

## Our Serial.

## MURIEL'S KEY-NOTE.

BY AGNES GIBBERNE.

## CHAPTER XVII.

OUT AND ABOUT.

"It is the way with everything in this world," said Mrs. Rokeby. "Nothing but disappointment and decay. Pleasures never last. Friends are sure to vanish. I have learnt to be surprised at nothing, darling Sophy. It is a sorrowful life, full of change, and full of heart-ache."

"Mamma, I don't believe Miss Bertram has changed."

"She has only grown tired of us. That is change. But it is just what we ought to have expected."

"I would rather expect the best till the worst comes. And I don't think it is Miss Bertram's way to get tired of people."

"Quite right to hope charitably for the best. But when you have seen more of human nature—dear child, there is no reliance to be placed on it."

"Miss Bertram cannot be fickle," Sophy said resolutely, preferring to keep clear of generalities.

"This is the third Wednesday that she has not come."

"There is some good reason. She never stays away if she can help it."

"Well—charity ought to 'believe all things,'" said Mrs. Rokeby again. "She means most kindly, I am sure. But there are other attractions just now. She only came three times in the five weeks before the last fortnight. I don't complain, for such disappointments are all meant to do us good; but it does go to one's heart to see how the best and kindest fail."

Sophy kept silence with a fear of being betrayed into over-much warmth.

"I used to think Miss Bertram might really be a help to me as well as to you," continued Mrs. Rokeby, after a slight pause for the adjustment of her crochet. "There is something about her so strong and bright—in contrast with my tendency to depression—that I quite hoped to gain real benefit from the companionship. But that is entirely at an end."

"Mamma, she will come again."

"She may. Yes, when she has nothing better to do she very probably will. But I feel that she has failed, and therefore her power over me is gone. I believe I am peculiarly sensitive to inconsistencies in the Christian life. Not that I would blame others—oh, no. I am the last person in the world to judge. But where I see a failure I can no longer learn from such a one. I feel that we are weak together, and on a par as to experience."

Sophy looked rather impatient. "I really don't see why we are to expect other people to be so much more perfect than ourselves," she said.

"My dear child, I expect nothing," responded Mrs. Rokeby, with gentle resignation. "I look for nothing. This sort of thing only confirms my knowledge of human nature. The world is full of failure and disappointment."

"Mamma!" said Sophy.

For the door stood open, and the little maid, having vainly sought to gain a hearing, stood blankly open-mouthed, with Muriel Bertram and Sybel Rivers in her rear. Sybel had been to call once before, and was not quite a stranger to Sophy, though she had missed seeing Mrs. Rokeby.

"How do you do, Mrs. Rokeby?" said Muriel cheerfully.

Mrs. Rokeby's "How do you do?" had a plaintive sound.

"Have you thought yourself quite forgotten of late, Sophy?" asked Muriel, starting at the foot of the couch. "Do you know we must hardly venture to sit down to-day. My uncle will call directly, to take us for a drive; but we determined to secure one little peep."

But Sybel took the offered seat beside Sophy. "I am afraid I have to plead guilty," she said. "Muriel's visits to her friends have been a good deal interrupted lately on my account. We have not been together for so long."

"Oh, yes—I quite understand," Sophy could answer heartily, while Mrs. Rokeby nodded her eyes.

"We all leave home directly," said Muriel. "I shall not be here again for a month, Sophy; but after that I hope to be quite regular again."

"A whole month! But it will do you good," said Sophy.

"I would rather have been at home," Muriel looked absent and constrained. Sophy had never seen her so before, and was perplexed.

"Are you going to the sea together?" she asked.

"O no," was all Muriel said.

"My husband and I have a good many visits to pay," explained Sybel. "But by-and-by we hope to come again to the Manor-house."

"How Miss Bertram will miss you!" Sophy murmured with a wistful glance at her friend.

Muriel could stand no discussion on that head. She was in no mood for it, being exceedingly heart-sore, and she dashed forthwith into other subjects—anything that occurred to her—doing most of the talking herself. Sophy said little. There was no getting below superficial chat that day. Sybel made an attempt, but found Sophy shy, Mrs. Rokeby irresponsible, and Muriel unusually silent. And in ten minutes the carriage came.

"Now we must go," said Muriel. "Dear Sophy, I am very sorry to have paid you such a flying visit, but it could not be helped. I hope to do better by-and-by. Take good care of yourself till I come back again."

Sophy smiled good-bye as usual, and when they were gone she lay silent.

"Just what I thought," Mrs. Rokeby averred. "Miss Bertram has grown tired of us."

"Mamma, I don't think so. She is hurried to-day—and troubled."

