

Our Serial.

MURIEL'S KEY-NOTE.

BY AGNES GIBBERNE.

CHAPTER XIII.

SISTERS.

Coming out from the gas-heated drawing-room, the cold air struck keen. Lilius shivered, and had a blue look, as she stepped from the carriage, at the Manor door, with nothing on her head, and only a short loose cloak over her shoulders. Snow was falling still.

It fell a good part of the night, and the world looked wintry in the morning. Lilius bent their pretty heads beneath an embarrassing mantle, and young green leaves peeped out in strange contrast with the snow which laded every bush.

That could not last. The wind swept round to the south, and before midday the sun shone out from an azure sky. Thereupon began the white-robe speedily to weep itself away. Little streams trickled in all directions, and each twig had its droppings, while the roads soon lay deep under a slushy compound. Spring came back in full force that day.

But the change was some hours too late for Lilius. She had taken a severe chill, and for the next two weeks lived a purely invalid existence. Muriel was anxious at heart, and longed to break through the ice-barrier which divided her sister from herself. Lilius' manner never thawed. Possibly Muriel's efforts to show her kindness were not even remarked. Also Mrs. Bertram rarely left Lilius, night or day, and when she was near Muriel did not venture to intrude. There was a touch of jealousy in Mrs. Bertram's engrossing love for this younger child.

In the other matter, concerning Cramer Ray, Muriel went through a good many tossings. She strove to put it aside, as a thing done with, yet he was never out of her mind. She felt by no means sure in her heart that he could have satisfied her present self, yet to forget him was impossible. Now she wished she had given him a word of stronger encouragement. Then she had a fit of indignant contempt for his fickleness, which of course helped her greatly. There were times when she disbelieved the whole tale. There were other times when she believed, and was almost thankful, feeling that it might indeed be for the best. There were yet again times when her loss came over her, with a power equally heart-breaking, whether its source were real or partly imaginary, and she sobbed or paced her room by the hour together. Altogether, though few could have guessed it, Muriel suffered a good deal.

The Rokebys made no mention of their late visitor. Before Muriel's next visit Claverton gossip had informed them as to the state of affairs, and they carefully avoided all allusion to him in her presence. Muriel heard the fact of his having stayed at the Cottage, and sometimes wondered whether they could have confirmed or denied the tale she had heard. Ask, she could not, however.

Something bright came one day in the shape of a letter from Chesney Rivers, telling of his proposed speedy return to England, with his wife. Even Lilius brightened up, and was pleased.

"Uncle Chesney does not write in depressed spirits, seemingly," Muriel remarked.

"He was always wonderfully buoyant," said Mrs. Bertram. "Lily, you must get up your good looks before then."

"I shall be well long before they come—though I don't believe Dr. Peters understands me in the least."

"Don't you think so?" He is such a clever man."

"If he had any sense he might get rid of this stupid little cough for me. Doctors never seem to hit upon just the medicines that I need."

"Shall we have a doctor down from London?"

"O no; I shall get all right without that. Only patience is wanted."

"Yes, you are better this afternoon, Lily."

"I wish I felt so."

Muriel scarcely caught the words, and Mrs. Bertram heard them not at all. A visitor having just come, she was summoned to another sitting-room. An impulse came over Muriel to turn to good account this rare opportunity. She was seldom alone with Lilius. Leaning over the sofa-back she said gently:

"Don't you feel so well to-day, Lily?"

"Why? What do you mean?" asked Lilius stiffly.

"I heard what you said just now."

"It was not meant for you, then."

"Would you not care for me to read to you sometimes?"

"No, thanks. Mamma does it."

Muriel was tempted to give up. She began arranging the coverlet over her sister's feet.

"Don't move that, please. Mamma always puts it right."

Thoroughly checked, Muriel moved away. She stood looking sorrowfully into the fire, thinking how hard this was to bear, when her heart was so filled with a new compassionate tenderness for poor Lilius. She scarcely knew that two or three large tears had dropped, glittering in the fire-light, and soiling the bright fender. But happening to turn round, she found Lilius' eyes watching her earnestly.

"Muriel, what are you crying about?"

"Nothing. I mean, it does not signify. Only at my own thoughts, I suppose."

"You are always thinking about Sybel, I believe."

"O no—I was thinking about you."

Lilius started and whitened, and looked strangely at her sister.

"About me?" she said. "Why in the world should you cry about me?"

Muriel was silent, hardly knowing what to say. She did not like to seem to accuse Lilius of unkindness. A certain different sense in which Lilius might take her words, did not occur to her.

"People do foolish things sometimes," she said quietly, and then she stooped to give Lilius a kiss.

Lily received it passively, and said no more. That was all that passed between them at the time. But the next day Mrs. Bertram asked in a displeased tone of her eldest daughter:

"Muriel, have you been talking any nonsense to Lilius about her health?"

"No, mamma."

