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CHAPTER XXXII.

"My brother's friend is not to be put off!" Miss Jean announced the third morning of Mr. Hurst's absence. "Of course I open Gilbert's letters. Here is one from that Mr. Drayton, and he means to look round, as he calls it, the end of this month, or the beginning of next. He wishes for no answer. May not be at home to receive it. Which is all very well, but how does he know if I can receive him? There are the rooms—"

Sydney gathered up her resolution! She would be gone before Richard Drayton came. "My holiday was to have been asked for soon," she said. "Of course now you will not want me back after it. Let me leave directly. I will write to—where I shall stay, and you will have room enough then for your guest."

And to this Miss Jean, inclined to be provoked at her continued reticence, agreed somewhat stiffly, and Sydney took the initial step toward departing by writing briefly to Jacob Cheene that in one week's time she would be with him at Stillcote-Upton.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

The next day Mr. Hurst came home. Sydney saw him nearing Wynstone, very erect, but surely aged, with a face that looked storm-beaten since that evening he had gone out to Perristone wearing her badge of wild white rosebuds. His footstep past the poplars, his voice in the hall, set all her pulses springing with delight that refused to be gainsaid, but sight of the steadily forced smile with which he entered, sound of his greeting words, to her subdued or cold, made her gladly escape, with eyelids smarting over unshed tears, while

Miss Jean poured forth inquiries anent his visit.

"Just as I said!" was her discouraging report when a few minutes later she followed Sydney upstairs. "The case hopeless as I knew it to be. Poor Gilbert has only flung thirty shillings away to hear what I could have told him as well. Those thirty shillings would have come in handy, but it can't be helped. As I told him in all kindness, it may be many days before I have another one pound ten to spare him for an outing, so I do hope, once he got over Doctor Legh's ultimatum, he managed to get a little enjoyment out of this one!"

"In all kindness," was poor Miss Jean's battle phrase just now, used with implicit belief that it represented her relationships with her brother. "In all kindness" she fired off speeches in his hearing as to the multitudinous expenses soon coming on her, and the blessing of work to people who could brace themselves to it; "in all kindness" she encouraged her soon-to-be step family about the house at all hours, for "dear Gilbert" to grow used to them before their final removal thither; and in "all kindness" she affectionately so contrived to fill the situation with stings and barbs that each day found Sydney more hopelessly heart-sick over this, the last turn of fickle Fortune's wheel.

Mr. Hurst she seldom saw. Her speedy going was spoken of before him often. Himself he never named it. The few words he addressed voluntarily to her were marked by extreme reserve. The subject neither could desire to approach seemed to have raised an impassable bar between them. The happier ease of late months became a lost Eden, and every minute Sydney stayed at Wynstone was freighted with fresh pain. But the very few minutes were counted now, for it was the noon she was to leave. To satisfy Miss Jean's anxious hospitality she had swallowed some of her last luncheon; had declined a supply of comestibles for the journey.

"Then you are not going far?" queried her hostess. "Not far, to-day," was the answer, registered as "uncommunicative as usual!" and then Miss Hurst was seized with the fear that Davis, who should by now have come for Sydney's luggage, had mistaken the hour and might not come at all. She must run down and see after him. She would only be five minutes. Miss Grey could take leave of her brother and be ready to start when she came back.

Outside the study door Sydney stood with nerves all quivering, knocked and went softly in; looked from flower-buds clustering about the long casement, and looks she had now done with to the one figure shut out from all, though in their midst, with the unsyllabled yearning of a last farewell.

Mr. Hurst knew what brought her there. He was ready with what to do and say. As the door fell back, latched by a west breeze, he got up from some letter he was slowly writing and spoke first, the table's breadth between them.

"You leave us now," he said, "but I have something here for you to read before you do so," passing across a business-like missive. Sydney took it, read it. A short acceptance of his book. An offered payment, small, as the work was a first one, but a suggestion that a more copious volume on the same lines would be worth a larger sum. "An opening at last," thought Sydney, bitterly, "and she must not help him to use it!"

"It reads like irony, does it not, Miss Grey?" was Mr. Hurst's comment, as if he saw what passed within her breast. "Still, this lifts me out



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of a beggar's estate! For that release I have to thank you. This will take me from Capel Moor without further encroachments on my sister; so again I thank you. "You, too, are going?" "Yes. To find my level among others as sightless as myself. I am to make one of Mr. Montague Carle's household. To learn, and to teach, and to get my daily bread under his orders. Mr. Babbington suggests this scheme, my sister desires it."

"And you—" "I accept it. It is means to the only human end my life may know. My sister's relief. I thank God for that." To Mr. Montague Carle's! Under his roof; his rule, hard, grasping, grinding, vulgar, intolerable! Sydney glawed, trembled, in angry revolt.

"You can never go there," she cried, passionately; "it is cruel—" "No, no! They see no cruelty in it. Like me, they see the necessity."

"Bât—fighting this fact—"Miss Hurst spoke to me of something else for you."

