

"Oh, Kitty!"

"Then do you like him?"

"How can I help liking him? I owe all my happiness to your papa."

"Do you like him better than mamma?"

"I should be very ungrateful, if I liked anybody better than your mamma."

Kitty considered a little, and shook her head. "I don't understand that," she declared roundly. "What do you mean?"

Sydney cleaned the pupil's slate, and set the pupil's sum--and said nothing.

Kitty placed a suspicious construction of her own on her governess's sudden silence. "Perhaps you don't like my wanting to know so many things," she suggested. "Or perhaps you meant to puzzle me?"

Sydney sighed, and answered, "I'm puzzled myself."

Chapter VII. Sydney Suffers.

In the autumn holiday-time friends in the south, who happened to be visiting Scotland, were invited to stop at Mount Morven on their way to the Highlands; and were accustomed to meet the neighbors of the Linleys at dinner on their arrival. The time for this yearly festival had now come round again; the guests were in the house; and Mr. and Mrs. Linley were occupied in making their arrangements for the dinner-party. With her unfailing consideration for every one about her, Mrs. Linley did not forget Sydney while she was sending out her cards of invitation. "Our table will be full at dinner," she said to her husband; "Miss Westerfield had better join us in the evening with Kitty."

"I suppose so," Linley answered with some hesitation.

"You seem to doubt about it, Herbert. Why?"

"I was only wondering--"

"Wondering about what?"

"Has Miss Westerfield got a gown, Catherine, that will do for a party?"

Linley's wife looked at him as if she doubted the evidence of her own senses. "Fancy a man thinking of that!" she exclaimed. "Herbert, you astonish me."

He laughed uneasily. "I don't know how I came to think of it--unless it is that she wears the same dress every day. Very neat; but (perhaps I'm wrong) a little shabby too."

"Upon my word, you pay Miss Westerfield a compliment which you have never paid to me! Wear what I may, you never seem to know how I am dressed."

"I beg your pardon, Catherine, I know that you are always dressed well."

That little tribute restored him to his place in his wife's estimation. "I may tell you now," she resumed, with her gentle smile, "that you only remind me of what I had thought of already. My milliner is at work for Miss Westerfield. The new dress must be your gift."

"Are you joking?"

"I am in earnest. To-morrow is Sydney's birthday; and here is my present." She opened a jeweler's case, and took out a plain gold bracelet. "Suggested by Kitty," she added, pointing to an inlaid miniature portrait of the child. Herbert read the inscription: To Sydney Westerfield with Catherine Linley's love. He gave the bracelet back to his wife in silence; his manner was more serious than usual--he kissed her hand.

The day of the dinner-party marked an epoch in Sydney's life.

For the first time, in all her past experience, she could look in the glass, and see herself prettily dressed, with a gold bracelet on her arm. If we consider how men (in one way) and milliners (in another) profit by it, vanity is surely to be reckoned, not among the vices but among the virtues of the sex. Will any woman, who speaks the truth, hesitate to acknowledge that her first sensations of gratified vanity rank among the most exquisite and most enduring pleasures that she has ever felt? Sydney locked her door, and exhibited herself to herself--in the front view, the side view, and the back

view (over the shoulder) with eyes that sparkled and cheeks that glowed in a delicious confusion of pride and astonishment. She practiced bowing to strangers in her new dress; she practiced shaking hands gracefully, with her bracelet well in view. Suddenly she stood still before the glass and became serious and thoughtful. Kind and dear Mr. Linley was in her mind now. While she was asking herself anxiously what he would think of her, Kitty--arrayed in her new finery, as vain and as happy as her governess--drummed with both fists outside the door, and announced at the top of her voice that it was time to go downstairs. Sydney's agitation at the prospect of meeting the ladies in the drawing-room added a charm of its own to the flush that her exercises before the glass had left on her face. Shyly following instead of leading her little companion into the room, she presented such a charming appearance of youth and beauty that the ladies paused in their talk to look at her. Some few admired Kitty's governess with generous interest; the greater number doubted Mrs. Linley's prudence in engaging a girl so very pretty and so very young. Little by little, Sydney's manner--simple, modest, shrinking from observation--pleaded in her favor even with the ladies who had been prejudiced against her at the outset. When Mrs. Linley presented her to the guests, the most beautiful woman among them (Mrs. MacEdwin) made room for her on the sofa, and with perfect tact and kindness set the stranger at her ease. When the gentlemen came in from the dinner-table, Sydney was composed enough to admire the brilliant scene, and to wonder again, as she had wondered already, what Mr. Linley would say to her new dress.

