

Our Serial.

MURIEL'S NOTE.

BY AGNES GIBBERNE.

CHAPTER XXI.

WITNESSING.

"Aburd! Ridiculous nonsense," said Mr. Rivers. The words met Muriel, on her return to the drawing-room, one evening after a brief absence. Three or four friends had come to dinner. Lillias was not present, but Mrs. Bertram, handsomely dressed, acted well the part of hostess, with untroubled brow.

Mr. Rivers sat upright and restless in his arm-chair. Opposite, upon the square ottoman, was a young man of low forehead, eagle nose, and complacent mien. Possibly he was amusing himself a little at the old gentleman's expense. Muriel had that impression, as she entered. Montgomery Maxwell was somewhat back beside a table, holding open a book of prints, but listening. The two lady-guests were attentive also, despite Mrs. Bertram's efforts to engage them in conversation.

"Ridiculous," repeated Mr. Rivers. "There is a great deal too much of that sort of thing now. Never used to be. Absurd." What manner of story it was that had roused his ire, Muriel could only guess from remarks generally.

"Very absurd," assented the other. "People ought to keep their consciences in their pockets. Unpleasant to have it flaunted in one's face."

"Conscience! People follow their own fancies and call that conscience. Everything goes down to conscience nowadays. Religion is put altogether into the wrong place."

"It would be worth while to have the right place defined," remarked the young man lazily. "Just for the sake of convenience—and as a matter of interest. Don't think I am not agreeing with you."

"The right place for it is where it was kept in my young days," said Mr. Rivers with sternness. "Religion is a matter of deeds, not words. It ought to be kept in the background—only its effects manifest. People did not then throw over all authority and call that religion."

"No—undoubtedly," assented the young man.

"True religion consists in providing for the poor and fatherless," said Mr. Rivers. "That is what the Bible itself declares. Pure religion is providing for the needy."

Now Mr. Rivers troubled himself very little about the poor and needy or the fatherless—quite as little as the young man opposite troubled himself about religion. He gave subscriptions sometimes, however—when he had not quarrelled with those who asked them of him.

"Very true. A good definition," said the young man. "A healthy sensible view of the question."

Muriel was about to speak, and found herself forestalled.

"Not precisely the Bible view, however," said Mr. Maxwell, with a composure which veiled the greatness of the effort—if so he felt it. "Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction."

"Precisely what I said," observed Mr. Rivers, giving the tutor an amazed look, for this was unwelcome boldness on his part. "What should I visit for except to relieve? If I prefer to send a five-pound note by somebody else, it comes to the same thing."

"The personal sympathy would be wanting," said Mr. Maxwell.

Mr. Rivers never did send five-pound notes, or one-pound notes either, in such a fashion; but the question did not hinge there.

"That is religion," said Mr. Rivers decisively. "Give me a man practically useful to his fellow-men. That is religion. Give me one that provides hospitals for the sick. That is religion. Cant is not religion."

"Perfectly true," said the young man. "I have the greatest imaginable horror of cant."

"So have I," said Montgomery. "Still, we are looking at the half only of that verse. 'Pure religion... is to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction—and—to keep himself unspotted from the world.'"

Mr. Rivers' moustaches curled and writhed. The young man watched him with amused eyes, and asked the tutor lightly, "What do you understand by that expression, 'the world'?" It has a rather vague sound."

"That which is not distinctly 'of Christ,' is 'of the world.' All who are not 'with Him' are 'against Him.' Then they are part of the world."

Gravely and quietly he spoke. It was a new phase of the man. Muriel knew this to be the outcome of wrestling prayer—knew it plainly as if she

had seen him on his knees an hour before. Mr. Rivers looked wrathful.

"Mr. Rivers and I must be dangerous company for good people," said the young man, with a slight shrug. "Something contaminating about us, eh?"

The motion of Montgomery's head might have been assent, might have been dismissal of the subject, might have been unconscious. He went back to his book without a word. Remarks were brewing in another quarter, but before Mr. Rivers had decided what to say, a servant entered, bearing a small salver with a letter.

"For you, sir," she said to Mr. Rivers. "It was left, to be given to you immediately."

Muriel knew in a moment that the note came from Bushby Rectory. She could not tell why or how. Instinct served in the place of sight, for she was too far off to distinguish the handwriting.

Mr. Rivers took it up, frowned, walked across the room, and dropped the unopened envelope into the fire.

"Do you treat many of your correspondents in that summary fashion, Mr. Rivers?" asked his much-entertained guest.

"There are some whose communications are beneath attention," said the old man haughtily.

"Ah—begging epistles, yes. One is fairly pestered with that sort of trash."

Mr. Rivers condescended to give no manner of explanation. Muriel felt sick at heart. A longing for fresh air came over her, and presently she escaped into the dining-room, taking her stand at the outer conservatory door, where a cool breeze swept round her. Suddenly a figure appeared from behind.

"Muriel! You here?"

"And you, Mr. Maxwell?"

"I thought I would make my escape this way."

"Ah, you don't like front-doors. Have you said good-bye?"

"Yes. One of the ladies made a move—and I saw that Mr. Rivers had had enough of me."

Montgomery stood looking into the moonlight, which came in silver flood over the garden, casting dark elm-shadows upon the grass, and glittering through the glass of the conservatory. Full-flowering plants rose in dark tiers on either side, with colours faintly distinguishable. Muriel, in a dress of transparent black and maize, statue-like in stillness, had a certain sombre gravity of look. Montgomery himself was calm. He had signed the warrant that evening for severing of most dearest; yet he knew they needed to be severed, and the battle had been fought out beforehand. He had the victory.

