

The Collaborators

A distant cousinship, so remote that it is almost non-existent, has invested Sylvia with the idea that she possesses a sort of proprietary interest in my person.

Sylvia is twenty-two, yet five summers ago she took an almost maternal interest in my future. My decision that I intended to embrace literature as a career brought her a telegram demanding my immediate attention. I went to receive a lecture on the folly of my choice.

Now that time has brought its measure of success, small though it be, Sylvia's claim of my wisdom in following her advice. And not for worlds would I enlighten her.

On my visit before me there lies a letter from her:

"Dear Dick: I have got a magnificent idea for a novel, simply exquisite, and I want you to help me with it. There are certain 'faults' in your writing which I think can help you to correct, and together we ought to write a lovely book, don't you think so? So come to tea to-morrow afternoon, and we can talk it over."

"SYLVIA."

From another place, I should throw the letter into the fire, and epitomize it as an egotistical piece of impertinence, but Sylvia is Sylvia, and I am off to catch the next train to Twickenham, where she lives.

Sylvia had come to the hall and took me into the drawing room, where tea was laid for two.

"So good of you to come, Dick," she said.

"I am all impatience," I replied.

Rang the bell. "We will have tea, and then go into the garden to discuss my idea."

During tea Sylvia talked on many subjects, but she avoided the one. When it was over, I rose. "Now, Sylvia," I said.

We went into the garden and sat down on a pair of chairs in the shade of some trees.

Sylvia regarded me. "Dick," she said, "I have long felt that there is something wanting about your books." Perhaps she saw a shadow cross my face. "They are awfully nice, but you do not understand women."

"Then I must marry," Sylvia, will you?"

"Don't be ridiculous, Dick! Now I have an idea—I know mankind."

"I thought you studied the other sex," I murmured.

For an awful moment Sylvia regarded me thoughtfully. "This I could carry, the woman's character through out the novel, and you the man!"

"And the minor characters?"

"We will do them between us."

"And now the plot," I said. "That is the principal part of a book."

"Is it?" queried Sylvia.

"Most decidedly," I replied.

"I thought of this," she said finally. "A man and a woman."

"Yes," I said encouragingly.

"She's frightfully rich, and he is terribly in love with her."

"And very poor," I suggested.

"Exactly. Dickie dear, said Sylvia. In the whole of my existence it is the first time Sylvia has called me dear; she generally adopts a maternal attitude.

"He is a business man with a grand idea for making money, but lacking the necessary capital."

"Capital," I ejaculated.

"I beg your pardon," said Sylvia.

"Excellent, I should have said," I murmured hastily.

"An unknown man lends him the money."

"Man?" I queried.

"Well, he thinks she is a man," said Sylvia, with a smile.

Sylvia looked at me steadily. "Are you extraordinarily dense, or are you attempting a joke?"

I ignored her, scathing rejoinder. "And the man is the girl all along."

"Yes, and he makes the business a huge success, and finds out how silly he has been."

"I am not proposing before, and then they enter into partnership."

"Yes," said Sylvia. "Of course we shall have to make a few incidents. Perhaps you call it 'romantic'?"

"I believe so," I replied. "I have no need for it in my books."

"Then ours ought to be a great success, Dickie dear." Sylvia can be horribly sarcastic on occasions.

"When we start?" I said.

Sylvia had brought a pencil and paper with her. "I thought we would commence now—write say, a couple of chapters this evening."

I looked at her in astonishment. This was a new side of her character. "You are most indiscreet," I said.

"I can't stand it like," she replied.

"Now, we will start."

"The open paper lay on her lap."

"Yes," I said.

"Well?" she responded.

"Have I got to come?"

"Certainly," replied Sylvia. "I am only responsible for the woman."

"Ladies should always be first," I responded.

"Suppose we commence with a soliloquy from the heroine."

"That's going to be original," she replied. "Books, soliloquies are out of date." Sylvia knows more about the art of writing a novel than I imagined.