Mr. Linley certainly did notice her--at a distance.

He looked at her with a momentary fervor of interest and admiration which made Sydney (so gratefully and so guiltlessly attached to him) tremble with pleasure; he even stepped forward as if to approach her, checked himself, and went back again among his guests. Now, in one part of the room, and now in another, she saw him speaking to them. The one neglected person whom he never even looked at again, was the poor girl to whom his approval was the breath of her life. Had she ever felt so unhappy as she felt now? No, not even at her aunt's school!

Friendly Mrs. MacEdwin touched her arm. "My dear, you are losing your pretty color. Are you overcome by the heat? Shall I take you into the next room?"

Sydney expressed her sincere sense of the lady's kindness. Her commonplace excuse was a true excuse--she had a headache; and she asked leave to retire to her room.

Approaching the door, she found herself face to face with Mr. Linley. He had just been giving directions to one of the servants, and was re-entering the drawing-room. She stopped, trembling and cold; but, in the very intensity of her wretchedness, she found courage enough to speak to him.

"You seem to avoid me, Mr. Linley," she began, addressing him with ceremonious respect, and keeping her eyes on the ground. "I hope--" she hesitated, and desperately looked at him--"I hope I haven't done anything to offend you?"

In her knowledge of him, up to that miserable evening, he constantly spoke to her with a smile. She had never yet seen him so serious and so inattentive as he was now. His eyes, wandering round the room, rested on Mrs. Linley--brilliant and beautiful, and laughing gayly. Why was he looking at his wife with plain signs of embarrassment in his face? Sydney piteously persisted in repeating her innocent question: "I hope I haven't done anything to offend you?"

He seemed to be still reluctant to notice her--on the one occasion of all others when she was looking her best! But he answered at last.

"My dear child, it is impossible that you should offend me; you have misunderstood and mistaken me. Don't suppose--pray don't suppose that I am changed or can ever be changed toward you."

He emphasized the kind intention which those words revealed by giving her his hand.

But the next moment he drew back. There was no disguising it, he drew back as if he wished to get away from her. She noticed that his lips were firmly closed and his eyebrows knitted in a frown; he looked like a man who was forcing himself to submit to some hard necessity that he hated or feared.

Sydney left the room in despair.

He had denied in the plainest and kindest terms that he was changed toward her. Was that not enough? It was nothing like enough. The facts were there to speak for themselves: he was an altered man; anxiety, sorrow, remorse--one or the other seemed to have got possession of him. Judging by Mrs. Linley's gayety of manner, his wife could not possibly have been taken into his confidence.

What did it mean? Oh, the useless, hopeless question! And yet, again and again she asked herself: what did it mean?

In bewildered wretchedness she lingered on the way to her room, and stopped at the end of a corridor.

On her right hand, a broad flight of old oak stairs led to the bed-chambers on the second floor of the house. On her left hand, an open door showed the stone steps which descended to the terrace and the garden. The moonlight lay in all its loveliness on the flower-beds and the grass, and tempted her to pause and admire it. A prospect of sleepless misery was the one prospect before her that Sydney could see, if she retired to rest. The cool night air came freshly up the vaulted tunnel in which the steps were set; the moonlit garden offered its solace to the girl's sore heart. No curious women-servants appeared on the stairs that led to the bed-chambers. No inquisitive eyes could look at her from the windows of the ground floor--a solitude abandoned to the curiosity of tourists. Sydney took her hat and cloak from the stand in a recess at the side of the door, and went into the garden.