

Our Serial.

MURIEL'S KEY-NOTE.

BY AGNES GIBBERNE.

CHAPTER XIV.

CHESNEY'S WIFE.

One brilliant June day, when the air breathed balm, and sparkled with gossamer threads, the travellers came. Chesney Rivers descended first from the carriage—a soldierly man, with frank blue eyes and resolute chin. Two sharply-defined dents, upright in his forehead, showed a touch of something like displeasure, and his greetings, though affectionate, were given with a preoccupied air.

Sybel came next, followed by a queer little ayah, in a red and yellow sari, carrying the baby. Sybel was twelve years younger than her husband, slight and frail, with a broad sensitive forehead, pencilled eyebrows, and a pale little face below. A sweet face it was, intellectual and full of refinement, having a luminous brightness not stamped upon but shining through each feature. Her black crape veil had fallen back, making her look paler by contrast.

It was to Muriel a strange thing to see Sybel taking her place as Mrs. Bertram's sister. The marriage had been at the last so hasty an affair, just before Chesney's enforced return to India, and so little had been seen of bride and bridegroom after, that Muriel had as yet hardly recognized the fact. During the first hour she had a feeling of being put at a distance from her friend, though certainly by no act of Sybel's own, and Muriel fretted under it. She inherited a touch of her mother's jealous vein.

They sat down to late dinner before she could gain a word alone with Sybel. Chesney had been chatting on various subjects, with the dents in his brow never relaxing. In deference to his wife's wish he held in his displeasure so far, and even through the meal. But self-restraint under indignation was foreign to his frank nature, and at dessert out it all came.

"We saw John and Rosamund at the station to-day."

Mr. Rivers' hand shook, clinking his glasses nervously. Chesney had mentioned in a letter having written to John to meet him there, and that was enough to keep away Mr. Rivers. Otherwise he had purposed going with Muriel.

"How is John?" asked Muriel. "Anything but robust, I should have said from his look, but of course he would acknowledge to nothing. I wanted Rose to drive here with Sybel, while John and I walked; but he says the Manor is forbidden ground to him and Rose. What on earth does it all mean?"

Dead silence. Mr. Rivers went on eating rapidly, "each particular hair" of his face working as if it had an independent existence. Mrs. Bertram and Lillias always avoided speaking on the subject, if possible. Muriel debated what to do.

"There seems some mystery," said Chesney, glancing from one to the other. "What crime has John committed?"

"I have forbidden him to enter this house again, or to hold intercourse with any member of my family," said Mr. Rivers curtly.

"Why, may I ask?" "If you wish for particulars, any one can give them to you."

"I do wish for them."

But nobody spoke.

"Extraordinary! You do not really mean that John never comes here now?"

"The extraordinary thing is your not knowing it," said Mr. Rivers sharply. "Come here! He had better not try."

"Poor Constance over again, I suppose," said Chesney, his mouth taking a stern set.

"Your sister's name is not to be mentioned before me," said Mr. Rivers fiercely.

"I assure you, father, I fully intend to see her soon in London. And any embargo as to intercourse with John and Rose will exclude Sybel and me."

Dead silence again. Fruit-eating went on slowly. Chesney sat with an arm thrown backwards over his chair, and a troubled look on his brow.

"John!" he said suddenly in an amazed tone. "John! Why, I thought he was as much of a fixture here as the hills—as needful to you as food and drink."

"You were mistaken."

"Didn't you persuade him to take orders, and put him into that living, solely that you might have him always within reach?"

"If so, my feelings have changed."

"If!" repeated Chesney. "Will nobody tell me the cause of offence? Is there no hope of setting it right? Muriel!"

"No. This discussion had better be dropped," said Mrs. Rivers.

"I beg your pardon. I think I have a right to know particulars. John is more of brother than nephew to me."

Mr. Rivers stood up, flung down the last half of his orange, and strode haughtily out of the room.

"O Chesney!" his wife said. "You will make papa fearfully angry if you go on like that," added his sister.

"I can't help it. You all seem cowed. What is this about John? Why have we never been told?"

"I never write on disagreeable subjects," said Mrs. Bertram.

"No—you—but Muriel?"

"Uncle Chesney, John told me at the first that he and Rose were determined not to trouble you two with home discords. And it did seem kindest, so I have done the same, though I often wanted to speak out to Sybel."

"It seems to me a most astounding state of affairs. How did it come about?"

"Muriel is more au fait at particulars than I," said Mrs. Bertram carelessly. "John was always doing things to annoy my father."

"Very unlike John."

"Yes—only—and Muriel lifted a flushed face—"only, uncle Chesney—if it were a matter of conscience with him!"

"Ha!" said Chesney, with a lurking smile. "John's letters show a change of a sort. Sybel, you must look out."

Sybel smiled, and shook her head. "But did Rose give offence too?" she asked.