"I propose making the hero have a conversation with a friend on a point of the river, in the twilight. As Sylvia herself explained, they were not to marry and her husband was to be married and her husband had been arrested.—Figaro."

"Don't," pleaded Sylvia. I gazed at her in astonishment. "Why not?"

"It's such a lovely evening for the river. If you talk about it I shan't be able to think about the book."

I leaped to my feet. "Sylvia!" I said. "I have an idea! Let's go on the river: we can write the first scene there—on the spot. What could be better?"

The river runs at the bottom of the garden, and to less than five minutes had unbroken the punt and was punting up stream.

"Now we will commence," I said. "It was twilight on the river—"

"That doesn't sound very original," said Sylvia critically.

"From a houseboat in the distance came the sound of a banjo."

"Yes, doesn't it play beautifully? That's the Gower's houseboat—I expect it's Teddy Gowers."

"Have you got that down?" I said, regardless of her interruption.

"No, I am so sorry; would you mind saying it again?"

Sylvia groaned, and repeated the sentence.

"Sounds rather like a lampighter," murmured Sylvia, bending over her pencil.

"Sylvia," I said seriously, "am I responsible for the appearance of the hero, or are you?"

"You are, Dickie dear; go on."

"You see, said the man with the pole, you can do little in the world without money."

Sylvia regarded me thoughtfully. "I wonder why money was ever invented," she said.

"That does very well for the other man's ready—I mean him to be a thoughtful man."

"Then I had better be responsible for him," said Sylvia. "I am afraid sarcasm is lost on her."

For half an hour we worked hard; then Sylvia laid down the pencil, and demanded a rest and some chocolates. We sat talking until dusk had fallen. In the distance and around us came the lights of houseboats. From more than one came the sound of music.

"We must get back," Sylvia looked at the streets on her lap. We had filled one page for nearly two-thirds of its length. "Look," she said, holding it out for my inspection. "I knew your plan would be a failure. At this rate."

"We shall be three score years and ten before we have finished one novel." I hastened to correct myself. "At least I shall be."

"Dickie, dear, your manners are becoming absolutely perfect, and you look very nice in your flannels."

The darkness has many charms. A sudden thought struck Sylvia. "Don't you think we should sit on the river in the dark, heroine-like on one of our scenes?"

I am afraid she misunderstood the inferences in my remark regarding darkness on the water.

"I am sure we could. We shall come down and rehearse it. Shall we say Saturday evening?"

"We will say nothing so absurd." "But we must go through the scene—I do in my books."

"The love scenes?" asked Sylvia innocently.

I found it necessary to guide the punt past an electric launch, so could not go on.

When we reached the house and I helped Sylvia out—"No more evenings on the river for work, Dickie," she said.

"But you have enjoyed yourself?"

"Fremendously."

Walking up the garden, Sylvia was thoughtful.

"Now we must do so many thousand words every evening."

"No author does any given number of words in a day, I am afraid."

"When he likes."

Sylvia clasped her hands together ecstatically. "What a delightful life!"

Before her father and mother she was silent regarding our project, but in a few moments that we had alone she related it to them. "I shall write out a synopsis of the plot," she said; "and divide the book into chapters; that will be useful."

"Very," I said.

"And I shall get a notebook and down any happy thoughts that occur to me."

"Then you will fill it in a day," I replied.

"Stupid boy," replied Sylvia, "I meant clever ones."

"Oh," I replied. There must have been an inflection in my voice.

"It will take me longer," said Sylvia seriously.

"Not at all," I replied hurriedly.

At the gate where she came to see me off, I reminded her about Saturday.

"Yes," said Sylvia. "Of course we shall have to make a few incidents."

"Perhaps you call it 'romantic'?"

"I believe so," I replied. "I have no need for it in my books."

"Then ours ought to be a great success, Dickie dear." Sylvia can be horribly sarcastic on occasions.

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"That's going to be original," she replied.

"Even the boy," was the reply.

"I am afraid he is," I said.

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