

HIS "COMRADE."

(Continued.)

'Come and have some tea,' she said, 'and leave Art for more commonplace matters. And Rex is going to sing.'

'He doesn't want me—do you Rex?' as Dare came forward, and he laughed. He was a thorough musician, and Gertrude played the accompaniments in the prevalent young lady slipshod fashion. Notes and time counted for nothing in her hands, and Rex kept the lover and the musician distinct.

'Sydney is so good as to accompany me,' he said. 'You like listening better, Gertrude.' Sydney felt that Gertrude, though she laughed and acquiesced gracefully, did not like this preference; albeit, it was only a musical one.

The girl listened, and drank her tea, whilst her thoughts were busy with the problem which she must solve in the next few days.

She saw, with foreboding, Tyrell go up to Rex and talk to him on the conclusion of the latter's song, and she set her teeth. She wondered what Rex would think of this man.

The other callers began taking leave, and Tyrell also made his adieux to the hostess, leaving only Rex and Gertrude, who remained for that more familiar chat dear to friends when an 'At Home' is weeded off the crowd.

'Where did you pick up that dreadful person, Sydney?' Rex said, laughing, when these three were alone. 'I saw him at the View the other day; but he only spoke with me to-day. Not your sort.'

'I didn't pick him up,' rejoined the artist. 'Merton brought him, and I was rather surprised when he came in to-day. I couldn't very well turn him out, could I?'

'What's the matter with him?' said Gertrude.

'He's a cad!' returned Dare, uncompromisingly. 'I don't mean that he does anything exactly 'off,' but he's 'off' altogether.'

'Of course; he isn't our sort,' Gertrude said. 'I think he's horrid. He got hold of me over those photographs, and bored me to death. Heigho!—stifling a yawn—'is he trying to get into society?'

'I suppose so. I shall snub him,' said Sydney.

'Do—oh do!' cried Gertrude, with such unnecessary warmth as made Rex laugh. Sydney laughed, too—yet was conscious of an uneasy feeling also. Why should she have it? Was she letting her artistic imagination run away with her, or was she, after all, allowing a paltry jealousy to warp her soberer judgment? She was conscious of no such feeling, but she knew it was not the first time she had had the question recurring to her. After all, what did she know of Gertrude Brereton?

And when Rex and Gertrude went away the girl sat long, perfectly still, by the fire, thinking, and trying to make something definite out of chaos.

Why did Tyrell change countenance so strangely when he saw Gertrude's portrait? Why was Gertrude so unaccountably startled and upset when she saw him in the ante-studio?

It was strange! Gertrude was not what one calls a nervous person, not easily startled, yet she had nearly fainted because an unexpected form rose from the lounge; then, again to-day, Sydney could have sworn that those two were not talking about the photographs, and to her keen senses, Gertrude's remark, as she, —Sydney—approached, did not sound natural, but as though intended for her to hear.

'It's a tangle!' the artist said to herself. 'And I can say nothing! Would he heed me if I did? Oh! My my poor Rex. If—'it—'but why should I anticipate? It would break his heart.'

'Yet would he?' was echoed somewhere in her soul; and it was the best—the highest—that a man can give, that Rex Dare was giving to this beautiful little butterfly? If haply even there lay nothing deeper, more sinister, than the irresponsible frivolity of a butterfly beneath the ethereal loveliness which had stolen Rex's heart, if not his soul.

Sydney rose to her feet, after a long time, with a sigh, and fetched a book, and tried to read, but somehow, the charm of what she read failed of its object.



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She threw the book away and went to the piano, and began playing in the twilight.

How lonely and still it was, and how very dreary everything.

She started up with an impatient sweep of her hand over her eyes. The hand was a little wet, and Sydney closed the lid of the piano with an angry self-contempt, and scolded herself for a fit of 'artist depression,' lighted the lamps, shut out the fading daylight, went to her room, put on her hat, and left the house, without any particular aim but to walk off her restlessness.

In the Brompton Road an omnibus going to Tottenham Court Road passed her and that trivial circumstance turned the current of three lives.

