From a pile of quarterlies Sydney read aloud each morning in the study, parted from the dining-room by a passage running to domestic regions, while in and out at the door or garden window Miss Hurst would bustle a dozen times an hour, vastly enjoying immunity from literary drudgery.

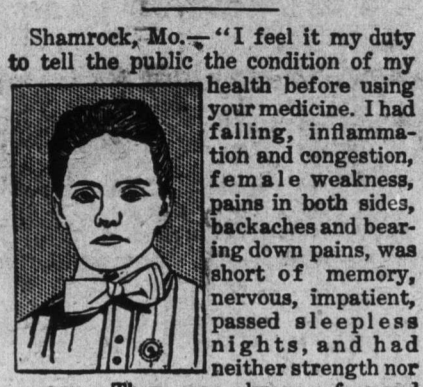
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and liberty to superintend a slow cook and a housemaid suspected of being flighty. Each afternoon another volume would be chosen. "Shall Miss Grey begin where I left off, Gilbert?" Miss Hurst questioned, handing down a stiff work on Coptic records, with a grimace expressive of distaste for its contents. "I've lost the marker, and don't remember where we were. I think about 170 B.C. No—I mean A.D. I get so mixed."

Mr. Hurst, however, thoroughly relishing his new reader's style, elected to begin afresh, listening with a close attention that inspired Sydney to throw more life into her labor day by day. To her nature, delighting always more in giving than receiving, it was keen pleasure to feel herself the channel of interest from the book's pages to the man's mind. That obtrusive "ego," which at first (small blame to her) obscured the subjects with visions of lost hopes, past struggles, past days, became, as week merged into week, less omnipresent. Theories which drove Miss Hurst into gentle dozes grew fascinating to a scholar trained by Robert Vaughan beyond the school-girl standard. A hard knot over differing opinions set Sydney reading slowly once, with long pauses at full stops. "This is dull for you," Mr. Hurst apologized; "I ought not to have let you go on. Pray, leave off."

"I should be sorry to," she answered; "I only wanted it clear to myself. I wish I knew the bare elements of all this better."

"You do?" he exclaimed. "Then you shall. There's a book"—getting up impetuously, only to seat himself again, with a sadly subdued expression. "I forgot I can not find it. But, Jean, you will. Asleep, is she? Then, when she wakes, or if it would do as well, I might tell you what you want to know."

"That would, indeed, be better. But it would trouble you."

"Not the least."

So leaning from his end of the table towards hers, looking at her, as she always felt, so entirely his infirmity was lost sight of in the expressive mobility of the other features, he gave her the essence of much reading in a few minutes, and after that, no matter what the subject started, Sydney had the clew to investigating it with brightness. At every stage she needed explanation. This he had always ready, from books, from memory, or by and by from manuscripts of his own, and life began to lose, for him, its dreariness.

Mightily pleased at her discrimination in securing this well-adapted "person," Miss Hurst noted a change in her brother, complacently appropriating it as a personal compliment, while time and distance, though no whit diminishing Sydney's fond regard for all she held dear at St.

Clair's, stilled the oppressive weight she had gone through, and left her healthily tired may be, but little disposed to brood over Mr. Villiers's defection, or over her step-sister's chances of becoming a countess-presumptive.

About which it is our duty to return to The Dale, and see what goes on.

CHAPTER XX.

It was a great misfortune, or she felt it so, that Mrs. Alwyn's conscience, worn fine under rough usage, still asserted its existence sufficiently to keep her extremely irritable for some time after her younger daughter's departure.

With the common perversity which values what is lost or flung away, Mrs. Alwyn now acknowledged that the child of her second marriage had some rare endowments of brain and soul, and the notion that she had so worked them as to get no social credit thereout, but had let them go into patry-paid servitude, was wormwood to her. For one-and-twenty years she had had that youngest-born to carp at or be kind to, as the whim took her. Now she missed her, hugged her conceit too closely to confess it, and took umbrage at all whose questions constantly reminded her of the girl's absence, and of the entanglement she had drawn upon herself by promoting it. Suffering under this condition, described by her servants as "bein' so nobody couldn't please her with nothing," the malaise of Mrs. Alwyn pervaded the household, and set ever-widening circles of gossip astir.

It was on one of June's last days when Hills appeared at the glass door of the morning-room, asking if his mistress or Miss Villiers would tell him what color Miss Sydney wished "they stocks grafted. He'd promises of General Jacks and Madame Nomores, but was not sure which miss wanted."

"Either will do," Mrs. Alwyn answered, from her writing-table; "one just as well as the other."

But Hills was not going to be choked off in that summary fashion. Miss Sydney interested herself in his flossers, and he determined to pay her the compliment of consulting her taste.

"I know miss lean one way or other," he persisted, "so, shall I wait for her views, ma'am, till she come back?"

"Oh, wait and welcome!" replied Mrs. Alwyn, with lips drawn into angry puckers.

"Werry well, ma'am. But as the sap's rising free, I hope Miss Sydney won't be long."

So Hills put the inquiry to Miss Villiers pointedly. "Could you say if she'll be back in a fortnight or so, miss?"

"No," said Leonora, "I really could not. Hills," and the man went off sulkily, to take counsel of Phillips.

"I've bin askin' 'em in there," with a jerk towards the ladies' room, "when they look for Miss Sydney, and neither on 'em 'I'll tell me. They hev'n't too an' quarreled with her, hev they?"

(To be Continued.)

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