

A GOLDEN SILENCE

By Harriet
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HESTER probably had never done a harder thing in her life than going to her Uncle Jasper and asking him to lend her a hundred dollars to help her through her last year in high school. She explained that she could earn her board and room by helping with the children at the home of the teacher of physics; but since her own home was in the country, she would have to pay tuition, and there would be extra expenses for graduation.

"I'll pay it back the first year after I graduate," she promised. "And I'll pay interest of course."

It was impossible for her to tell from Uncle Jasper's face whether she had made a favorable impression on him or not.

"Study Latin, don't you?" he observed after a discouraging pause.

"Yes, sir."

"And French?"

"Yes, sir."

"It always seemed to me that women could say enough in one language. I don't believe in sending them to school to learn to talk any more than they're bound to do anyway."

Hester reddened. "There's lots of silly talk,

I'm not going to do any talking for a while. If I didn't, they'd probably think I was crazy or ill and get the doctor."

"There's something in that. You can tell them what you're going to do, but not why you're going to do it."

Hester eagerly agreed. But when that evening at the supper table she announced her intention of not talking for a few days, she realized that the ensuing week was to be a period of unexampled difficulty.

"You mean you're not going to talk at all?" demanded her mother. "I hope the queer streak on your father's side of the family ain't coming out in you, Hester," she added. "Look at your Uncle Jasper!"

"I guess a man who has made as much money as Jasper has as good brains as most folks," declared Mr. Marshall, a little nettled at this slighting reference to his family. "What I can't understand is what Hester's looking to gain by going round as if she were deaf and dumb."

"I want to see if I can do it," said Hester, which was part of the truth.

"There's lots of things I could do that I'm not going to try," said her father. "Maybe I

gives me the creeps to see you going round with your mouth squeezed shut as if it were sewed together."

And Horace, with his eyes gleaming with mischief, would call to her from the next room, "Say, sis, what time is it by the kitchen clock?"

After two days Hester's silence ceased to stimulate the flow of small talk; the family ate their meals with so little conversation that an outsider might have supposed it a household of mutes. But Hester's resolution was to undergo tests from other sources. On the second evening, when she had gone to her room with a book, Horace came rushing upstairs.

"Dan Thorne is at the gate, asking for you, sis!" he cried. "I guess he wants to take you riding."

Hester checked an exclamation of dismay. Dan Thorne was the son of a neighboring farmer, a boy four years older than herself. Those four years had meant a great deal when Dan went off to college. He was almost a young man, and Hester was only a little girl. But last spring, when Dan came home for his short vacation, they had met on a new footing. Hester was no longer a little girl, and they had discovered a community of tastes none too frequent in the experience of either. After Dan returned to college, he had written, and Hester had replied; and now he was at the door asking for her.

Hester remembered that her agreement with Uncle Jasper applied only to oral speech. She snatched a sheet of paper from a box of stationery, and wrote:

Dear Dan. I can't come down to-night. I'm so sorry. If you care to come round next week after Tuesday, I'll explain. Hester.

Horace eyed the note provokingly as she held it toward him. "What's that for?"

Hester pointed to Dan's name on the envelope, but Horace was in an irritating mood.

"I don't understand sign language. If you have got anything to say to me, use United States."

He was backing toward the door, and Hester realized despairingly that he would not deliver the note. Too proud to continue the wordless appeal, she turned her back on him and took up her book. But her reading was only a pretense. Five minutes after Horace had clattered downstairs, she heard the sound of wheels moving away from the house, and when a tear splashed down on the unread page Hester made up her mind that, whatever the clock said, it was bedtime.



It was on a Wednesday morning that Hester's silence began, and on the following Tuesday who should appear but Uncle Jasper. He walked into the kitchen unannounced. "Morning, Lyddy!" was his greeting. "Morning, Hester!"

Hester nodded without speaking, and Mrs. Marshall broke out angrily: "Well, I'm glad you've come, Jasper! Maybe you can tell me what to do for this girl of mine."

"Ain't sick, is she?" asked Uncle Jasper. "She's taken it into her head to stop talking. It's a week to-day since we've heard a word out of her. Did you ever hear the like of that? There is a queer streak in you Marshalls, Jasper, and it looks to me as if Hester had inherited it."