Sydney hailed the 'bus, and got in. 'I'll go and have a chat with Rose,' she said to herself. 'She's sure to be in.'

Rose was a young musical artist, a friend of Sydney's, living in Gower Street, and Sydney, alighting at Tottenham Court Road, walked up that thoroughfare, and made her way into the one which was her destination.

CHAPTER V.

It was quite dark by the time Sydney got into Gower Street; the sky was dull and overcast.

The street lamps did not throw much light, except in their immediate vicinity, so that, when a cab stopped a little distance ahead of Sydney, and a female figure got out and paid the driver, the artist scarcely noticed her.

The cab drove away, and the fare, who wore a cloak, walked on, at a not very quick pace, some twenty or thirty yards in advance of Sydney.

Something in the form—in the walk—struck the girl with a vague reminiscence. She seemed to know the one ahead, and yet could not identify her in her own mind.

Then the figure passed under a lamp; and recognition suddenly struck Sydney with a shock that, for a second, rooted her to the spot.

What in Heaven's name was Gertrude Brereton doing in this neighborhood, alone and at this time?—for Gertrude did not belong to the ranks of professional life.

She was a young lady living in society, more or less, and totally unaccustomed—so it appeared—to going about at night unattended.

And she had no friends about this part of the world—at least, Sydney had never heard her mentioned any living there.

Could she be mistaken? It was someone like Gertrude, perhaps. Yet Sydney knew she was not mistaken—knew in her heart that this was Gertrude and that this visit was made in secret.

Where was the girl going? Sydney's resolution was taken, though her soul revolted at playing the spy. But the issues were too momentous to allow her to shrink from doing so now.

She must follow Gertrude. All manner of terrible surmises came to her mind—conjectures, questionings; and through all, inevitably, she conjured Hargrave Tyrell with Gertrude's visit to these parts.

Sydney did not know whether he lived about here or not; but thought it likely, since Merton, his friend, lived in Bloomsbury Square.

She followed the cloaked little figure, herself keeping as much as possible in shadow; but Gertrude never turned round, and kept straight on, never faltering, or looking to see whether she were right or no.

Evidently, Sydney thought, with an inward gasp, she knew her way. She turned down Torrington Street, crossed Gordon Square, and turned north, pursuing her way as far as a street leading to the Euston Road.

In this she stopped at a house about halfway up.

Looking for the name of this thoroughfare, Sydney found it was Malpas Street. Scarcely breathing, the artist paused a little way off and watched.

The door was opened by a middle-aged woman, who looked like a lodging-house landlady.

Gertrude asked a question evidently, and was admitted.

The door closed, and Sydney asked herself what it all meant.

It seemed like a dream, and yet it was all so real, so painfully real.

What should she do? Wait and see when Gertrude came out, and accost her, or let her go apparently unrecognized?

Was it any business of hers? But supposing this young girl was involved in any sort of mischief—was in some difficult, even compromising position, from which she could not extricate herself—she was very young, and might even have done some wrong through ignorance. If Sydney could save her, help her, had she the right to stand aside because it 'was no business of hers'?

There were lights in the first-floor windows, and Sydney watched those windows with deepening anxiety.

Was Gertrude there? she wondered. Who had she come to see?

In such questionings, the time passed. Sydney stood in the shadow of an archway opposite the house into which Gertrude had gone.

People passing by glanced at her and continued their way; probably they thought she expected some laggard lover. At last—it might have been three-quarters of an hour—the street door opened, and the cloaked figure came out, paused to glance to right and left, possibly

to see if a cab was in sight, and then walked swiftly up the street towards the square again.

As swiftly, but still at a little distance, Sydney followed; and in Gordon Square Gertrude stopped a passing hansom, got in, and was driven off.

Sydney drew a breath of relief. Gertrude was, in all probability, safe on her way home. So far, so good. But the matter could not rest here. She must speak either to Rex or to the girl herself, for Gertrude's own sake.

Yet, Sydney shrank from interfering, from seeming to make mischief. It was possible that even Rex might misjudge her, and think that some feeling of jealousy had prompted her to see wrong or trivoliety where there was no cause.

