

SYDNEY HOLT, B.A.

BY MARTIN MILNER.

[FROM THE STRAND MAGAZINE.]

"I'm very sorry for you, Leigh!" "Thanks. You've said that before, though."

"Well, you need not be so disagreeable; I really am sorry for you, and would help you if I could."

The speaker was an elderly man, with an intellectual face and a head of tangled gray hair, who stood by a couch on which lay a young man with his head bandaged and his arm in a sling.

"You had better try and put it all out of your mind for a month," he went on, compassionately. "You can't work, so what's the good of worrying?"

"The fact that I can't work is the reason why I worry," said Leigh. "If I had only finished my book before this accident happened, I shouldn't care. But publishers are like time and tide, they wait for no man, as you might know, one would think!"

"I thought the doctor did not want you to use your head at all," said the elder man.

"Oh! he doesn't mind now. I'm all right again, really; only he says he must keep my eyes bandaged for another fortnight, 'just as a precautionary measure.' Precautionary humbug, call it!"

"Well, then, employ an amanuensis," said Morris Holt, taking no notice of the last remark.

"So I would, if I could find one worth having; but how can I find one while I'm stuck here on this sofa? And somehow, when a fellow is ill, people seem such a bother."

"I have a young cousin whom I think might do," said Holt. "I never thought of it till this minute; I always forget everything! A London B.A. Worked in the British Museum. All that sort of thing. Too poor to ask high terms; very accurate and a really good scholar."

"Well, that praise means something from you," said Leigh, rather grudgingly. "We might have an interview to-morrow afternoon, anyway, if you'll arrange it for me."

"All right; I must be off now. I only meant to stay two minutes, but I had no idea you had been so ill."

"He shook the uninjured hand and made his way towards the door, tripping against a stool as he peered short-sightedly for the handle."

A shout from Leigh made him pause just as he was closing the door. "Stop a minute! What name did you say?"

"Holt. Sydney Holt," he said, opening the door an inch or two and shutting it again.

"Poor chap!" he muttered, as he made his way down the steep stone staircase of the flat. "But it's just the thing for Sydney. I'll go round there now."

Morris Holt was one of the most oblivious and absent-minded men in the world, but he had a fund of kindness within him when he remembered to use it, and on this cold, wet November evening he went nearly a mile out of his way that he might convey the news of employment to his young relative at once.

It was a dingy street into which he turned, and the house at which he stopped was one of the dingiest of the row. An untidy servant-girl admitted him, and stood aside to let him go up to the first floor.

Mr. Holt stumbled up the dark staircase and knocked at the first door he came to.

"Come in," cried a voice from inside, and he turned the handle and entered. The room was like hundreds of others in cheap London lodging-houses. The furniture was worn and shabby, the ceiling discolored, and the window-panes dirty; but there were a few touches here and there which showed that the occupant was a person of refinement.

A girl, whose curly hair was cut short over her head, and whose pale face showed the marks of overwork, threw down her pen and rose to greet him with a smile.

"Why, Cousin Morris!" she said, "I have not seen you for weeks!"

"No, my dear," said Mr. Holt, sitting down in the chair she pushed forward for him. "I have been out of town. I was at the Museum yesterday and to-day, but I did not see you, Sydney. Where have you been?"

"At home," said Sydney, rather mournfully. "Or, rather, I tired myself out yesterday going to three different schools in want of teachers; but they were all filled up before I got there!"

"I am sorry I have not been able to help you more," said Mr. Holt, with a little remorse in his tone. "But it is next door to impossible; everything is so crowded. However, I am forgetting what I came to tell you, and I must make haste, because I am going out of town again to-morrow, and I am very busy."

A friend of mine who is writing a book has had an accident, and can't use his eyes for a time. He is worrying himself to death about it, and wants to get some one to help him. It must be some one up in the classics, because there are a lot of Greek quotations; so I suggested you, and he would like you to go round to-morrow afternoon. There's the address."

He threw a card on the table as he spoke and got up to go.

"But shall I be able to do what he wants?" said Sydney, doubtfully.

"Oh! yes; I told him all about you. You know, and he thought you would do."

There were many other things that Sydney wanted to ask, but her cousin was in a hurry to be off, and she could not detain him. She stood for a long time with the card in her hand after he had gone, as though it could tell her all the things that he had left unsaid.

"OLIVER LEIGH,
6 Lincoln Gardens."

more of the overstocked condition of the teaching world, they had sunk lower and lower. Her cousin had no influence there, but he had procured her a few pieces of literary back-work from time to time, which just kept her head above water.

