

# Miss Wentworth's Idea

(BY)

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## CHAPTER X.

Go straight to head-quarters for information sounds like a wise principle to act upon; and indeed the system is said to have been adopted with success by certain eminent statesmen and diplomats. Yet, if the truth were known, it might possibly be found that the statesmen have not wholly disdained other means of arriving at their ends, because, unfortunately, the desire of the candid inquirer for a plain statement of facts is not always shared at head-quarters. No one, therefore,



will be surprised to hear that Sylvia, in spite of her bold resolution to interrogate Sir Harry Brewster as to the circumstances connected with his divorce, knew very little more about them at the end of three weeks than she had done at the beginning. She did, indeed, summon up courage to put a point-blank question to him, but his reply was such as to render further questions almost impossible. It was too true, he said, that he was a divorced man, but Miss Sylvia would understand that he could not talk much to her upon such a subject. He might add that it was an excessively painful one to him.

After that, what more could she do? She ventured upon an occasional hint; but these he ignored, and finally she said to herself that she really did not care to pry into matters which were none of her business. The past was past and had better be forgotten; the present was quite enjoyable enough to content her.

If the present had not contented her no blame could have attached to Sir Harry Brewster, who was indefatigable in devising schemes for her amusement.

Although he did not come very often to the house, he contrived to make arrangements for meeting Sylvia almost every day of the week, and what was still more clever of him was that he also contrived to secure the necessary escort in the person of her father. Mr Wentworth did not mind incurring a little trouble and inconvenience for the pleasure of Sir Harry's society. Sir Harry was not only himself entertaining, but had a number of entertaining friends whom it was a change and an amusement to meet. As for Muriel's apprehensions and warnings, they were preposterous upon the face of them; impossibilities do not occur, and Mr Wentworth had a comfortable habit of treating all disagreeable occurrences as impossible.

Muriel herself ended by shutting her eyes to what, after all, was not obtruded upon her notice. When one is helpless, one may as well hope for the best; moreover, she had now a good deal more to occupy her thoughts than she had hitherto had. Every day she spent several hours with the sick children, whose affections she had no difficulty in gaining; the Sisters made her welcome and were not averse to chatting with her about the rules of the Society to which they belonged, and in the principles of which they had the firmest faith; from time to time she encountered Mr Compton, who was always in a hurry, yet never passed her without saying a few friendly words, and she had come to look forward to the visits of Colonel Medhurst, who frequently happened to drop in about tea-time. Upon the whole, her life just now was pleasant to her, notwithstanding the modesty of its immediate aims; and, that being so, she was disposed to take a more sanguine view of the proceedings and prospects of others.

One day Sylvia received a letter which ought to have delighted her, yet, somehow or other, failed to produce that effect, and the contents of which she did not at once communicate to Muriel.

'We are going to have our annual ball next Wednesday,' Lady Morecambe wrote, 'and there will be two others in the neighbourhood in the course of the week; so you see the time has come for you to redeem your promise. We shall expect you on Monday, and I will undertake to provide you with as many good partners as you can wish for.'

Instead of jumping for joy, Sylvia found herself wondering whether she could not find some excuse for declining this seductive invitation, and it must be acknowledged that at first she was a little surprised by her own hesitation. However, she accounted for it by reflecting that she really had not more than one ball-dress fit to wear and that she could not afford two new ones; also that balls were poor fun when you hadn't an idea who your partners would be; finally that Sir Harry Brewster had promised to take her to see a polo match on the day named by Lady Morecambe. The approach of the post hour found her still irresolute, and she was sitting at her aunt's writing-table in the drawing-room, biting the end of her pen and sighing, when Sir Harry Brewster was announced.

Sir Harry, who was always careful to observe the laws of conventionalism, hastened to explain that he had asked for Miss Wentworth and had been told that she was at home.

'One Miss Wentworth is at home,' answered Sylvia laughing, 'and the other will be soon. Sit down and help me invent a polite fib. Lady Morecambe has asked me to go down to them next Monday for their ball, and I don't think I want to go. What shall I say to her.'

'When I don't want to accept an invitation,' observed Sir Harry, 'I always say I'm afraid I can't manage it; but perhaps ladies are expected to give reasons. Why don't you want to go, though? It's sure to be well done, and I expect you would enjoy it.' He added presently, 'I'll go, if you will?'

'Have you been invited?' asked Sylvia, with a sudden change of countenance.

'No; but that's a trifle. I'll get Morecambe to ask me.'

Sylvia looked down and began to draw patterns upon the sheet of paper before her. 'Do you know,' she said hesitatingly at length, 'I don't think Lady Morecambe quite likes you.'