On the other hand, the highest and purest motives would equally accuse anyone to save a girl from possible consequences of folly, if no worse.

At any rate, her duty was clear; and Sydney, having once made this out, was not going to shrink from doing it.

The next morning, Rex himself gave her the opportunity, by coming into her studio.

The flushed a little, but gave him her hand with her usual bright smile of welcome.

He sat down in the low chair by her easel, just as he always used to; but there had been an interval when the habit had become somewhat broken.

Perhaps it was this which made Sydney paint in silence for a minute or two, and made Rex also silent.

She was the first to speak. 'Well,' she said, cheerfully, 'what did you do with yourself last night?'

'I had an engagement to dine with some fellows,' Rex answered, 'which was a bore. Gertrude was going piously to church, she said; but I couldn't put off this engagement, it was of such long standing.'

'To what church was she going?' Sydney asked.

Her heart was throbbing violently. 'Oh, I don't know!—somewhere near, I think, because I objected to her being out so late by herself, and she said no one would eat her between Chester Square and the next street. Of course, that was a figure of speech, unless she meant St. Michael's.'

'You are sure she was going to church?' 'She may have altered her mind. But why do you speak so strangely?' with a smile.

'Did I speak strangely? Perhaps I feel a little strange,' answered Sydney, not looking at Rex; 'only Gertrude didn't go to church, Rex. I saw her in Gower street last evening.'

Rex sat, up drawing his brows together. 'You must have been mistaken,' he said. 'No; I was not,' she answered. 'You mustn't be vexed; there may be some good reason for her being there, but you ought to know, because young girls often get into scrapes that are no harm, perhaps, but that they can't get out of, and, if that is so, you could help her. And Sydney told Rex of the circumstances of the evening before, explaining how she herself came to be in the neighborhood. 'Though,' she added, 'I never went to see Rose after, all; I feel too uneasy.'

Rex listened silently, with bent brows. That there had been some deceit somewhere was a fact not to be got over, even if Gertrude's errand had been harmless. She had lied to her lover, because she had distinctly said she was going to church when she must have known she was going somewhere else.

And she was safe in doing this, because she knew that Rex had an engagement which he had told he could not put off. And deceit, even in its lightest, most harmless forms, was what Rex had a horror of.

'I shall ask her about this,' he said, getting up, with a sort of restless movement. 'Of course, the child will be able to explain it—it isn't that. You haven't any idea who lives, I suppose?'

'The house looks like an ordinary lodging- or boarding-house,' returned Sydney, somewhat evasively—'for why give utterance to vague suspicion which was in her own mind? 'But you could go there and see.'

'I'll speak to Gertrude,' answered Rex. 'Poor little thing, I daresay, she's dreadfully distressed. She'll explain of course. I'll go now—you won't mind me leaving leaving you so abruptly, Sydney will you?'

'Of course not Rex. You are naturally anxious, the girl answered, as she gave him her hand, and he clasped it closely a moment, and turned away.

When he had gone, Sydney leant her head on her hands, and there were heavy tears in her eyes.

Her heart was aching for this dear 'comrade' of hers. She did not feel at all certain that Gertrude would be able to explain.

Rex, meanwhile, on asking to see Miss Brereton, was shown into the drawing-room, and told that the young lady would be with him directly.

She was at present deep in the mysteries of a 'trying-on.'

Rex walked up and down restlessly curbing his impatience at the delay as best he might.

But, as all things are said to come to those who wait, Rex at last heard a step outside, and turned as Gertrude came in, looking bewitching in a charming spring toilet.

'You dear Rex! she said, coming to him with her lovely eyes half-raised, as he took her in his arms and kissed her tenderly, but with a gravity that sent a vague thrill through her heart. 'How deliciously early you are. Are you come to take me somewhere?'

She looked so sweet and fair, so utterly innocent and childlike, that the many thoughts, which somehow, had found their way to his mind, seemed a shame to him. How was it possible to connect anything wrong with this exquisite creature?