She set out about three o'clock the next afternoon and made her way to Lincoln Gardens. It was as dull and damp a day as the previous one had been, and she debated within herself whether she should not do her dress more than eighteen pence's worth of danger by walking; however, she had only five shillings in hand to last to the end of the week, so she picked her way as well as she could through the mud.

Lincoln Gardens was reached at last, and having pressed the electric bell at the door, a dirty little boy in buttons admitted her.

"Mr. Leigh?" he said, in answer to her inquiry. "Yes, he's in. Third floor!" and so saying he disappeared down a passage, leaving Sydney to make her way up.

The door at the head of the third staircase stood open, and her timid knock was answered by a voice, in obedience to which she entered. The room formed a strong contrast to her own. A bright fire burned on the hearth, throwing its leaping lights and shadows over the picture-covered walls and the soft hues of carpet and curtains. But Sydney's eyes were not attracted by the room; they were fixed in mute surprise upon its owner. She had expected to see an elderly, gray-headed man, like her cousin; but the hair that appeared over the bandages was thick and dark, and the figure in the armchair was that of a man in the prime of youth. She was so taken aback that she hesitated on the threshold, uncertain what to do; but in the meantime he could not see her and she was obliged to speak.

"My cousin, Mr. Morris Holt, asked me to call on you to-day, about some work," she said.

"Oh, yes; come in," said Leigh. "Excuse my getting up, I'm rather lame. Holt was here yesterday and said he thought you could do what I want; but I should think you were very young, by your voice."

Sydney thought that his manners were decidedly peculiar, but she knew that she must not mind such things as these. "Yes, I am young," she said, "but I have taken the B.A. degree at the London University, and I have had some experience in literary work, too."

"Oh, well, I daresay you'll do all right," said Leigh. "I'll try you, anyhow. My doctor says I mustn't do more than three hours' work a day at present. He's a chum of mine, who comes in every morning to bandage me up for the use of all that kind of thing; so we had better work from two till five, if that will suit you."

"Very well indeed," said Sydney. "All right, then. We ought to finish the work in a fortnight. I hope you can write a clear hand. Oh, and terms: will two guineas a week do for you?"

"Certainly," said Sydney, who had not dared to expect so much.

"We may as well begin at once, then. You'll find the papers on the writing-table. Tell me when you are ready, and I'll fire away."

Sydney arranged the papers and began to write. The book was one dealing with certain aspects of Greek drama, and the quotations made the work difficult; but the subject was one which thoroughly interested her, and the time sped rapidly away.

Five o'clock chimed out at last from the little clock on the mantelpiece, and Leigh gave a satisfied sigh. "I suppose we must stop," he said, "or I shall get into a row with my doctor. However, we've got on capitally, so I won't complain. Be sure you come punctually to-morrow."

"I will be certain to be here," said Sydney, opening the door as she spoke.

"All right, and if you see your cousin you can tell him I think you'll do very well. You really have a very decent amount of scholarship, though I should think you're not much more than a boy!"

Sydney gave a startled little gasp as he uttered the last words, and escaped before he could add anything more. So this was the meaning of his cursory remarks and his off-hand ways! Morris had evidently only spoken of her as his "cousin" without mentioning her name; or, even if he had mentioned it, it would have told nothing unless he added an explanation. Why had she not been called Ada or Caroline, instead of Sydney?

All through her homeward walk she was debating what she could do. Should she ask her cousin to explain? But he was gone out of town, and she did not even know his address. Should she explain the mistake herself? But the idea was too formidable! After all, it was only an hour or two in the day for a fortnight; it would soon be over.

She hardly noticed the discomforts of her room that evening; her mind was too much occupied with the events of the day, and instead of worrying over her money troubles when she went to bed, she fell asleep wondering what the morrow would bring.

Leigh was waiting for her when she arrived the next afternoon. "Here you are," he said, cheerfully. "The doctor says I'm none the worse for the work yesterday, so that's all right. We shall soon finish, at this rate."

Sydney became as interested in the book as the author himself. It showed a depth of research and a broad way of dealing with facts that gave her a very high opinion of his mind. She admired him also for his patience under trials that had befallen him, and day by day she found herself looking forward more eagerly to their hours of work.

Leigh, on his part, felt a growing admiration for his secretary.

"You never bother me, somehow," he said, one day. "Some fellows are so

clumsy, knocking things over, and making all sorts of mistakes. But you are uncommonly quiet, I must say, and you are sharp enough, too! That suggestion you made yesterday was really very good; I thought about it a great deal in the night."

"I am glad you think I can do the work," said Sydney.

