

THE Alliance Grand OR Love That Kne Now Bounds.

CHAPTER XXVII.

This speech was delivered while Miss Trotter, the rustic modiste, was down-stairs dining, and Miss Hurst was inspecting sundry boxes of mixed millinery with the aim of producing a new head ornamentation for the next Sabbath. Her achievements in this way were rather terrible. All the finery collected by the late Miss Hammond for many years danced a sort of country-dance with Miss Hurst's treasures of the same date, changing partners in shifting positions, limp plumes now hiding rusty lace, presentable lace coquettishly concealing squashed flowers, and the last of the careful lady's efforts always outshone its predecessor in ugliness. Now she eyed the conglomeration of smartness ruefully, saying with dejection.

"Having such good things by me, I should not be justified in buying anything new—especially when, as I said to Gilbert this morning, I have not paid for his last suit yet. But how to contrive anything becoming out of these odds and ends I know no more than an infant in arms. Should you think, Miss Grey, this would do?" pointing on an ancient speckled shape a bunch of violet velvet, red poppies and golden oats (flowers out of season, snow-drops in October, blush-roses in December, had a fascination for Miss Jean.)

"No," said Sydney; then at the ejaculation of disappointment, "I wonder," she ventured to add, "if I could do it for you. Ah! I have a sister in Paris who could put it together beautifully."

"In Paris?" exclaimed Miss Jean, on the qui vive for scraps of Sydney's history. "Living there?"

"Only travelling with my mother. But," quietly barring further questions, "may I try the bonnet for you? What dress do you wear it with?"

"The maroon; I thought green sat in with some of the dangling things of Cousin Priscilla's best cap would look well."

Sydney shook her head. "It must be black."

"With these poppies, then?"

"No. Nothing but"—critically—"a buckle or two."

"Not even these dear"—sentimentally—"dear little forget-me-nots?"

"Not even them. Let me do it as I like, then come and see if you approve."

And remembering why and for whom she worked, Sydney used an hour to such effect that Miss Hurst returned to find, elated, "a bonnet that actually might have come from a shop! So now," with incautious gratitude, "I shall be easy about how I look on Sunday. But, Miss Grey, I hope you have said nothing to my brother about who comes then."

"Nothing. I should never think of naming what you spoke of in such a manner."

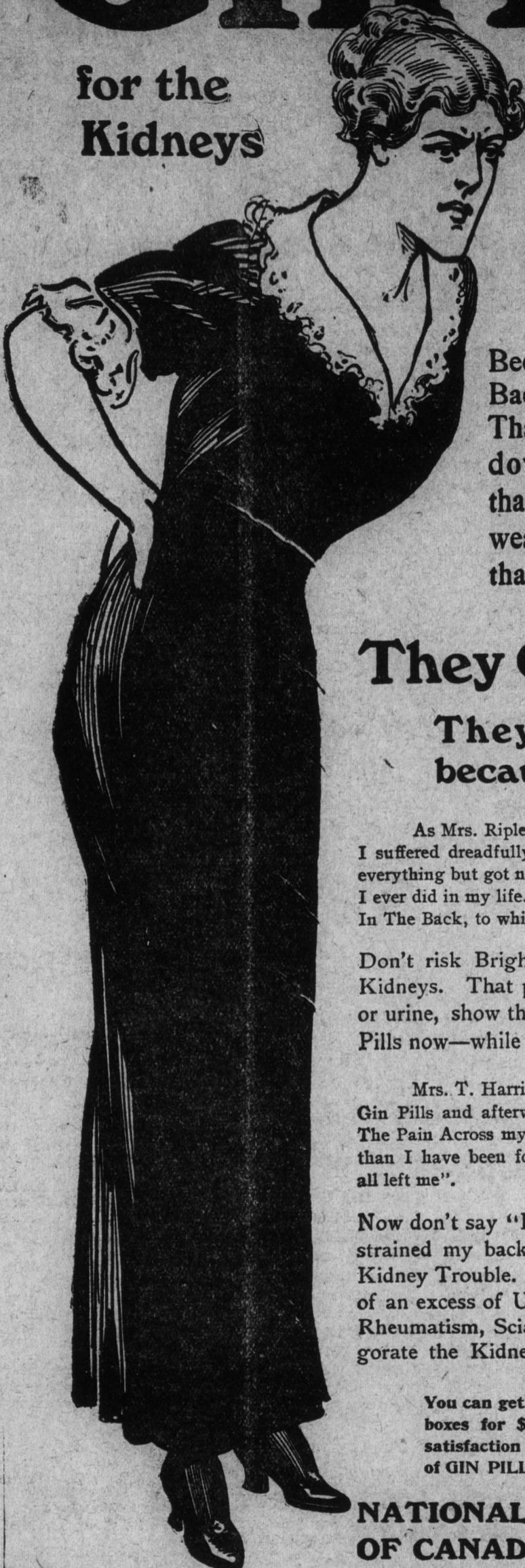
"Of course not. I beg your pardon for asking. But there is a little nervousness about it. I shan't get over it until we have met—as—as middle-aged people and strangers to—everything we used to think of I shall put off naming—him—to my brother as long as I can. It is sure to reopen that miserable time—those wretched memories."

This hit Sydney, robbing Miss Jean's orientalist pathos of its almost drollery. She, too, anticipated Sunday sympathetically; was pleased when Miss Jean went to church, very subdued, looking so much her best that country lasses in their pews nudged each other to mark the change; felt the little jump her companion gave when the stranger's voice first sounded; almost shared the wistful curiosity with which the Rev. Horatius Babington's first love stole glances at his two pale-faced, flaxen-haired little girls, perched on hassocks in the rectory pew; and knowing instinctively the agitated lady's silence would last no longer than the end of the service, hastened forward, leaving brother and sister to walk home together.