"O Rose and John are completely one. The first difficulty I can remember is John's refusing to play for money. Grandpapa was very angry, and John kept cool, but he would not yield. Then he began to work the parish thoroughly, instead of letting it drag on in its old sleepy style. It is a great change there—but grandpapa hates innovations, and can't endure prayer-meetings or missionary societies."

"Are you of a mind with John or my father?"

"With John."

"How do you get on without a crash?"

"Ah, you may well ask," sighed Mrs. Bertram. "Certainly not through any caution of her own."

"Grandpapa doesn't think much of the female intellect," Muriel said, with a gleam of humour. "Our opinions are of very little importance in his sight, so long as we do what we are told. That is all the womankind is fit for."

"What was the next mess?" asked Chesney, as Mrs. Bertram rose. Lillias always lays down in her room after dinner, and Mrs. Bertram always "arranged" her on the sofa. Sybel and Muriel rose likewise, but Chesney checked them.

"We'll come directly," he called after his sister. "I must hear more of this, and my father will be in the drawing-room. Now, Muriel, tell me what can be done to heal the breach."

"I wish I knew. There is no single thing to take hold of. One great offence was John's declining to come to a large dinner-party on Sunday. I really think grandpapa got it up for the express purpose of testing John, for we never do have dinner-parties on Sunday. I know how miserable it made me, and John and Rose would not come, of course. How could they, feeling as they did? When once grandpapa got into that mood, everything John did and said was wrong. And the crowning offence was about old Sir Timothy."

"Ha! you had an escape there."

"Indeed, yes. Sybel, it was dreadful. Sometimes I thought I should go out of my mind. It seemed as if grandpapa would have it, no matter how I struggled. And John just threw himself between, and saved me; but from that week he has never been inside the house. Mamma was very angry with him too for that, but she gets over such feelings. I do not think grandpapa ever does. He prides himself on never taking back what he has once said."

"Poor dear Muriel," Sybel said tenderly. "You have had some troubles in your life."

Some! Muriel thought she had had a good many; but she could not say so to Sybel. Sweet and bright as her friend was, she knew that a deep heart-ache lay below. The silence of both father and mother as to their twins spoke all plainly to Muriel.

"It seems we have come to England for a purpose," remarked Chesney, getting up. "By-the-by, how about Lillias? She looks rather like a will-o'-the-wisp."

"O Chesney, what a poor simile for one so white and quiet!"

"Like a fading lily, then," Chesney spoke rather gravely.

"She has been better since the warm weather set in," said Muriel. "I

don't think she is well yet; but Lillias can't bear mamma to be made anxious."

"Your mother as devoted to her youngest as ever?"

"Yes," and Muriel flushed painfully.

"Never mind. The baby is always the pet, you know," said Chesney kindly.

The subject of John and Rose was dropped for that evening, though Muriel felt sure it would not be dropped much longer. Meantime Chesney threw off all appearance of vexation, and exerted himself to win back his father to a tranquil mood. He was not without success. Baby was brought in for a few minutes, and a family consultation took place upon her brown eyes, as compared with her father's blue and her mother's grey ones.

Muriel thought there was something very touching in the expression of Sybel's face, as she sat looking down upon the infant in her arms—a mingling of meek submission and intense longing.

Sybel was tired, and it fell to Muriel's lot to conduct her early to bed. Chesney rather hurried her off, but he held back Muriel to whisper:

"Don't get upon any agitating subjects to-night. She can't stand them."

"Not if I can help it," was Muriel's answer.

There did not at first seem any danger. Undressing went on, with quiet talk, and an occasional expression of pleasure from each at being together once more. Sybel's chief wish seemed to be to hear all particulars about Muriel's life. But a little later, she suddenly brought from the table a small velvet-lined case, open in her hand.

"Look," she said, "Muriel, here they are. This is much better than the photograph we sent home."

"Dear Sybel, not to-night"—for though calm, she shook like an aspen.

"I must. I could not sleep without one look. It is all I have left of them."

She pressed her lips to one and the other of those two fair little faces.

"I never cry before Chesney, if I can help it. He did so love them; and it breaks his heart to see me grieve. O Muriel, my little darlings!"

She buried her face on Muriel's shoulder, catching her breath in half sobs.

"Sybel dear, this will make you ill."

"O no—"

Then she stood up suddenly.

"Is that Chesney's step?"

"I don't think so."

Sybel went back to the likenesses, tears dropping heavily. Muriel took the case gently out of her hand.

"No more to-night," she said, and Sybel submitted.

"But it does not hurt me, Muriel," she said. "I must give you a little sometimes, you know. Some day it will be a comfort to me to tell you all particulars. I never could write them."

"Some day—not to-night."

"No. But oh, Muriel, we had comfort. The look on my precious Muriel's face, as she passed away—I could not describe it to you. It was just radiant. I think she must have seen her Saviour coming for her. I know I felt as if He were in the room."