"I think you must. Nobody else would do such a thing."

"I ask her how she feels sometimes."

"That is not all. Last night she was crying quite violently in bed. She would give me no reason, except that she was tired of being so long ill, and wanted to know when the doctor said she would be well. It is only two or three weeks, and I told her so, for I could not think what the poor darling meant; but she kept saying that she had been ill much longer than that, and that she knew people thought her so. I could only suppose that you had been putting depressing notions into her head."

"No, indeed, mamma—certainly not, knowing it. And you don't tell me much about Dr. Peters' visits, so I could not tell her what he says, even if I wished."

"Dr. Peters is always inclined to croak. I would have down a London doctor to-morrow, if I did not think it would make her nervous."

"Would it not be better to risk that? Mamma, is there any real anxiety?"

"Anxiety! Of course not. A mere cold, giving way steadily. But how you can suggest such an idea, and in that cool tone too! I always knew you never did really care for your poor sister."

Mrs. Bertram went away in tears, and Muriel began to think she had almost better never speak at all. Everything she said and did seemed to be wrong. It did not strike her that her mother's irritability perhaps arose from a smothered fear.

A day or two later Lilius said carelessly:

"Mamma, you never get your dinner in peace. Couldn't Muriel sometimes stay with me part of the time? I should be all right with her for half-an-hour, if she does not mind."

Muriel smiled full assent.

"My dear, I don't care for anything except your comfort."

"But Arthur says grandpapa is angry at your getting up and down so often."

"I could have my dinner afterwards," said Muriel.

"Muriel is no nurse," said Mrs. Bertram, not quite pleased at the suggestion.

"I don't need nursing, and she could call you any moment. Promise me to have that one meal quietly."

Lilius gained her way, and Muriel wondered and was glad. Had Lily any particular object in making this proposal? Muriel thought, and prayed, and waited. After three evenings of almost silent watching through her half-hour, she ventured to say:

"Lily, I sometimes fancy you would like me to read a few verses out of my Pocket-Testament while I am here."

Lilius lay silently, her white face pressed into the pillow.

"It is nice to have one or two Bible thoughts to go to sleep upon. Rose used always to do it for me that time I was ill in John's house. Should you mind?"

"No. I thought you would propose it the first night," was the unexpected answer.

"I wish I had. It came into my head, but I suppose I was a coward," said Muriel, studiously hiding sur-

prise. "Is there any particular part you would like?"

"Anywhere."

Muriel chose the second chapter of Mark, and read earnestly, throwing much expression into her voice, but making no comment. At the end Lilius merely said, "Thank you," and dropped asleep—something unusual, since she was greatly troubled with wakefulness.

From that day the short reading became a regular custom. Muriel never exceeded a short portion, and Lilius showed no signs of fatigue. She listened always with the same impassive quietness; but one day Muriel had a glimpse of a tear upon her cheek, and when the chapter was ended, Lilius said hastily:

"Don't tell mamma about your reading to me. There is no need. I should not like it to stop."

With that Muriel was content. The little plan went on undiscovered for about a month, till Lilius was so far recovered as to take her place once more among the family circle in the evening. She looked very delicate still, but the warmer weather suited her, and people counted her well thenceforward. The household mind was a good deal occupied with the quickly-expected arrival from India.

"HAVING YOUR CONVERSATION SEEMLY AMONG THE GENTILES."

(1 Pet. ii. 12, R. V.)

The Christian character is something that you can no more counterfeit than you can counterfeit a rose. You can indeed make wax roses which have the true form and color, but you cannot endue them with the genuine fragrance. And you can make artificial Christians by means of sacraments and ceremonies; but there is a fragrance of spiritual life, an aroma of grace, which will be wanting, and it is just this indefinable something which we call spiritual influence, that is most efficient of all agencies for winning men to God. You will constantly meet Christians who know little of theology, and less of science, who nevertheless have an excellent flavor about their speech; their conversation leaves a good taste in the mouth when you talk with them.

"I am the vine, ye are the branches," says Christ; and you feel at once that these are the pure fruit of the vine—no adulteration, no artificial mixture of real and pretended. Their influence is genuine and unconscious. Therefore when the world throws out its challenge, "Show me a Christian!" we have no need to stand up and take off the hat and say, "Here is one. It will go without saying if we really are so. Men will take knowledge of us that we have been with Jesus if we really have been with him."

"Ye are the light of the world," says Christ; and a light does not need any one to go before it, to sound a trumpet, saying, "Behold my shining!" It will manifest itself readily enough. Light travels faster than sound. If a cannon is fired from yonder fort you will see the flash before you hear the report. And so a real Christian generally impresses you with his influence before he does with his speech. We say this because of our desire that, as Christians, we should present the strongest and most permanent influence possible in the world. And this influence will depend on the amount of sincere, substantial, self-denying Christian life that is found in us.

