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"Flatterers"

—OR—

The Shadow of the Future.

CHAPTER XII.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS.

And the beautiful eyes looking up under their black fringe said, "Ask for me!" a petition that Mr. Villiers, seeing in it occasion out of which he could make capital, answered promptly:

"Let me be your envoy to my aunt and make it smooth with her. I'll soon get her to say 'yes.'"

And this, by what seemed legitimate means to Sydney, he actually achieved, and soon saw her off on the hasty Samaritan journey.

Mr. Villiers drove her to Hedyngham; Hills vis-a-vis tabooring all but commonplace talk. But when Sydney was ensconced in the stuffy luxury of a first-class, her charioteer leaned on the window, reminding her:

"You will be sure and return for Friday?"

"Before then, most likely," blushing at his anxious expression.

"For I have something most particular I want to give you then."

"I shall be home."

"And I shall want to ask you something, too!"

"Yes," nervous, and deeply crimsoning again.

"Do you think I deserve anything for helping to send you away when I wanted you at the Dale?"

"You deserve a great deal for getting me leave to go to poor Mrs. Dacie."

"A great deal? Then you are grateful to me?" The train was moving off.



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but he paced by it, looking under the brim of his brown hat at her downcast eyes.

"Grateful? Yes, very."

"Then, Sydney, when you come back I shall ask for my reward!"

CHAPTER XIII.

FRESH FIELDS.

Despite her presumably regrettable mission, Sydney's journey through that long June afternoon was the very reverse of sad.

Mrs. Dacie was not reported so very ill. As likely as not, calculated Sydney, knowing her well, her new malady was only a great restless homesickness that could easily make prey of such a house-mother as she, for close on forty years, had been. If only this, then the magic of the gold stored away in Sydney's purse would soon furnish the medicine of speedy return. If by ill-hap anything more serious impended, still the coming fullness of that same purse would surely be able to level some difficulties, smooth some cares away!

So, resolutely refusing the situation any very seamy side, but rather painting it with colors of the palette of her own bright present, Sydney sped along by homestead, village, field; past sleepy little towns backing by riversides in hollows of the landscape; effected, by aid of a friendly porter, a most complicated change at such a junction of perplexing lines as would have driven the invalid, unescorted, clean demented; swept by a grand cathedral, with uprising lanterns so stern and solemn for the moment as to awe the buoyancy of her spirit into something akin to prayer, and glided into mid-England, unwearied by miles or hours, having within her, plus recounted pleasures, a something secret and surpassing all—muted mystery of hope and expectation that sufficed to annihilate space and time for that one exciting day.

Those last glances of Rupert Villiers! His last words! What had they meant!

Why, one thing. One only. That, the message rarely heard unmoved.

All the journey's length his farewell entreaty for her quick return followed her, ringing like music in her ears. Such a heralding was here of summons from the unfettered fields of girlhood into the happy bondage of woman's royal domain that her whole nature trembled while it glowed at the prospect, and any attempt at calmly judging her own emotions was lost in the all but mystic new conditions that enveloped her.

The glow of afternoon was melting into evening when Sydney was set down at her destination. Stranded at the small station of the very rural town that, with quite respectable hills in the background, and stone-built dwellings in lieu of East Anglia's interminable brick and plaster, had half a foreign look, she found any arrival from St. Clair's so far unexpected that no one was at hand to meet her.

Cabs being luxuries unknown at Chaddesley, she had first to inquire her way to the abode of Miss Thorne and Mrs. Carew, spinster and widow sisters of Mrs. Dacie, and then make her way thither about, independently carrying her own light impedimenta.

The long street traversed, and the modestly well-to-do little house, looking out on its own croft from windows framed in ivy and monthly roses, discovered at last, Sydney's unannounced appearance on the trim pink-begst lawn scared the good people at whose bidding she had come amazingly.