"You do remarkably well," said Leigh. "You really ought to turn out something or other one of these days. I don't know why I always imagine you are so young; I suppose it's your voice."

"Can I do anything more for you before I go?" said Sydney, passing over the difficult question.

"Yes; I wish you would just give me a rug. I get so cold sitting here, and the doctor won't let me try my ankle yet. I wish that horse hadn't managed to stand on so many places at once when it knocked me over."

Sydney felt a rush of sympathy go through her, but she dared not express it. She put the rug softly over him, and went back to the writing-table.

"I think I shall come out a poet at last," said Leigh, in a dreamy tone. "I don't know why, but I seemed to think of stars and music and the 'sweet south' on a bank of violets, all in a breath just now."

"Good afternoon," said Sydney, opening the door and taking a sudden departure.

"I shall have to tell him," she said to herself, desperately, as she hastened down the stone staircase. "And yet—there are only three days more!"

"I say, young man," began Leigh in a playful tone when his secretary arrived on the next afternoon, "you ought not to leave your love-tokens about on other people's tables! The doctor told me I might take a walk round my room this morning. The housekeeper was to have helped me, but she never appeared, so I had to clutch on to the things as best I could, and as I caught hold of the writing-table I found this!"

He held up a ribbon as he spoke, which Sydney recognized directly as one that she had missed when she reached home.

"Well, are you not going to ask for it back?" said Leigh, finding that he got no answer. "I shall just tell your cousin the little tale when I see him next!"

"Please give it to me," said Sydney, in a low voice.

Leigh thought that he had given offense, and relinquished the ribbon at once. It seemed to him rather foolish to be upset by such a trivial thing, but he was too kind-hearted not to try and make amends.

"I shall be quite sorry when our work comes to an end," he said, pleasantly, when five o'clock sounded the hour of Sydney's departure.

"So shall I," thought Sydney, but she did not say so.

"In fact," went on Leigh, "I have something to propose to you. The doctor says the bandage may come off my eyes in a day or two, but I am not to use them much at first. Will you stay on and help me, if you have nothing better to do?"

No one has ever suited me so admirably as you have done, and I do not feel at all inclined to let you go."

Sydney's heart beat almost to suffocation. How could he answer him? In a day or two at furthest he must discover the deception that she had practised upon him.

"You don't seem to like the idea much," said Leigh, in a disappointed tone. "Perhaps you have something else in view; but I gathered from what your cousin told me that you have not been getting on very fast. Has your father other plans for you?"

"I have no father," said Sydney, glad of a question that she could reply to. "I have been an orphan for some years, and I never had any brothers or sisters."

"Then why will you not agree to my proposal?" said Leigh. "It would probably be only a temporary thing, and I would not stand in the way of your taking anything else that turned up."

"It is not that," said Sydney, in a low voice.

"What is it, then?" asked Leigh, rather peremptorily.

Sydney could not reply, her heart was too full. She felt her eyes filling with tears, and in the effort to choke down her feelings a sob escaped her lips.

Leigh gave a sudden start and half rose from his seat, but sank back again as his injured foot gave way under him. Sydney watched him anxiously; she dared not speak, but in another moment she saw him raise his hand as though to tear the bandage from his eyes.

"No, no," she cried, fear for him overcoming every other feeling: "you must not do it; you will ruin your sight forever!" She darted forward as she spoke and seized his hand.

Instead of scratching away his hand, Leigh took hers between both his own and held it firmly. It quivered like a little frightened bird in the captor's grasp, but he would not let it go. It was small and soft and warm, and he stroked it lightly with his fingers.

"This is not a man's hand!" he said. "Oh, I will tell you the truth!" cried Sydney, despairingly. "My cousin told me about your work, and I wanted the money so much, and he said that he had told you all about me. And then when I came I found you did not know, and he was away, and I could not make up my mind to tell you, and I hoped you would never find it out! But now I will go away, and I shall never come back."

She drew her hand away from him, but as he released it, he pulled the bandage from his eyes before she knew what he was doing!

The sight that met his eyes he will never forget till his dying day. The small, slight figure before him was clad in a dress of some dark woolen material, that any woman would have told him at once was old-fashioned and shabby. But Leigh saw nothing of that; he only knew that the curls that lay tossed all over the little head glittered like gold in the firelight, that the pale cheeks were

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tinged with delicate color, and that her eyes shone like stars through the tears that hung on their lashes!

But the vision only lasted for a moment. Turning passionately from him, she caught up her things and flew from the room.

How Sydney found her way home that night she never knew. A tumult of feelings surged through her heart, but in the midst of it all one resolve was fixed within her—nothing should ever take her back! What though her work was unfinished; what though she had not as yet received the much-needed money? She would rather starve than ever see him again!