"My dear Sophy, the thing is as clear as daylight."

Sophy felt that her own daylight had grown cloudy. If she did not believe in Muriel being fickle, she had nevertheless a sense of disappointment. It weighed upon her heavily for awhile. She seemed left very much without help and cheer in her life. Muriel had been a bright spot to her hitherto, but the bright spot was suddenly dimmed. Must it be so always? Was life indeed fall to the close of nothing but disappointed expectation?

Sophy went through a little bout of depression. Then there came a whisper of comfort in her heart—a thought of One who could never change.

"Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, to-day, and forever."

"That is enough—isn't it?" murmured Sophy, smiling, her mother having left the room. "He is always the same. No ups and downs in His love for me—no fear of His being too busy to sympathize. Heaven and earth may pass, but he does not change. O that is something to rejoice in, if there were nothing else. 'God's everlasting love? What wouldst thou more?'"

Sophy felt that she wanted not more. She would not have been without the brief pain, which brought such sweetness with it. She drew nearer to her Lord that day.

"Why, Muriel dear," said Sybel, after they had got some way, "you were not quite yourself."

"No. How do you like Mrs. Rokeby?"

"She is lady-like."

Muriel looked restlessly over the corn-fields as they drove through a lane. She and Sybel sat side by side, with Chesney opposite.

"I ought to have gone alone," she said. "Our visit was a failure. Your being there kept me on the stretch."

"Dear Muriel—why?"

"I can't bear you to go away. I suppose that is the reason. I was in a mood to be unnatural."

"But why be governed by passing moods?"

"Ah, you said something of that sort once before. But how to keep them in check—"

"You and I may not be able. There is always 'the exceeding greatness of His power to us-ward who believe.'"

"We don't make the most of that," said Muriel, with a sigh. "I do generally master my moods in visiting the sick, but one now and then proves too much for me. So you like Mrs. Rokeby?"

"She is lady-like and pleasant."

"You heard her words as we went in—characteristic of her—the world is full of disappointment and failure. She sings a minor song, as John would say. O Sybel—for a sight of John!"

"I wish you could have it."

"My key is minor to-day, I am afraid. 'Full of disappointment and failure.' I could sing that from my heart."

"I have a better song," said Sybel. "The earth is full of the goodness of the Lord; and 'The earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord.'"

"I can believe both—sometimes," said Muriel.

"I can believe always. I can realize sometimes."

"Only sometimes."

"Yes."

"I am glad. That brings us nearer together."

"You should wish better things for me. The goodness and the glory don't die out merely because we don't see them, any more than the sun dies out whenever a cloud comes between."

"But the 'glory' is future and trouble is now."

"Don't you think one can rejoice now in future happiness? Besides, the goodness fills the earth now—beauty and loving kindness on every side. It seems to me that in a sense the glory is here too, even now."

"I don't see how."

"The glory of His power—shown in His works. 'The heavens declare the glory of God,' you know. And the glory of His love, shown in redemption. And the glory of His presence—spiritual and actual too. He is here, though we can't see Him, except by faith. We can't see the angels, but we know they are busy round us. And we can't see God, but we know He is in our midst. It seems to me that there is 'glory' literally on every side only not manifest yet to our bodily senses. That is future. O Muriel—what the first lifting of the veil must be!"

Sybel's eyes were full, almost to overflowing.

"Look here," Chesney interposed for the first time. He had listened in silence hitherto. "There is a poor fellow toiling up the hill just ahead, who seems to have reached the end of his powers. Suppose we give him a lift. He has a respectable appearance."

Just then they overtook the said figure. Muriel gave one breathless exclamation.

"Very respectable," said Sybel. "Why, it is John!"

The carriage stopped, and John Rivers came to the door.

"How do you all do? Why, Muriel—"

"Ought I to run away? Oh, John!" and she held his hand tightly.

"You don't run away while under my charge," said Chesney. "Get in, John."

"I shall land you in difficulties."

"We'll float out of them again. Nonsense—get in. Muriel has nothing to do with it. We will take you on a little way, and drop you near your own door as we return."

"Too tempting an offer to be refused this hot day."

Muriel did not like the air of lassitude which crept over him as he leant back in his seat. Usually his vigor was unconquerable, but he had grown somewhat hollow-cheeked, and his hands looked thin.

"John, you have not been well lately?" she said.

"May we exchange remarks?" asked John.

"I don't know. O John, I can't help it. Uncle Chesney has decided for us."

"Of course I have. I am the person in authority just now. Leave me to settle with my father. How is Rose?"

"Awake all night, and in bed all to-day, with face ache. Well otherwise."