Uncle Jasper's steely gray eyes gleamed as he looked at his niece.

"Think you ought to worry your ma this way, Hester?" he asked.

"There, that's the way!" exclaimed Mrs.



"THERE, THAT'S THE WAY!" EXCLAIMED MRS. MARSHALL WHEN HESTER MADE NO REPLY. . . . "NOT A WORD TO THROW TO A DOG"

Uncle Jasper, but I haven't ever noticed that women did more than their share."

"Men talk because they've got something to say, and women talk because it's like the breath of life to 'em."

Hester realized vaguely that this little, dried-up man, her father's oldest brother, was trying to tease her and that it would not do to get angry. Though Uncle Jasper objected to feminine volubility, no one, she reflected, had suffered on that score less than he, since for nearly twenty years he had lived alone.

"Just how long do you reckon you could do without talking, Hester?" Uncle Jasper asked suddenly.

"As long as I wanted to."

"A week?"

"Of course. It would be a silly thing to do, because it would be inconvenient. But I could do it easy enough if I had a reason."

"Then I'll give you a reason. If you'll do it for one week, beginning to-morrow morning, I'll lend you the hundred dollars at six per cent interest. There's no use wasting breath thanking me till you get the money, and I'm not counting on your getting it."

"Oh, but I shall, Uncle Jasper. I'm sure to. And I can't tell you how grateful I am —"

"You understand," interrupted Uncle Jasper. "This agreement is a secret between you and me. You mustn't tell anyone about it."

Hester reflected. "I'll have to tell the family

could do my day's work with one hand tied behind me, but I'd think I was a fool for trying."

Hester's younger brother, Horace, broke in at that point. "Are you going to count hollering, sis—saying 'O' and 'ouch' and that sort of thing?"

"No, that won't count," replied Hester, but with a sinking heart.

Horace's grin assured her that she could expect no mercy at his hands. With the household arrayed against her, she perceived that, if she succeeded in complying with Uncle Jasper's conditions, she was going to earn her hundred dollars.

Hester awoke next morning with the thought of a speechless week pressing down upon her like a heavy weight. She realized that, if she failed to get Uncle Jasper's loan, it would be because she was taken off her guard; she must not let an inadvertent word escape her lips.

As a general rule, the Marshalls were not a talkative family; many a time they would eat a meal almost without a word. But Hester's continued silence seemed to excite the others to unwonted volubility. Her mother would make an assertion and appeal to Hester for confirmation, and when she gave it in the form of a nod Mrs. Marshall would on each occasion seem to find it a fresh shock.

"My gracious, Hester," she would say, "it

Marshall when Hester made no reply to her uncle. "Not a word to throw to a dog. I believe I'll have Doctor Wigglin come and look her over."

"He wouldn't know what to do for her," replied Uncle Jasper. "It's a new disease if a woman won't talk."

Again his eyes met Hester's, and it seemed to her that she read a reluctant admiration in their depths.

Uncle Jasper had evidently come to spend the day. Seating himself, he entered into conversation with his sister-in-law, occasionally addressing a remark to Hester that she ignored or answered with a nod or with a shake of the head.

To her relief they left her to herself at last. As she went about her work she heard the murmur of voices on the front porch. Presently Horace brought his gun to the back of the house and after fussing with it for some minutes suddenly started up as if he had thought of something that demanded his immediate attention. As he went round the corner of the house, he called back over his shoulder, "Don't touch my gun, sis; it's loaded."

Hester frowned and compressed her lips. If it had been the next day, she would have ordered him to put his gun into a safe place. As it was, she went on beating her sponge cake and resolved to give him a lecture on the morrow. She looked at the clock. Half past ten. In twelve hours she would be in bed, and her next year of school would be assured.

She was just putting the cake into the oven when a sound outside made her turn her head. A flash of a pink gingham frock brought her to her feet. The six-year-old daughter of one of the farm hands had taken the gun that Horace had left leaning against the house, and Hester saw that one small hand was flut-tering about the trigger. For an instant her

heart seemed to stop short. The distance to the spot where the little girl stood seemed a good mile.