Leigh, meanwhile, was passing through an equal tumult, but his thoughts were much pleasanter than Sydney's. His principal fear was that she would fulfil her threat of not returning, and as the next afternoon came and went, dragging out its weary hours in dull loneliness, he became gradually convinced that she had really meant what she said.

"Never mind, I'll go and see her to-morrow," he thought. "I can get down stairs and into a cab well enough now."

But when the next day came a sudden thought flashed upon him that filled him with dismay. He had not the vaguest notion of her address; and more than this, rave and storm as he might, there was no chance of his finding it out unless her cousin had come back to town! He had been allowed to exchange his bandage for a shade, and reaching pen and paper he wrote off a hasty note with no explanations, merely asking for the address by return of post.

But Morris Holt was still out of town, and the note lay unopened amid a pile of letters on his writing-table for several days, during which Leigh went through an agony of suspense. Perhaps his note had been lost, and had never reached its destination; perhaps she had guessed what he would do, and had forbidden her cousin to send the address! Then a new agony began. She had told him herself how much she wanted the money; perhaps she was starving, and there was no one to help her. He worried and distressed himself till the doctor shook his head, and ordered him to the South of France.

Leigh took no notice of his advice. Everything seemed to go by him in a dream, until one day a post-card was brought up to him, with two lines written upon it, that ran like an electric stream through his frame. The words were these:

"Only just back in town. 24th South Street, Chilton Square."

Sydney was sitting alone that afternoon in her cheerless room. She could not afford a fire, and the clinging damp made everything chilly and uncomfortable. She had at last heard of some teaching, but the salary was small, and she would not receive anything until the end of the term.

A week ago at this time a very different scene had surrounded her, but that thought was too painful to be borne as yet!

A ring at the bell and a heavy step on the stair roused no expectations in Sydney's mind; no one ever came to see her but her cousin, and she thought that he was still away. But to her surprise the steps paused at her door, and the servant-girl threw it open without any attempt at announcement, and in another moment Oliver Leigh stood before her.

He was breathless with his ascent, and leant heavily upon his stick; but he had left off his bandages, and his eyes rested eagerly upon her.

"I should have been here days ago," he exclaimed, "but I had no clue to your address, and I was obliged to wait until I could get it from your cousin. The days have seemed like an eternity!"

He paused; but Sydney could find no words in which to answer.

"Are you angry with me for coming?" he asked. "You would not be, if you knew how terribly I have missed you."

"I am not angry," said Sydney, in a scarcely audible voice, while she raised her eyes for a moment to his.

Leigh's face brightened. "I cannot part from you again!" he exclaimed. "I have come here to-day to ask you to be my wife."

"But we have known each other such a little time, said Sydney, trying to repress the joy that trembled through her at his words. She knew that she should never love any other man as she loved him, but she feared that he might be yielding to a sudden impulse which he would afterwards repent.

"Do you call it a little while?" he said. "It seems to me that I have known you for years. You must remember that a fortnight of work together like ours is worth a year of ordinary acquaintance. No, I cannot take that as an answer. The only thing that will send me away is for you to tell me that you do not love me. Can you tell me that?"

There was an entreating accent in his voice against which Sydney was in no proof. "No," she said, softly, and the brief negative conveyed a whole world of assent.

The dreary room, with all its chill dullness, disappeared as if by magic, transfigured and glorified by a haze of golden light.

Cold, weariness, poverty, all were forgotten, blotted out from Sydney's mind.

ory by the sudden rush of happiness; while Leigh felt that this was the moment for which he had been waiting all his life.

"You must not forget that you owe me two days' work!" he said at last, looking at her with a smile.

"I don't owe them!" said Sydney, playfully. "You have never paid me anything at all yet!"

Leigh's smile faded and he bowed his head on hers. "I can't bear to think of what you have suffered, my little one," he said. "But that is all over now. There is nothing to wait for; let us be married at once, and we will go abroad together. I believe the doctor told me I ought to go to a warm climate for a little while, so we will forget all these dark days in love and sunshine! I shall never be thankful enough that your cousin sent you to me."

"Do you think we need tell him all the story?" said Sydney, anxiously.

"No, dear, no," said Leigh. "It is too sweet a story to be spoilt by telling; we will keep it all to ourselves."

And thus it came to pass that when Morris Holt read the letter that told him of Sydney's engagement, he said to himself, with his usual abstracted smile: "Ah! yes, I saw Leigh was interested directly I told him about her; Sydney may thank me, after all, for having settled her in life!"

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