

Our Serial.

MURIEL'S KEY-NOTE.

BY AGNES GIBBERNE.

CHAPTER V.

WAITING.

"Punctuality would not appear to be a cardinal virtue in Claverton, Mrs. Rokeyby."

"I think we are all dressed rather early. But Whittier's flymen are certainly not quite to be depended on," said Mrs. Rokeyby, a sweet and sad-faced widow, with a sweet and sad voice. "Clissie dear, just look out of the window, and see if the fly is coming."

Clarissa, rather a pretty girl of eighteen, dressed in half-mourning evening attire, crossed the little drawing-room obediently. "No," she said. "I see no signs of it. We can afford to wait a few minutes, Mr. Ray."

She stood looking out, and drawing on a pair of white gloves. The house was an odd little detached building, nicknamed Tea-Caddy Cottage by certain satirical observers, though really rejoicing in the name of Copenhagen Villa; in shape tall and narrow, with a single bay-window on each of the three floors, facing the road. Mrs. Rokeyby and her two daughters were new-comers to Claverton.

"Mamma—there she is!" cried Clarissa with eagerness.

"Who, dear?"

"Never knew before that cabs, like ships, were of the feminine gender," muttered the young man, from his station on the hearth-rug. He had come that day to pay a few days' visit to these old friends, with scant notice, and under plea of London over-work. The welcome of which he was sure, he received, albeit no signs of the over-work showed in his healthy face—a face of good outline, sensible rather than brilliant; observant, though scarcely acute. No one, studying Cramer Ray, would have expected him to set the Thames on fire, or to climb to the top rung of any particular ladder. Nevertheless, many found a certain attraction in his good-humoured bearing, and he was a complete gentleman.

"O not the fly! Mamma, it is Muriel. O she is going on. I hoped she meant to call here."

"It she did she could not be back before dark. Besides, to-morrow is her usual day."

Neither Mrs. Rokeyby nor Clarissa saw what somebody else did see, a sudden start forward, promptly controlled, on the part of Cramer Ray. He walked leisurely towards the window with an air of indifference.

There was a fourth person present in the room. A couch of peculiar make stood in a corner, and on it lay a bent twisted figure. Sophy Rokeyby had been born thus, and no doctor's skill could lighten her heavy life-burden. She never had walked, and never would walk. The frail-looking fingers moved slowly over some work, and the eyes, bright with intelligence, took in all that came within their horizon.

"O Mr. Ray, you are too late. She has gone."

"A great friend of yours?" asked Cramer Ray.

"The very best friend we have in Claverton," enthusiastically answered Clissie, who had grown to be one of Muriel's most ardent admirers. If Muriel Bertram ranked as no bright light in her own family, there were other Claverton homes in which she was accounted a very sunbeam—and in Copenhagen Villa not least so. To Clarissa, a well-meaning and pleasant girl, afflicted with a young-ladyish want of occupation in life, the acquaintance came as an agreeable excitement. To Sophy, Muriel's visits were growing to be the bright spots in a grey landscape.

"How many friends have you managed to make in three months?" asked Cramer Ray drily.

"Well—there are degrees of friendship. But Miss Bertram is unlike everybody else. We all fell in love with her at first sight."

"You called her something else just now."

"Muriel. I ought not, only it is such a lovely name, I can't resist sometimes. I hope she will give me leave some day, but she is years older than I am—four or five and twenty. She comes to visit Sophy regularly once a week, if not oftener; and her kind—oh, I can't describe it to you."

"Just like—"

"Just like what?"

"Nothing in particular."

"Just like whom, then?"

"Just like—Lady Bountiful."

"No, in Bushby," said the young man.

"O yes, I forgot—at Mr. John Rivers'. But I suppose you were in and out here."

"Occasionally."

"And you have never heard about

sympathizing creature you ever saw.

"Everybody loves her."

