

Grand Alliance;

Love That Knew No Bounds.

CHAPTER XII.

"And why," exclaimed Mrs. Alwyn to Leonora, as soon as their informant was gone—"why should not I send something that will be useful? At such a time it must be accepted as a compliment. A son is all very well. Even a small squire like Mr. Massey wishes for one, I suppose. But they will have to save money for him to spend by and by, and they'll value money's worth now all the more."

The consequence of which happy inspiration was the packing off to Barnes of the deep-pointed breadth of costly gowns that long ago had raised many a grand dame's envy when displayed upon some velvet-fronted dinner-dress, and with it went a cleverly worded note, making the offering to the "new, most precious boy," in terms that quite affected that unconscious little person's mother, drawing from her a tremulously pencilled acknowledgment of this gorgeous christening robe.

The immediate result of this little manoeuvre was precisely what Mrs. Alwyn had calculated on. The countess had called and been most affable. Then had Mrs. Alwyn let fall those somewhat premature words concerning her younger child which she intended to turn to more accounts than one. Ten days afterward a luncheon had followed at Oakleigh Place. Quite a family affair. No other strangers than Leonora and her mother, Sydney (for once, to Mrs. Alwyn's complete approval) being tied to an engagement in the parish; and Lady Comyngham had commented on Leonora's pink-and-white coloring, "apple blossom," she called it, adding "it was the very complexion gentlemen admired. Her son Edward had spoken of it. He fancied he had particular reason to think it beautiful. Some day Mrs. Alwyn would see if he was right!"

In expectation of that day Mrs. Alwyn had to wait, hiding intense excitement under outward calm. But she drove her pair of plans along the daily course with the skill of a cool head and a firm hand. It was desirable—best—kindest—that Sydney should be detached from The Dale. This she never lost sight of for a moment. And the sooner the better. Then, if this other business lagged, she could invoke the aid of little diplomatic shifts, shadows of shame that the younger daughter's honest-eyed presence made difficult. There fore, though the girl in her new-born elation was difficult to depress, Mrs.

Alwyn took pains to make her feel that she considered the partition of property a fresh partition of interests, pleasures, affections, and let her distinctly foresee that the Sydney of the future would be more isolated in her home than the Sydney of the past. So counter ran all this to the semi-hellish's deepest desires—she who had yearned for love that she ever wanted to buy it!—that there is small wonder if it drove her straight on to the result intended; and if when Mr. Rupert Villiers came down armed for this was to be his grand attack!—with the very rose she had been longing for, and the very most attractive manner he could don, she received him as heartily as thirsty leaves a shower!

And well the young man played the last round in his hand. Marriage, or some means of clearing up with his creditors, was imperative. That remembrance filled him with keenly nervous energy. By now those often-repeated insinuations were unfolding their meaning to Sydney.



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What did they mean to her? Was she glad or sorry? As yet she could tell nothing. She was dazzled, bewildered. But the new mood touched her with such peculiar grace that Mr. Villiers' pre-arranged attentions came very easy to him, and made the moment that should end this Act the First seem very alluring.

Beyond his second day with them the moment surely would not have been delayed, delightful as was the dallying on the verge of confident conquest; but once again accident played him an unkind trick.

A line from the Gate House called Sydney there, and sent her back in distress.

Mr. Villiers was on the lawn, watching for her, she felt, as she returned, and to him she confided the trouble.

"Mrs. Dacie went out for a holiday that was to do her so much good; now she is ill and longing to get home. But her sisters write that it is impossible for her to travel alone and ask if Mary can go for her. But of course she can not, for Dr. Dacie is just helpless without her. Oh, Mr. Villiers, I am so fond of Mrs. Dacie and so sorry about it all! And I do so want to ask mamma to let me go for her, but—I dare not!"

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 to Sydney, he actually achieved, and noon saw her off on the hasty Samaritan journey.

Mr. Villiers drove her to Hedyngham: Hills vis-a-vis taboing 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've 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 cringing 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, but he paced by it, looking under the brim of her brown hat at her downcast eyes.

"Grateful? Yes, very."

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

CHAPTER XIII.

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 for a 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 off the palette of her own bright present, Sydney sped along by homestead, village field; past sleepy little towns, basking by river-sides 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 up rising lantern so stern and solemn for the moment awed 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 surpassing all—mixed 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 her 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 environed her.

The glow of the 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 an arrival from St. Clair's so far unexpected that no one was a hand to meet her.

Cabs being luxuries unknown a 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 aloft, independently carrying her own light impediments.

The long street traversed, and the modestly well-to-do little house looking out on its own croft from windows framed in ivy and month-

roses, discovered at last, Sydney's unannounced appearance on the trim pink-begirt lawn scared the good people at whose bidding she had come amazingly.

The trio were out-of-doors, rusticated 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 hastened 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

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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? Kindly excuse us. We were rather 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 Mary can not leave her father very well, I came instead of her, to take Mrs. Dacie back if she is able to go. But"—glancing towards 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," out in the spinster.

"Which was only natural," added he 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—"

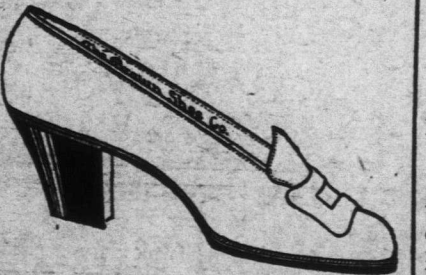
Well, "only," as Sydney could clearly gather from the explanatory just they poured forth in lowered key, this timid feminine household had fussed itself into a violent state of alarm, and had evidently jumped at the idea of getting their guest safely back to her own home, though in the presence of this generous young stranger they felt a little bit ashamed of the course they had somewhat selfishly adopted. They were very voluble, though, in mutual exculpation, repeating how they would both "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.

(To be Continued.)

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