"Dearest—" Muriel said, half tearfully.

"So we had comfort. Sweet Rosie was unconscious at the last, but she had so loved always to hear me speak of the Lord Jesus. And they are both with Him now. That is a joy, isn't it, Muriel?—though I can't always feel it so. His care is better than even a mother's, you know. There—I will not say any more, or I shall not sleep. Tell me all about Lily's health, and about the invalids that you visit," Sybel added, with her usual sweet smile.

MEETINGS FOR PRAYER.

I. *Compact your people.* Get them into a room large enough, and not into a huge barn, and then fill your room. The fire burns when one coal is close enough to the other to be ignited. There is strength in compactness.

II. *Be punctual.* A tardy leader loses much of his power over the meeting. Satan is always ahead of the hour appointed for prayer. The Romans waited in quietude for their enemies to leave Italy; but Alaric took advantage of the delay, and, crossing the Alps, ran through the country. While you are waiting Satan is overrunning your territory. Be in time. Do not let the meeting wait even for its leader.

III. *Prepare a plan.* Yet plans do not always do the work. If the meeting has a tendency to run away from a plan, let it go its own way, it will run in the right direction if the Holy Spirit be there. However, plans are generally needed; and in planning there should be adequate preparation, for which purpose,

1. *Use the Word of God.* There

have been many graduates in the sciences and in the arts, but never has one mastered the Bible yet. Many have ceased studying it, but no one has fully learned the old Book. Let the Word of God be the Book you study for your prayer-service.

2. *Meditate and pray very much over the truth.* While you meditate, the fire burns. Go into the prayer-room with hot hearts, and with lips touched by the glory revealed through prayer. These means will prepare you adequately for your task.

IV. *Be brief in your remarks.* Do not try to say all that you know at one meeting. Have some reserved power, for you will need it. It is well to impress the people that you have not said all you could, or even desired to say. Be short and pointed.

V. *Sing much.* And yet do not sing too much. Sing often and briefly. Away with your sleepy, dull, doleful, tedious tunes and hymns! Let your songs be full of sweetness, comfort and praise. Let them be appropriate to the subject of the meeting, and to the experiences of disciples who speak.

VI. *Let there be continuity of service.* Suffer no breaches in the service. Do not wait for any one to pump up religious steam. The steam should be ready for the service. What if, before firing the engine and getting steam ready for use, the fireman waited until the hour arrived for the train to leave the depot! The closet should be resorted to before the hour arrives for Christian worship. We ought to learn, in our services, to begin at the hour announced, with power already on hand, whose presence is to be continued throughout the meeting. As a Christian church, we have not yet learned to make the most of our machinery. Let each moment of the hour devoted to the prayer-meeting be used, without destroying a single one of all the sixty links in the chain. The whole hour should be a continuous flow of worship. These six points observed, and there cannot be a dull, insipid prayer service in any church.—Dr. Dunn.

GO BACK TO CHRIST.

One day a young man about graduating from the theological class of an Eastern Seminary came to his professor with a sorry tale.

"I am about to go out to preach," said he, "and yet I have lost my zeal for the salvation of men, my love for their souls. I tell you frankly I have not any longer, as I once had, a burning, consuming desire to save the lost. I do not realize as I once did the awful meaning of the word 'lost,' as applied to the soul. I am troubled about it. I have no liberty in prayer as I once had. I have been tempted to-day to give it all up."

"When did you have those convictions and feelings of which you speak? When was it you knew the blessedness which now you mourn?" asked the professor.

"That," replied the student, "was shortly after I was converted. It was during the first year of my Christian life. It came to me when I gave my whole heart to Christ, and offered up every thing to him."

"Then," said the professor, "my dear brother, you have revealed the secret. Go right back to Christ, just as you found him at first. Confess your sins as at the beginning, renew your covenant, give up all to God, and if you do not have these feelings, my word for it, the Bible is not true."

The writer of this is well acquainted with that young minister. He took the advice given him. His whole life was changed. From that day to this he has never passed a communion season without welcoming souls into the kingdom of Christ.—Presbyterian.

RANDOM READINGS.

The difference between the man that hates and the man that kills, may be nowhere but in the courage.

Blessings are strewn like flowers in our pathway; it rests with us to gather them up carefully or pass them by.

If I can put one touch of a rosy sunset into the life of any man or woman, I shall feel that I have worked with God.

Use your gentlest voice at home. A kind word is a joy to the dear ones around the family hearth. Train to sweet tones now, and it will keep in tune through life.

One watch set right will do to set many by; on the other hand, one that goes wrong may be the means of misleading a whole neighborhood; and the same may be said of the example we each set to those around us.

The religion of Christ is a religion of hope—hope for the person and hope for the world, and it is the only religion which wears the morning star of hope upon its illuminated forehead. It is the only religion which says to man: "Take courage."

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