'Oh, if that's all, I'm sure she doesn't,' he replied. 'Lady Morecambe is—shall we say prejudiced against me? Then, perceiving what he was probably meant to understand, he resumed: 'I shall not beg for my invitation until the last moment, you know, and I shall not apply to her ladyship at all. Meanwhile, please write an acceptance. I'll undertake to say that when you enter the ball-room you will find me on the spot, waiting to claim a dance.'

From the above fragment of dialogue it will be seen that three weeks had brought about a decided change of relations between these two persons, and that Sir Harry had, consciously or unconsciously, ceased to pose as the benevolent admirer of mature years. Sylvia scribbled off the letter, pausing every now and again to throw a remark over her shoulder.

'I don't know why Lady Morecambe should be prejudiced against you,' was one of these.

'Oh, I think you do,' responded Sir Harry, tranquilly. 'In a general way of speaking, the British matron is prejudiced against me, and the British matron is not wrong. I don't complain—but at the same time I must confess that I don't care. So long as you don't share the good lady's prejudices, she is very welcome to them.'

'But perhaps I should,' observed Sylvia turning a somewhat uneasy countenance towards him, 'if—'

'If you were as well acquainted with my misdeeds as she is? Very likely you would; and that is why I shall not confess them to you. I will only take the liberty of pleading that I am not quite so black as I am painted.'

During the period of silence which followed this audacious assertion Muriel came in and recognised the visitor with a look of annoyed surprise which did not escape his notice.

'You will have to dismiss your butler, Miss Wentworth,' said he; 'his mind is too logical for his position. You have evidently given him a general order to the effect that you are always out when you are at home, and a deductive process of reasoning has led him to conclude that you must be at home when you are out. Anyhow, he assured me that you were at home, and upon the faith of that statement I followed him upstairs. I can't pretend that I regret having done so especially as I arrived just in time to persuade Miss Sylvia that she ought to accept an invitation to Lady Morecambe's ball, which she was thinking of refusing. Nobody understands how to make a country ball go off better than Lady Morecambe.'

'I had not heard anything about it; Sylvia did not mention it to me,' said Muriel, with a perplexed look. And then as her niece vouchsafed no remark: 'Are you going to this ball, Sir Harry?' she inquired.

'I am sorry to say that I haven't been asked,' replied Sir Harry, imperturbably.

Sylvia bent over the envelope which she was addressing. She was perhaps a little ashamed of her confederate's *supplicatio veri*; but, on the other hand, the fact that he was making himself her confederate was not disagreeable to her. As for Muriel she both felt relieved and looked so.

'Of course you will go, Sylvia,' she said. 'When did you ever refuse an invitation to a ball?'

'Oh, I am going,' answered Sylvia. 'Only I doubted about it because Lady Morecambe says there are to be two other dances, and I have neither frocks nor money to buy them.'

'If that is all, I'll provide the frocks,' said Muriel, who indeed was in the habit of supplementing her niece's allowance by frequent gifts of that description.

In the innocence of her heart, she felt quite grateful to Sir Harry for having urged this change of scene upon Sylvia, and began to think that, bad as he was, she might have wronged him by suspecting him of designs which only a hardened scoundrel could have entertained. It was, therefore, with unwonted graciousness that she said: 'I hope you will stay and have a cup of tea with us.'

'He will be delighted,' answered Sylvia for him. 'I say so to save him from telling a direct falsehood. Sir Harry would prefer a sherry and bitters; he doesn't really like tea; no man does. Not even your long, solemn soldier, Muriel, though he meekly swallows about a quart of it every afternoon to please you.'

Muriel, slightly displeased, was beginning to say that neither Sir Harry Brewster nor anyone else gave her the least pleasure by swallowing what he did not like, when she was interrupted by the entrance of the 'long, solemn soldier,' whose arrival at that hour had, to tell the truth, become a matter of almost daily occurrence.

The candles had not yet been lighted, so that Colonel Medhurst did not notice the presence of a stranger until after he had exchanged a few remarks with Muriel and had turned to shake hands with Sylvia. The latter since her

aunt said nothing, took upon herself to accomplish an introduction by which both men appeared to be disagreeably affected. Sir Harry on hearing the name of Colonel Medhurst, rose hastily, made a half bow and looked around for his hat, while the other standing stock-still, clenched his fist and muttered something suspiciously like an imprecation. There was a brief pause; after which the Colonel, whose voice was trembling with anger, said:

'I have not tried to meet you, Sir Harry Brewster; I know that I should gain nothing except a little personal satisfaction from giving you the thrashing that you so richly deserve. But since chance has brought us together in this very unexpected way, I will take this opportunity of telling you that you are no gentleman and that you have no business to be in any lady's house. I am sure if Miss Wentworth knew as much about you as I know, she would not permit you to enter here.'