When some one spoke to Dr. Chalmers about the magnetism of a certain preacher he replied: "Yes, but gravitation is better than magnetism." That is true; for the force of gravitation depends on the weight of the body attracting, and is therefore a steady and enduring influence. The magnetism will fail when the preacher becomes rusty or demagnetized through old age, and will cease to draw. But gravitation never fails; for it is founded on weight of character, and character remains in spite of age and failing powers of mind and body. We talk about popular preachers. Let us remember what some unpopular preachers have done—Dr. Griffin, in Park Street Church, fifty years ago; Dr. Beecher, at the North End of Boston; Dr. Payson, in Portland. These men were hated and derided, caricatured in the public prints, ridiculed in street-songs. But there was a great weight of genuine character behind their words, which gave their ministry a permanent influence, so that, being dead, they yet speak.

But we are not talking now about ministers especially, but about Christians. You want to know how you can attract the masses. Our text gives the secret: "Having your behaviour seemly among the Gentiles." Give us eight hundred Christians, everyone of whom is unselfish, devoted, tender-hearted, humble, prayerful, and sincere, and they will prove the strongest attraction which can possibly be set up. Gravitation is better than magnetism. The moon lifts the tides by gravitation; and the Church must lift

the neglected masses, if at all, by the power of gravitation, by the solid attraction of goodness and purity and unworldliness. O, how we are moved to plead for sincerity and wholeheartedness as we touch upon this point! It is not numbers, but graces, that tell. An ounce of sincerity weighs more than a pound of profession. And that sincerity cannot be counterfeited, cannot be put on. It must be part of our real spiritual fibre, or it does not exist.

This is what the apostle meant when he said: "Ye are our epistle, known and read of all men." And this epistle cannot be easily counterfeited. Dore, the famous painter, once lost his passport while travelling in a foreign country. When the official demanded it he said: "I am sorry to say that I have lost my passport. I can only tell you that I am Dore the artist."

"Ah!" responded the officer, sneeringly; "we'll see very quickly whether you are Dore;" and, handing him pencil and paper, he said, "Prove it, if you are."

Taking the pencil, the artist, with a few strokes, sketched a group of peasants, who happened to be standing by, with such inimitable skill that the official said: "Yes, no doubt of it; you must be Dore."

We profess to be true Christians—living epistles, "Write your name," says the world, "and let us see if you are." No bungling handwriting of selfishness and half-heartedness will answer; no cramped autograph, in which you have tried to spell "Christian," but have really spelt "world," will do. It must be a plain, legible, open hand, or it won't be recognized.

—The Rev. Dr. J. A. Gordon.

WHAT THE BIBLE IS LIKE.

1. It is like a large, beautiful tree, which bears fruit for those that are hungry, and affords shelter and shade for the pilgrims on their way to the kingdom of heaven.

2. It is like a cabinet of jewels and precious stones, which are not only to be looked at and admired, but used and worn.

3. It is like a telescope, which brings distant objects and far-off things of the world very near, so that we can see something of their beauty and importance.

4. It is like a treasure-house, storehouse of all sorts of valuable and useful things, and which are to be had without money and without price.

5. It is like a deep, broad, calm, flowing river, the banks of which are green and flowery; where birds sing and lambs play, and dear little children are loving and happy.

My dear, dear children, because I love you, I want you to love the Bible. If you attend to it it will make you, through God's blessing, wise, rich and happy forever and ever. It is God's book. It is the best book. It is a book for children. I hope you will learn it, and learn to sing, too, that beautiful hymn:

"Holy Bible, book divine,
Precious treasure, thou art mine."

—Well-Spring.

TO YOUNG CHRISTIANS.

More than fifty years ago the late Dr. Bacon closed a sermon to young Christians with the following appeal, the spirit of which was grandly illustrated in his after life:

"Would to God I could make you know what results are depending upon you; what interests of the Church and of a dying world are involved in your future character and efforts. When I look at the young Christians of this age, and reflect that they are soon to sustain the ancient glories of the Church of God—when I look abroad on the earth and see the crisis at hand—when I listen to the cries that come from every quarter of the world, summoning the people of God to new effort and more splendid exhibitions of piety—I seem to see the very generations that are passed rising up from their repose to watch over the young followers of Christ; I seem to hear the voices of blessed spirits from above cheering them on in the career of piety, I seem to see a world of misery turning its imploring hands to them, and beseeching them to be worthy of their name, worthy of their privileges, worthy of their noble destiny; I seem to hear, I do hear, God himself speaking from the heavens, 'Ye have chosen the better part; be faithful unto death, and I will give you crowns of life.'"

RANDOM READINGS.

It is a small thing to be wronged; but a horrible thing to be wrong.

Our beloved must be his own mirror. None but Jesus can reveal Jesus.—Spurgeon.

An earnest Christian is always peculiar and half incomprehensible to the world. He has something which they have not, and which they do not know how to reckon in their calculations.

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