"She is such a bright Christian," said Mrs. Rokeyby. "That is her chief beauty, it seems to me. I know I feel rebuked when I am with her, and see her never-failing cheerfulness." Mrs. Rokeyby sighed.

"So very lively?" asked Cramer, studying the twisted fringe of an antimacassar.

"It is not liveliness—not that at all," said Clissie. "I have seen her look sad. But she always has a smile, and always is so full of interest in other people's concerns. You never see her self-absorbed. Yet she has home troubles enough."

"What sort?"

"O we are only learning about her gradually, but of course things come to our ears. Her own family don't half appreciate her. Isn't it strange? Her mother and sister are two walking icicles, and her brother is a heavy sort of boy, without two ideas of his own; and her grandfather is perfectly dreadful."

"Eh?" said Cramer, lifting his eyebrows. "A real live ogre! I must have a glimpse of him."

"No, but really, Mr. Ray—truly—you can't think what a man he is. He quarrels with everybody. It is quite the talk of the place. The other day I heard two gentlemen talking together, and the first said, 'Our worthy friend of the Manor doesn't see me now, when we pass in the road;' and the second answered, 'O are you too so distinguished by him? My turn next, I suppose;' and then they laughed."

"Who does he quarrel with chiefly?"

"Anybody that doesn't agree with him. He has cast off one of his own daughters completely—years and years ago. She was engaged to a Mr. — what was the name, Sophy?—Irwin, I think—and Mr. Irwin lost his property—or his father did—and he went into business. Mr. Rivers wanted his daughter to give him up, for he is desperately proud, and won't look at a business man—so you will not suit him, Mr. Ray."

Cramer knitted his brows, seeming not to relish the remark. "I am aware of that."

"And his daughter refused to give up Mr. Irwin, so Mr. Rivers gave her up instead. They say her name is never spoken in his hearing. Constance—such a pretty name! Do you think she was right? It must have been a very difficult question for her. What do you think?"

"I'll decide—when I stand in her position."

"They say that if Mr. Rivers once takes offence, he never forgives."

"Did Miss Bertram tell you that?"

"Miss Bertram! As if we ever came near the subject with her! Oh, no; only every one in Claverton knows about them. And then there is this last affair. Mr. John Rivers is such a favourite, that many people seem indignant at his being cast off."

"John Rivers! Nonsense! He has not split with him! Impossible!" Cramer exclaimed.

"Why, do you know him?" asked Clissie, surprised at the outburst.

"I am distantly connected with the family. John Rivers' wife was a Ray before marriage."

"Was she? I did not know that," said Clissie, greatly interested.

"Yes. Rather a far-off cousin of mine. I have not seen her for eight years."

"Then you must have a second tie with them too. Surely some one told me that Miss Bertram's uncle in India, Major Rivers, had married a sister of Mrs. John Rivers. I never heard their surname. I should have thought of you directly."

"Sybel Ray—yes. But Rosamund and Sybel are really first-cousins, though brought up as sisters."

"Who by?"

"Rosamund's mother. She died soon after Sybel's marriage; about four years ago, that is, or not quite so much. Chesney Rivers carried off Sybel on his return from furlough, but I heard few particulars. Rosamund was married nine years ago, not long before my last visit. In fact, I stayed with her and her husband."

"And those two—Rosamund and Sybel you call them—were great friends of Miss Bertram?"

"The three made a most devoted trio."

"Were your cousins very charming girls?"

"John Rivers and his uncle must have thought so."

"How odd for Miss Bertram to have a friend of her own age for aunt. Then you really stayed in Claverton eight years ago?"

"No, in Bushby," said the young man.

"O yes, I forgot—at Mr. John Rivers'. But I suppose you were in and out here."

"Occasionally."

"And you have never heard about

this quarrel, or whatever it is to be called, between Mr. Rivers and Mr. John Rivers?"

"I never hear anything. Rosamund detests letter-writing, and Sybel is in India. Besides, they would not be likely to mention such a matter."