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"Then said Miss Jean, clutching at Gilbert's arm, "Oh! what—what did you think of that sermon? A little different from Mr. Preece's, was it not?" "Much longer," said Mr. Hurst, unexcited enough. "Longer! Surely not. But I wasn't meaning that. Oh, Gilbert! don't you know who it was? I could have told it the first word. You've not forgotten—Horatius Babington!" "Babington!" he repeated, voice and manner softened instantly, "why, Jean dear, my poor old Jean, how will you like this?" "Oh! well enough," she answered, swallowing obtrusive gruglings of anything but mirth. "I can bear it; especially for you. You are quite right; I am only 'old' Jean; and your Jean; and only dear to you. And that's all—I want to be. The past won't affect me the least. For I know well enough there is no such thing as

marrying for me, any more than for you. No home for me except with you, any more than there's a home for you except with me. You won't object to my being kind to those poor little children? But don't be concerned for me, Gilbert. I can meet Mr. Babington as indifferently as any lady should."

In time the new-come clergyman made his first call, behaving with soberist propriety, though Sydney secretly resented his inquisitive inspection of herself, and still more his bluntness of perception in dragging from Mr. Hurst every detail of first falling, and then fully lost, sight. That half-hour's visit stamped him on her mind as bland, opinionated, miable domestically, more widely selfish, theologically effusive—mentally beneath the standard at which he rated himself; and her first impression was correct.

Before long Mr. Babington had communicated to Miss Hurst much of his personal career since they two parted, and Sydney—not Mr. Hurst, she noticed—was made further recipient of these particulars. "He was so unsettled, poor man, after he left Stillcote," Miss Jean said, evidently deeply gratified at the fact. "He tried two chaplaincies abroad, but then he felt that he must fling himself into something engrossing."

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Log, or— So he went to Palestine. Of course, he overworked himself. He couldn't help it in the state he was. He had a wretched fever, and the consul's family took the greatest care of him. They had found out his value. One daughter, an excellent creature, no doubt, devoted herself to him. He was lonely, weak, always so impressionable to kindness. It was natural, indeed necessary, since the poor thing got so attached to him, for him to marry her. I should never blame him, never! But I scarcely think she was fit to be a clergyman's wife. He mourns for her, oh! most sincerely; but human grief is shortsighted. After all, it may be for the best that poor Mrs. Babington, with her desire for English society and a larger income, was taken."

Apparently, poor Mr. Babington grew to look on his bereavement in this light. A great unanimity of sentiment became more and more visible between him and the choice of his youth. His children, two plain, loquacious little maidens, and a small, shy boy, were perpetually trotting to Wynstone with messages—"Ought the deaf widow, named Wilkin, to have bread given her every week?" "Please, papa wanted to know, were there any one in the place who could knit little Horry some socks?" and so forth; and Miss Jean's word on these matters became law. Belle and Flossy would enter now without knock or ring, so much at home they grew with their papa's kind friend. Horry soon learned to climb her knee, demanding cake at all hours. No matter when they came Miss Hurst found them no interruption, but ever turned their visit to some such charitable account as the mending of skirts, or stitching buttons on boots, or some neglected office of which the motherless trio stood much in need. All which was well enough, and only diverted from her brother part of the lukewarm attention she had ever bestowed on his greatest pleasures. But another phase of Mr. Babington's influence took a less agreeable form. He himself had great fondness for probing Mr. Hurst's sentiments on subjects men are often chary of dragging into common conversation. Now Miss Hurst followed suit.

"I fear," she said one day to Sydney, with the semblance of much anxiety, "Gilbert, while he is after this book he fancies he can put together, never happens to speak of—of better things? Never talks about religion, Miss Grey?"

"No," replied Sydney, startled. "Ah!" his sister sighed, "it's a pity. But he never would. And people bound together—with a heavier sigh—"as we are, ought to be open as daylight on such an important point; ought to see through each other like glass! I can't see through poor Gilbert. Mr. Babington was saying, clever as he is, he is too reticent to be thoroughly satisfactory. Oh! if he would only talk, Miss Grey, and tell me exactly what he feels, how thankful I should be! For all he says, you know, he might be a—a—what is the word? One that reminds you of ash-stick or knob-stick, though it's neither of them precisely."

"Agnostic!" cried Sydney, divided between laughter and indignation. "Miss Hurst, you would do well to be angry with any one who called your brother that!" (Only a little while before, wearied herself by one of Mr. Babington's copious discourses, in momentary unguarded petulance she had wondered to Mr. Hurst why every service took him so regularly to the little church. "For the peace that always lies within its walls," he had answered, and she cherished the reply, though self-conviction charged it with unmeant rebuke. This was the man whose sister was trembling over his spiritual state!) "Indeed," she went on, hotly, "you can not think what the word means, or never could you hint at Mr. Hurst's being that!"

"Ah! well, I only hope you may be right," returned Miss Jean, slightly abashed, but dragged two ways as clearly as ever weak woman was; "but still, abilities are a great snare" (a parrot lesson assuredly), "and we know poor Gilbert has abilities enough."

Some—not thing, but—person had come between Miss Hurst and her brother; and Miss Hurst did not fulfil her threat. She did not hate this person! (To be Continued.)

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