The trio, were out-of-doors, rusticating in an arbor cut from a hedge of yew, Mrs. Carew, a plump, elderly likeness of Mrs. Dacie, ensconced in a garden-seat, was knitting flaming scarlet comforters for next winter's service. Miss Thorne, larger, longer, more determined of aspect, sat bolt upright on a three-legged stool, reading the poetical effusions of a local genius; the invalid sister peacefully dozed in her easy-chair, under the soporific influence of drowsy rhymes and the buzzing of gnats.

With the unlatching of the gate the two wakeful ladies were on the alert. At sight of Sydney both hustled forward, careful not to "rouse" their sister, and offered a welcome mingled with confused surprise.

"My dear," whispered Mrs. Carew, "how glad we are to see you! But we didn't expect you—I mean we never thought you could get here so soon. You see, your dear mother—but" stopping short—"I—I—beg your pardon! I must be mistaken. Is it Mary?—Mary Dacie?"

"Certainly not, Carry," interrupted Miss Thorne, in peremptory undertone. "How could you make such a blunder? Expecting a young relative my sister had not seen for many years. But may I inquire who—or to what we are indebted—"

"I am only Mary Dacie's friend, Sydney Alwyn," was the straightforward reply to this embarrassed questioning. "Perhaps you may have heard my name from Mrs. Dacie." Both sisters set up an affirmative murmur. "As Mrs. Dacie cannot leave her father very well, I came instead of her, to take Mrs. Dacie back if she is able to go. But"—glancing toward the arbor—"she does not look worse. Is she? We were frightened about her when your letter came."

"Indeed, so were we when we sent it," returned Miss Thorne, emphatically, "but we never meant to upset them at St. Clair's. We are so vexed if we did. It is so good of you to come, Miss Alwyn. We do hope it has not inconvenienced you!"

"But we felt it our duty to write," said Mrs. Carew, "when poor Mary Ellen had those dizzy attacks."

"And seems to pine after her husband's doctoring so extraordinarily," put in the spinster, to decide what "Which was only natural," added the widow; "but dizziness, Miss Alwyn, as our father, who was a physician, used to say—dizziness may mean anything, from bile to apoplexy."

"And we felt the responsibility so great, we were forced to let them know the true state of the case."

"Not that poor Mary Ellen actually asked us to write for her daughter, you understand, Miss Alwyn, only—"

Well, "only," as Sydney could clearly gather from the explanatory dust they poured forth in lowered key, this timid feminine household had fused itself into a violent state of alarm, and had evidently jumped at the idea of getting their guest safely back to her own home, though in the presence of this generous young stranger they felt a little bit ashamed of the course they had somewhat hastily adopted. They were very voluble, though, in mutual exculpation, repeating how they would "do anything for dear Mary Ellen, but—if anything were to happen!" and at that solemn juncture "Mary Ellen" woke up suddenly, and added her quota of astonishment to Sydney's reception. Once assured, however, that no horrible calamity at St. Clair's had sent her young neighbor to her side, the invalid was so genuinely delighted at the sight of her that she most readily condoned the exaggerated fears which had fetched her thither.

"My dear," confessed Mrs. Dacie, after the sisters had left them, with anxious injunctions to come in soon, for the sun was going down—"my dear, the very sound of your voice seems like part of my own people and makes me better; but do you know I was miserably shaky last week, and I think we all frightened one another. Being so tight together, you see, we had forgotten each other's ways. They meant to be kindness itself, but except when I could induce Maria to read this young linen-draper's poetry to me, she could talk of nothing but my symptoms, and seemed determined to make out I was going to have a fit! And poor Caroline was so particular over everything I ate and drank, that it was coming to my never relishing a thing at all. They—very thoughtfully, I'm sure—brought a young doctor in to see me unexpectedly, and, Sydney, it seemed so dreadful to have any one but my own husband asking me questions—I was quite overcome. I expect it was this they wrote. To tell the truth, I'm not sorry they did—if, dear child, caressing Sydney's hand, "it has not put you about too much making the journey for me."

(To be continued)

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