"Were you ever in Claverton itself, before that visit? I mean, did you ever visit your cousins?"

"Once, as a boy, for some weeks. Rosamund and Sybel were pretty little creatures, a few years younger than myself. I used to patronize them in boyish style."

"I dare say. Did they know Miss Bertram then?"

"She was in and out."

"Why, she is an old friend of yours. How curious and interesting. You will enjoy seeing her again."

"That fly of yours is an unconscionable time coming," said Cramer, with a hasty movement towards the door. "I'll take a look out."

Cramer, standing at the little front gate, forgot all about the fly, which he might have seen approaching. His face relaxed into a restless expression, and clouded over, the moment he felt himself unobserved. "What did bring me?" he muttered. "The barrier is as strong as ever—sheer insanity for me to indulge again in any such dream. She will never follow in her aunt's footsteps. Could I wish it for her? Wish! I could wish anything. How all this brings back the old days to me! Clissie's rattle is past endurance. I have a great mind to return to London to-morrow. Absurd to come here, just when I seemed to be settling down to a possibility of something else. 'Spanish princess'—don't I know that look? O Muriel! There I am! I shall be as bad as ever in a week. I had better cut my visit short, and go back at once, before I have a chance of seeing her. I think I will."

But he did not.

TO-DAY, IF YE WILL HEAR MY VOICE.

In every man's life there is something of the desert journey. There is something of the bondage and the sea, of the bitter waters and the manna, of the fords of Jordan and the giants of Canaan. God, by His Providence and Spirit, is ever urging on to something better and higher, and we are ever resisting and turning back. Some remain in Egypt, perpetual slaves; some fall in the desert; and some turn back at Jordan.

But everywhere and all along, the great obstacle to our progress is in ourselves. We fancy it is the way we are led, but the trouble is we do not follow the leading. We fancy it is want of opportunity, when it is really a failure to seize opportunity. We fancy it is in our stars, but the trouble is we do not follow our stars. Every man has at some time looked over into the Canaan of his life, and might have entered if he would. He entered not because he failed to cross over.

Many a man is in bondage all his life because he failed to go out when the cry was made. The sea would have opened if he had only gone forward. He did not hear the voice of to-day and so did not gain the victory to which it led. When truth spoke he turned his back on her, and his has been a false life ever since. When honor was at stake he sacrificed her, and ever since has been walking in the quagmires. It was a failure to hear the voice of God, of truth, of conscience, at some critical point where his life turned.

A young man, in great straits, sees the advertisement of a lottery. "Here is the chance of \$5,000 for \$5. It is not much to lose, it is a great deal to gain. May he not risk so little for so much?" Most certainly he may if that is all. But he stakes and loses his sturdy integrity and his honest purpose. After that, a Jordan rolls between him and an honest man's life. He has chosen the desert of dishonest gain. "The evil of gambling," says one of our newspapers, "is that ninety-nine must lose that one may win." Oh, no! That is not its chief evil. The great evil of gambling is that somebody wins. Somebody draws a prize. A gentleman said to us once, on reading of a large drawing, "I cannot rejoice with him who drew the prize, for thinking of those who lost their money."

"My sympathies," was the reply, "are with the man who wins. Those who lost may learn a lesson worth many times what the ticket cost. But he who won has entered a course of life which may land him in shameful dishonor." A man may recover lost money, but he can never recover that nice sense of honor which he sacrificed when he received money without giving an equivalent. To him it may be a day of provocation in the wilderness, when God says he should not enter into rest.

We all come to essentially the same point, where it all turns on hearing the voice of to-day. To all of us there is God's Word, to all there are obstacles in the way. We often hear it said:

"It is easier for some men to be Christians than others." There is no doubt some truth in this, but less than appears. It is easier for some men to be patient than others; easier for some to be temperate than others; easier even for some men to be honest than others. But every man has his Red Sea to pass through, his desert to cross and his giants to meet. "It is easy for patient and amiable people to be Christians," one says. It is easy for them to be patient and amiable, but not so easy perhaps for them to meet the positive demands of the Christian life which require decision and force and heroism. The gentle and the violent has each his own contest and his own victory, but neither need think the victory will come without the contest. The goal must mean the race run to reach it; the crown must signify the conflict which won it.