Yet, it was not of course, wrong that he had to ask about.

But she might of got, all innocently, into some difficulty.

So he said very tenderly, stroking, her hair back the while—

'I heard something just now, dearest, that made me anxious concerning you, so I came at once to ask you about it.'

Her eyes widened.

'About me?' she said, then laughed. 'Oh! you dear silly boy! Why, what is there to be anxious about in me?'

'I hope nothing dear. But tell me what made you go last night to a house in Bloomsbury, instead of going to church as you did me?'

The question came so suddenly, as almost to take the girl off her guard.

Her eyes flickered, the color deepened on her cheek.

She felt at sea, for she could not tell how much Rex knew.

'Who had seen her?' flashed angrily through her mind. 'Sydney?'

But her confusion was only momentary. She rapidly decided that a 'half-truth' was safest.

Gradually her head drooped till her face was hidden.

'I thought,' she whispered, 'you wouldn't let me go—if I told you—alone—and—besides—'

'Well—besides? What do you mean, Gertrude? What could you have to do in that part of town?'

'Don't be angry!' supplicated the penitent, with tears.

'No, no, dear, I am not—at least, I hate deception! Why did you tell me a lie?'

'Oh! Rex! How can you? Gertrude was sobbing now; and, manlike, Rex felt he was rather a brute to talk like this to anything so tender and sensitive. 'I wasn't doing any harm. I took a cab—no one could hurt me!'

'But what business could you have in a place like Malpas Street? Tell me why you went there?' Rex said, quietly.

'I—I only went to see an old servant,' answered Gertrude. As Rex became more gentle, she began to put on an injured air. 'She was ill, and had no one to see to her but me.'

'Then why not have said so, Gertrude? and I would have gone with you, or you could have taken the maid.'

'You had an engagement you said you couldn't break, and I know Mrs. Hayward would never have let me go so late, even with the maid. Poor old Ellen was my nurse once, Gertrude said, lifting earnest, innocent eyes to her lover's face. 'She was very ill; I didn't know but what it was something infectious.'

'How frightened you are for me, directly' as Rex started and drew her to him closely. 'No, it wasn't anything, I found, of that sort; but I thought she had better go to the hospital, so I made arrangements for her to be taken there to-day. That's all your poor little Gertrude has been guilty of; you see, nothing very dreadful, is it?'

'An error of judgment, more than a heinous sin,' he answered, smiling. He felt relieved, yet, somehow, not as relieved as he ought to have felt. 'But you must promise me never to do anything of the kind again, and, above all, you must never deceive me, Gertrude, not in the smallest particular,' he said, very gravely; 'deceit is the one thing that I could not forgive—remember that!'

She looked up at him with a curiously searching gaze; then she said, half poutingly—

'You are so very strict! I don't call that sort of thing "deception" exactly. Of course I was wrong, and I'm very sorry. Who saw me on my little errand?'

'Sydney happened to be that way. She has a friend in the neighborhood, and she thought you might be in some difficulty. Girls sometimes get into such, through ignorance, dearest; so she told me.'

'Difficulty! What do you mean, Rex? What can a girl get into?'

'Perhaps you may not quite understand, dear,' he answered, half smiling at her pretty ignorance. 'I don't mean anything wrong—only, perhaps, imprudent. One hears of such things often. A young girl fancies herself in love with someone, maybe, and writes letters to him, which he may—'

'—it a blackguard—threaten to disclose to her friends, or lover, or husband, and so may blackmail her. That's one sort of difficulty.'

'Oh! but Rex, I've never cared for anyone but you!' cried Gertrude, in distress. 'How could you suppose anything of the sort? I never was even a flirt! You are unkind.'

'Silly child! small blame to you there would be if something of the kind had happened,' returned Rex. 'Don't be foolish, dear. Let's say no more about it. If you want to go and see this old lady

of yours in the hospital, go in the daytime, and take someone with you. I won't have you running about alone. Now, go and get ready, and I'll take you to the gallery.'

'Thanks, you are nice!' cried Gertrude, clapping her hands. She thought she had got very well out of the wood. 'I feel ever so much better now you know all about it.'