'My good man,' returned Sir Harry, calmly, 'there is one thing which certainly ought not to take place in any lady's house, and that is a brawl. Here is my card. If you wish to thrash me, and think you can do it, by all means call upon me at any hour which it may please you to appoint; but, for your own sake, don't indulge in strong language under circumstances which make it impossible for me to answer you.'

Colonel Medhurst was one of those quiet, sensible men who very seldom lose their temper, and who consequently have had little practice in the difficult task of self-control.

'I am not going to treat you as if you were a gentleman,' he retorted, forgetting that he was asked to show some consideration for his hostess, not for his enemy. 'Wherever I meet you I shall say what I said just now, and, as you very well know, I can justify my words.'

'In that case,' observed Sir Harry, 'it is evident that one or other of us must retire. I will leave you to explain and excuse your behaviour to Miss Wentworth. No doubt, if she thinks it worth while, she will allow me to state my own case some other time.'

He then took his leave in a manner which was not devoid of quiet dignity; and, as the slight pressure which he ventured to give to Sylvia's fingers was distinctly returned, he went away without much fear as to ultimate results.

Yet his predicament was really an awkward one, as he might have realised, had he not been rendered a little dull of comprehension by the comparative facility with which he had regained his position in society, after a temporary period of eclipse. Medhurst when he was left alone with the ladies, grew a little cooler, though he was still much agitated.

'I suppose I ought to make you an apology,' he began; 'I ought not, perhaps, to have brought about a scene in your drawing-room. But I think you will forgive me when I tell you that that man was my sister's husband, and that she was compelled to obtain a divorce from him while I was away in India. You won't wish or expect me to give you all the particulars of the case; but I may say this—that she proved personal cruelty. He struck her on more than one occasion before the servants. And the worst of it is that he has not been punished; he was glad to be set free. It is she, and she alone, who has suffered.'

'I don't think you owe us any apology, Colonel Medhurst,' said Muriel, who looked penitent and ashamed. 'I knew—my brother told me—about the divorce; but I didn't know who Sir Harry's wife had been.'

'Your brother told you, and yet you continued to receive him!' exclaimed Medhurst. 'Well—I am surprised. I must say that I am surprised.' Muriel, feeling that it would be a little undignified to plead her own repeatedly expressed reluctance to receive the culprit, remained silent; but Sylvia said:

'Why are we to condemn Sir Harry unheard? Of course you are angry and you won't admit that there can be anything to be said for him; but there are always two sides to a case.'

'It is impossible to explain away facts which have been proved in a court of law,' returned Colonel Medhurst, coldly. 'If you will excuse me, I will say good-night now. I am sorry that this encounter should not have taken place elsewhere; but as regards what I said to that man I have nothing to retract and nothing to regret.'

'I can't compliment your friend upon his manners,' remarked Sylvia, when the door had closed behind the irate colonel. 'One may forgive him for having insulted Sir Harry, though perhaps it would have been better form to wait until they were both out in the street; but I don't know what right he had to be so rude to us.'

'He wasn't rude,' answered Muriel rather sadly, for she felt sure that her friend would now be her friend no longer, 'he was only offended, and he had a right to be that. We ought not to receive Sir Harry Brewster; I have thought so all along.'

'Papa doesn't think so, it seems,' returned Sylvia, preparing herself for battle; 'nor does Lady Morecambe. What have we to do with the sins which our acquaintances may have committed in days gone by? I suppose that even Colonel Medhurst, if he were put into the confessional, would have to plead guilty to a few peccadilloes.'

But Muriel declined the fray. She reserved what she had to say for her brother, with whom she sought an interview in his study before she went to bed, and to whom she gave an account of the afternoon's events.

'Dear me, what an odd coincidence,' remarked Mr Wentworth, after patiently hearing her out. 'Now that you mention it, I think I do recollect that the lady's maiden name was Medhurst. Well, of course we mustn't let these two fire eaters come to fisticuffs here. You had better give the necessary orders to the servants.'

'I doubt whether Colonel Medhurst will ever come here again,' answered Muriel. 'I am sure he won't if Sir Harry Brewster is to be admitted. Surely there can be no question as to which of them ought to have the door shut against him.'

An unwelcome idea was suggested to Mr Wentworth by this speech. He had always taken the possibility of Muriel's marriage into account, but only in the same sense as he had contemplated the possibility of the house being burnt down or of his own premature demise. Just as there are a good many non-marrying men, so one occasionally comes across a non-worrying woman. He had mentally included his sister in the latter restricted class, and it is needless to add that he had done so very willingly. She was free to marry if she pleased, only her marriage would mean the curtailment of a considerable proportion of his personal comforts; and that may have been one reason why he at once jumped to the conclusion that Colonel Medhurst was in no way worthy of her.