We have all in some way heard the voice of God. It may have come to us as a conviction of duty, as a perception of truth, or an impulse of emotion. God speaks to us in all the influences about us—in our thoughts, in our consciences and in our sympathies. Truth is not always equally clear, nor conscience always equally vivid. There are times when we see duty with peculiar clearness, and feel its claims with peculiar freshness. It matters little how a man's convictions come to him, how intense they are, but how he treats them. It is not how God speaks to him, but whether he listens or not. It is never want of light but want of looking; never want of truth but want of listening. "To-day, if ye will hear his voice, harden not your heart." If you ever want to hear the voice of God, hear him now when he speaks. If you ever want to follow the best convictions of your heart, follow them now while they are fresh. If you ever hope to follow Christ unto his kingdom, obey his present voice and follow his present leading. The blind man heard that Jesus was passing, and he cried out at once lest he should be gone beyond his call. Jesus is passing by us whenever our hearts apprehend him; he has passed by us whenever our hearts grow indifferent to him.—*The Advance*.

SAYINGS OF SAM JONES.

What is culture worth if it is but the whitewash of a rascal?

It's no use for a man to get religion if he doesn't quit lying.

Perhaps if you don't talk about your religion it is because you haven't any religion to talk about.

Whisky is a good thing, but its place is in hell. If I go there, I'll drink all I can get, but I won't touch it here.

You say you have doubts. No wonder. Now if you will pull up one of your doubts you will find something at the tap-root, and the name of that something is sin.

A train that makes no noise, raises no dust, kills no stock and disturbs nobody, will never draw any freight nor carry any passengers, nor go anywhere.

It takes grace, grit and greenbacks to run a meeting. God will furnish the grace, but it is our business to furnish the grit and the greenbacks. I'll furnish the grit, you the greenbacks. I like a division of labor.

RANDOM READINGS.

There is nothing as sweet as duty, and all the best pleasures of life come in the wake of duties done.—*Jean Ingelove*.

The old days never come again, because they would be getting in the way of the new, better days whose turn it is.—*Geo. Macdonald*.

That which mellow and ripens, that without which there could be no golden fruitage, that which gives the rich bloom of divine manhood to the spirit, is the frost, the frost of care. Thank God for the sunshine of life, thank him also none the less for the ripening frost.

Never do what your conscience condemns, however you may be urged by others, or whatever immediate pleasure the act may promise. A wounded conscience will give you pain, and the pleasures of sin will soon turn to worm-wood and gall.

How near is heaven? Dr. Talmage says: "It is four arms' length. The arm of earthly farewell on this side; the arm of heavenly welcome put out from the other, while the dying Christian stretches out his two arms—one to take the farewell of earth, the other to take the greeting of heaven."

The happiness of life depends on the regular prosecution of some laudable purpose or lawful calling, which engages, helps and enlivens all our powers; let those bear witness who, after spending years in active usefulness, retire, to enjoy themselves. Prayers should be offered for their servants and wives; and for themselves, too—they are a burden to themselves.—*W. Jay*.



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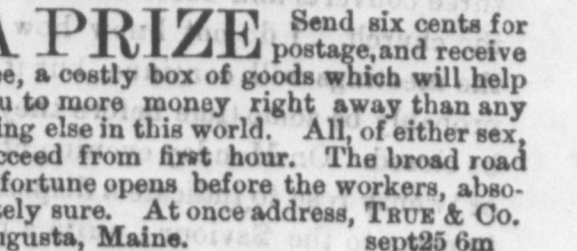
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