The carriage swept under over-arching trees, through which the sunbeams came in broken fleckles. "This is pleasant," John said. "One can appreciate these hedges, driving."

"My dear fellow, you were appreciating nothing but the dust when we overtook you," said Chesney. "I never saw a man more deep in contemplation."

"Was I?"—and a pause.

"John, what are you thinking about?" asked Muriel.

"Things in general;" with a half-smile.

"Everything in general, and nothing in particular," suggested Chesney. "Don't believe him, Muriel. He is too tired to have a single thought in his head."

"How is my grandfather," asked John.

"I see a great change in him."

Chesney spoke hastily, but stopped short, for John flushed and paled as a girl might do.

"A change!"

"He is getting old. What can we expect?" asked Chesney rather gravely.

"Yes, but—he has been strong hitherto."

"For his age, perhaps."

"Then he has not been the same lately as he was."

"I don't know. Coming home, I suppose the difference strikes me."

John looked at Muriel. "Mamma sometimes says he has failed a little," she said unwillingly. "I don't see much difference—only he cannot walk far."

"This wretched division is wearing you both out," said Chesney.

"I think it really is that," added Sybel. "The expression of his face is so unhappy at times."

"The most hopeful thing is his allowing intercourse on your part with us," said John.

"Allowing!" repeated Chesney. "He would never have given leave, if I had not taken it."

"He has not banished you in consequence."

"He may try yet. I shall decline to be banished—treat it all as a joke. Why didn't you?"

John shook his head. "It was in too serious earnest."

"Why don't you come to the Manor and see me some day."

"My dear Chesney!" said his wife. "Rather a wild plan. But it is

enough to drive one to wild expedients. Such nonsense—foolery—and worse! What on earth does he get by it all?"

"Thy father," John said very softly.

"True," Chesney answered; but he broke out hotly the next minute—"Family quarrels! how I hate them! Pride and folly at the bottom of every one."

"Only by pride cometh contention," quoted John. "He that is hasty of spirit exalteth folly. You have high authority for your opinion."

"I am afraid I forgot my authority. However, I have come to the conclusion that taking offence is the most undignified action under the sun. I wish you would give me a string of texts to quote at my father."

"You would not have the run of the Manor much longer."

"Then we come to you."

"Mamma thinks living entirely in peace with everybody quite impossible," said Muriel. "She says we are only expected to do it as much as in us lies. I told her of your sermon, John."

"Curious plea for a thief before a court of justice," said John quaintly. "My lord, I earnestly wish to be honest as much as in me lies. Unfortunately, it did not lie in me to be honest on that particular occasion." The verdict would hardly be a pitying acquittal. Why don't people use their common-sense in religion?

"Some folks have none to use," said Chesney.

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In midsummer cholera came to the village in a virulent form, and death followed death in quick succession. The terror-stricken people fled to their gods; but the one Christian besought them to come to the true God, who could hear their prayers and save them. Because of their despair they listened, and joined with him in asking God to stay the plague; and God honored their faith, imperfect though it was, and the plague was stayed that day. The people then held a conference, and as a town they resolved to accept the new religion, and worship the God who helped them. Although some have fallen away since, the majority remain steadfast, and have contributed more than a hundred dollars to build a chapel.—Chinese Recorder.

MORAL COURAGE.

Have the courage to do without that which you do not need, however much your eyes may covet it.

Have the courage to show your respect for honesty in whatever guise it appears; and your contempt for dishonest duplicity, by whomsoever exhibited.

Have the courage to wear your old clothes until you can pay for new ones.

Have the courage to obey your Maker at the risk of being ridiculed by man.

Have the courage to prefer comfort and propriety to fashion, in all things.

Have the courage to acknowledge your ignorance, rather than to seek credit for knowledge under false pretences.

RANDOM READINGS.

Nothing will make us so charitable and tender of the faults of others as by thoroughly knowing our own.

If believers are condemned by the world, let them remember that they shall not be condemned with the world.

Unclean is the tongue of fire, and it is the very gift which no universities, no degrees, no amount of learning or critical attainment, no cultivation of the science of belles-lettres or rhetoric or elocution can bestow.—E. Paxton Hood.

Many good people think that they ought to guard the gospel; but it is never so safe as when it stands out in its own native majesty. It wants no covering from us. When we protect it with provisos, and guard it with exceptions, and qualify it with observations, it is like David in Saul's armor. It is hampered and hindered, and you may even hear it cry, "I can not go with these."—Spurgeon.

When King Thebaw was asked if he wanted all his wives and mothers-in-law taken along with him, he said he'd had fighting enough.

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