And away she skipped, light hearted as any child, thought Rex, who looked after her with a curious ache at his heart nevertheless.

He half-sighed, and wondered if Sydney would be as relieved as he was at the perfectly natural explanation which Gertrude had given of her proceedings last night.

Strange how much heart and goodness lay under that child's sometimes rather frivolous exterior.

He himself even had—well, lately—hardly been able to fancy Gertrude by a sick bed, braving infection in order to comfort a poor old nurse; but, of course, she was so young and undeveloped.

No one can tell what lies in the character before life has well begun for it—not even those who love the undeveloped one most deeply and tenderly.

CHAPTER VI.

'Gertrude has explained everything to me, Sydney,' said Rex, the next day, to his 'comrade.'

He came into the studio, where the girl was busy at work, and plunged at once into the subject, in an off-hand manner.

'She went to see an old servant, and was afraid to let anybody know lest she should be prevented. She promised me not to go again, alone. Besides, the old lady has been removed to a hospital, so that's all right.'

'I am very glad,' answered Sydney, brightly.

In her heart she was doubtful if it was all right, or that Rex was, in truth, as satisfied as he persuaded himself; but she was not going to let him see this, if she could help it.

Yet, the very absence of comment must have struck him as strange.

He did not, however, make any remark on this, which showed that both were skating on thin ice.

Having made his explanation, Rex chatted a few moments in a desultory sort of way, and then departed.

When he was gone, Sydney covered her face with her hands.

Her heart was wrung for him. 'Is he beginning to find out?' she half whispered. 'He is not the same as he used to be: he is changed, somehow. Has Gertrude spoken the truth? I can't think so, and yet—I hate to think otherwise. I wish—'

What she wished in her heart did not come over her lips; perhaps it was to indefinite to be put into words; yet, a knock at the door, followed by the entrance of the art critic, Mr. Merton, gave it instant shape.

Sydney welcomed him with her usual bright cordiality; she was always glad to see him, and for a time they chatted about art matters, Sydney seeking an opportunity of bringing in the subject which was uppermost in her mind.

'By the way,' she said, laughing 'your friend, Mr. Tyrell—she half hesitated, then went on—'is he a great friend of yours?'

'Why, do you want to abuse him, you naughty girl?' answered Merton, smiling.

'No; he's not a great friend of mine, and between you and me and the gate-post he's no very great connoisseur in art matters.'

So I judged. Truth to say, I don't know very much about him; nor do I think he's nearly so well off as he gives himself out to be. Rich Americans don't camp down between Oxford Street and the Euston Road.'

Sydney drew a silent breath, but only answered, laughingly.

'I don't know. What of Russell Square boarding-houses?'

'But he doesn't live in one, my dear child; he's got rooms somewhere farther north. What the deuce is the name of the thoroughfare? Oh, Malpas Street—that's it.'

'Malpas Street! I know it—a very decent place. What is his number? I know a girl living that way,' said Sydney.

Her heart was throbbing quickly, but she spoke quite naturally.

'Thirty something. Stay—I've got it here. I've such a bad memory for addresses that I always put em' down. Here it is—tumbling in his pocket for his address-book—'thirty-four.'

'My friend is at thirty-eight,' answered Sydney. 'Shall I ask Mr. Tyrell to my next "at home"?''

'There'd be no harm; he might buy a picture or two,' returned Merton, with a twinkle in his eye. 'I fancy he does that kind of thing on commission for some New York rich nobody, who doesn't know a picture from a dump, and pass someone to know for him.'

'And who doesn't?' said Sydney, gravely, whereat the art critic shrugged his shoulders and laughed.

'So,' thought Sydney, when he was gone 'that is his address, and Gertrude went to see him! Great Heavens! what a tangle it seems! Yet, she may have been to see an old servant lodging at the same house. It would be a coincidence—a strange one.'

She could easily ascertain, but the duty was not to her taste.

Was it her duty—was it her business to, (CONTINUED ON FIFTEENTH PAGE)

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