"Ah! to undertake, maimed as I am, for loaves and fishes, what I never counted myself fit for in more capable days. No. This is better than that. I had a friend once, Miss Grey, a Robert Vaughan, who always held that solace of some sort lies at the end of the road called straight, however narrow, however rough it might be." (Sydney's eyes filled fast. Heaven send he might so find it!) "There was"—very slowly—"an hour when I forgot this. Henceforth I must forget it no more. When Jean, in her great sisterly goodness, willed to keep me with her—idle—I yielded; for I had no right to risk money of hers in seeking advantage for myself I might never secure. That way was narrow enough, but peaceful too. Now things are altered. Brighter times seem come for Jean. It would be unjust for me to mar them. So I turn out—late enough—on the rough way."

No calm could hide how he was suffering. Her tears fell quick and silent. Oh, to comfort him, to comfort him! "I would not have tired you with so much about myself"—he had to be very careful of each word now—"only I would fain have my helper—of so many months remember me fairly. At least no worse than I am." He broke off abruptly. Sydney could barely muster voice to answer him.

"I will remember most, Mr. Hurst, that you taught me very much. That while you let me learn of you I grew almost to forget some great troubles."

"Troubles which may be nigh done with now," he returned; "for," mechanically repeating the sentences he had drilled himself in, "Jean tells me what she sees in store for you. If she is right there is assuredly one cause for—for us—to be glad at this break-up."

Glad—was he? Best so a thousand times. And yet a momentary faintness surged over her. Outside Miss Hurst was heard. "Here, Davis, this is the luggage. Be careful of it. We have no time to lose." Sydney moved near Gilbert Hurst.

"Then I can only bid you good-bye," she said.

He leaned against the chimney-piece; his usual fashion, as she first saw him at Wynstone. Her own hand she held forth in farewell. He knew it, but kept his arms fast folded. For honor, for reason, he must act the churl.

"Good-bye," he repeated, motionless.

"Miss Grey!" cried his sister without; the door opened; a rush of flower-scented air filled the room; it closed; Sydney was gone.

She never remembered clearly that walk to Capel Moor station with Miss Hurst. Belle Babbington ran out from the manor and claimed to join them. Davis brought a great bunch of white stocks as a valedictory offering from his "missus;" Miss Jean kept up a stream of mysterious offers to write anywhere or do anything for her benefit, and wafted salutes from the tips of her fingers as the train moved off; but all this, with the hot midday journey which ensued, seemed only like a dream, herself an automaton moving through it.

They were nearing Stillcote-Upton when she roused from breathing space to pain once more. To pain, and to dim hope, struggling against reader unbelief in the dictum Gilbert Hurst long before, she later, at St. Clair, had learned of their mutual master, Robert Vaughan.

But even that was destined to more conflict.

Her destination reached, she traversed sleepy little Stillcote, guided by landmarks Jacob had pointed out last autumn. Past the lodgings of his clerical days, where her father went to and fro each morning; down the quaint, irregular High Street, where shop-folks stared at her, so evidently a stranger; by St. Clement's, its rectory shadowed by the buttressed tower; by Stuart's, where guelder-roses peeped at her from the old walled-in garden; and so toward Jacob's dwelling.

She looked up at his bow-window, longing for the old man's smile—the only one in the world she could now count upon. He had not written back to her, but she never doubted his ready welcome. How much she would have to tell him—how much to withhold!

On Miss Ambler's shining knocker she sounded a summons, modest enough, but it set the echoes flying down the old town, and brought in immediate response a small, rosy-checked hand-maid, with very red eyes.

"Mr. Cheene, miss!" ejaculated Nancy, as, too tired to wait for invitation, Sydney entered while asking for him. "Oh, didn't you know, miss? Hadn't nobody sent you word of it? Why?"—recklessly crumpling a clean apron over her face—"poor Mr. Cheene! he died o' Thursday, miss, an' they've buried him on'y this very mornin'!"

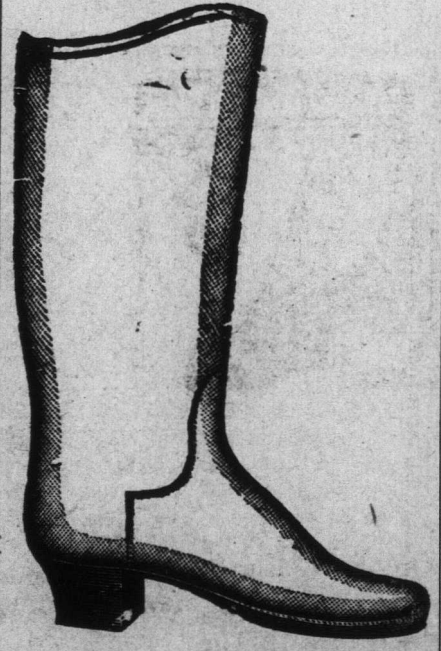
(To be Continued.)

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