"Sally!" She tried to speak in her natural voice, hiding the terror that possessed her, lest she startle the child and precipitate the disaster she dreaded. "Sally, put down the gun and come here."

Ordinarily Sally was obedient. But as Hester crossed the kitchen she saw with incredulous horror that the child stood her ground obstinately, and that the fingers of her right hand seemed to be on the trigger.

Hester shot through the kitchen door and pounced upon the offender. Sally resisted, struggling.

"Sally, stop!" The sternness in Hester's voice overawed the small rebel, for her fingers relaxed their hold. Hester seized the gun in one hand and the child in the other and jerked them in opposite directions. Then she became aware that she had an audience. Her mother and Uncle Jasper stood staring at her, and behind them was Horace, grinning a little nervously.

Sally, finding herself the centre of attention, began to cry. "He said if I'd do it he'd give me a doll," she sobbed.

Hester put her hand up to her forehead. Something in the gesture seemed to make Horace uncomfortable.

"It wouldn't 'a' hurt her!" he called, defensively. "The gun wasn't loaded. I just said that to fool you."

A terrible look crossed Hester's face. She took a step toward her brother, then turned abruptly and entered the kitchen. After a moment Uncle Jasper followed her.

"You might as well ease your mind now," he said. "You spoke once, and that's the same as if you'd spoken right along every day."

"Yes, I know." Hester began to collect the

dishes that she had used in her cooking. Her shaking hands contradicted the assumed composure of her manner.

"Why didn't you light into Horace just now?" Uncle Jasper asked. Why should he madden her with such questions? "That was a mean trick he played you."

"I'd rather wait till I'm not so angry," Hester answered.

"H'm!" Uncle Jasper scratched his head. "I've always noticed that when I was hot under the collar it helped me to do a subject justice."

"I've got a bad temper," said Hester tonelessly. "If I try to talk about a thing when I'm angry, I say more than I mean to; and besides," she went on, evidently struggling to be just, "Horace didn't know anything depended on my not speaking. He thought it was only a silly notion of mine."

Uncle Jasper walked across the room, then turned and came back.

"Hester," he said, "I guess you think I'm pretty unreasonable about women's tongues. But I've got a right to be. If it hadn't been for one of the women that talk oftener than they think, I shouldn't be a crabbed old bachelor, with his head as full of crotchets as an egg is of meat."

Hester looked at him with a sympathy strongly tintured with astonishment. It was the first time that she had ever thought of him as a lonely, disappointed old man. A new and unconscious tenderness was in her voice as she said, "Uncle Jasper, I'm sorry."

Her uncle did not reply. He took a roll of bills from his pocket and, peeling off the outermost, laid it on the table beside her. Hester had just time to realize that it was a ten-dollar bill before a second of the same denomination covered the first. One by one Uncle Jasper deliberately counted out ten of them.

"There!" he said to the silently observant girl. "There's your money for your next year in school. If you want more, all you got to do is to speak up."

"But, Uncle Jasper, I didn't keep my side of the bargain. I talked."

"I promised to lend you a hundred dollars if you didn't speak a word for a week; well, you slipped up on your side of the bargain, and that lets me out. But I'm going to give you a hundred dollars for doing a little better than any woman ever did before. It's not only your keeping silent well on to a week, Hester; it's more than that; when a girl can hold her tongue because she knows she's too angry to trust herself to talk, she's done about as big a thing as anyone can do."

Hester would not have believed that she could be any happier than she was at that moment. She found out her mistake a little later when Horace brought her a letter. She knew the handwriting, opened it hastily and read it standing, for it was brief and to the point.

"Why," she exclaimed, "it's from Dan! He says he's coming home to-morrow. Did he go away again?"

Horace looked down and shuffled his feet in embarrassment.

"He hasn't been home yet," he said. "That wasn't Dan that night. It was Deacon Potts, to see pa about buying the spotted cow. I—I guess I've been pretty mean to you this week, Hester, but I was only fooling."

"Yes, I know," said Hester in a tone of motherly indulgence. "But it doesn't matter as long as I have these." She patted the pocket of her apron into which she had tucked the ten wonderful pieces of paper that meant the fulfillment of her ambition.

Then, seeing Dan's letter projecting from the other pocket, she patted that, too.