"What is the matter?" he could ask quietly of her.

"Something is wrong at the Rectory," she said.

"How do you know?"

"That letter—you saw, did you not?"

One came a few days ago. They would not write so often without reason. Is there no way of finding out?"

He made no answer. Muriel clasped her hands together.

"Mr. Maxwell, how could I bear it, if anything happened to John? And I am not there—not able to help."

"You do not know that anything is wrong."

"I don't feel any doubt."

"No need to make trouble till it comes. But you may be right, possibly. I will try to find out. I must not give needless offence by going myself to the Rectory. Banishment is likely to come soon enough without that."

"Banishment! Not of you?"

"Did you not see that I caused annoyance? But it must be so. It is right. It is well."

"Oh no—not to have more divisions," said Muriel sorrowfully.

"There's a quarrel enough."

"Two are needed to make a quarrel, and I will not be one of the two. But he may forbid you to hold intercourse with me, as with John."

"Not for those few words."

"It is not unlikely."

Muriel turned her head away, but pain was too sharp to be kept down.

"How long is this kind of thing to go on?" she asked. "Everything is going. I shall have nothing left soon."

"If God wills—so it must be."

"You don't know—it isn't so much to you," she said, not knowing the calm of heart-break which was his.

"You do not lose all—you are free."

Was he so? She did not know of his shackles.

"I am losing everything," she repeated. "John and Rose are cut off from me. Sybel and uncle Chesney soon will be. Lillias is sinking—don't think I can't see it—dying! And you—you too are leaving. But I will not be denied speaking to you and Mrs. Maxwell."

"If he forbids, you will obey. Coming to our house is no paramount duty with you," said Mrs. Maxwell.

"Duty! Ah if you had not drilled me in as you have done, I must have broken loose long ago. Why can't I go to live with John and Rose? How they would welcome me!"

"Does God's providence point there for you?"

Muriel sighed heavily.

"You see your place is here. You have no right whatever to break the ties with which God has bound you. Your mother has the first right to you."

"She does not care for the right."

"My dear child, she does not repudiate it," said Montgomery mildly.

He was not thinking of self. His whole mind was bent to a most single-hearted consideration of her position.

"If it pleases God to take Lillias, you will be all that is left to her."

"I am nothing to her," said Muriel, with falling tears.

"You may be more. It is impossible to foresee, but I believe things will be different some day. However, I do not expect that your obedience will be put to the test as regarding ourselves."

"You think he will not forbid us to meet."

"He may—probably will. I do not know. But if he does I cannot stay in Claverton."

"Not in Claverton!" she said dismayed.

"No. It would be too painful. And—I have reasons."

"But your house?"

"I gave provisional notice last quarter."

"Why?" she asked, in surprise.

"I thought it would come to this. I did not know when. Strange, how hard the speaking-out has looked beforehand—yet so easy at the moment. I marvelled at the help given me."

"You have not spoken out to-day, because of anything I once said?" she inquired, struck with a sudden fear.

"No—but because it was needful. As a servant of Christ, my livery must be worn. You first helped to open my eyes; but I have thought and prayed much since. It has been a struggle. I have known so well all that it would entail. But I have counted the cost, and you and I must be content to have matters thus. It is best and wisest in the end. I am afraid I have done evil that good might come. I alone shall suffer, and that is my comfort."

Muriel did not see it so. Life looked heavy to her just then. She found anything of cheerful acceptance a difficult matter.

A GOOD FIRE-MAKER.

There are two ways of making a fire. One way is to lay the shavings first, then fine wood, then coarser wood, and last of all the usual fuel. When so arranged the light blaze of the match soon grows into a good fire. The second method is to bring a mass of live coals sufficient to fire everything that touches it. Put the mass of coals where the fire is desired, and add the ordinary fuel, from which a good fire is the result. But alas! housekeepers know of many other ways in which unskilled hands attempt to start the fire. They know of the shavings laid under coarse wood, only to blaze up quickly and die out quickly, leaving the wood with here and there a burning splinter along the sides and corners, and giving the cook a half-hour's hard fussing to complete the fire. They know how long it takes to coax a few weak flames that may show themselves among black smoking blocks of coal into a working heat. The prayer-meeting in the household of grace is much like the fire in the household ordinary. There are likewise two good ways of starting the prayer-meeting.

It may be freely admitted that the ideal prayer-meeting is to have plenty of good people, representing all kinds of fuel; some that will kindle with the quickness of shavings; others like dry fine wood to catch from the shavings; still others of more weight to catch from the fine wood, and so on until the most ordinary are set on fire. With such material well laid, the pastor need only serve the purpose of a match in starting, and a glowing fire will always follow. But, alas! how many communities where prayer-meetings must be held, have only one sort of material to offer—the plain, ordinary fuel. And yet how many pastors persist in the unskilful attempt to start their prayer-meetings with the mere blaze of a match, such, for instance, as "a brief exhortation that every one should feel at home and take part." His brief opening scarcely fires the corners and edges of the souls present. There is no strong blaze, only weak, flickering flames or smoke, and the whole effort of spiritual fire-making is a drag.

Now let a word be put in for the second method. If the pastor knows that the rest will bring only unsplit, unbroken fuel, then let him provide a mass of live coals, large enough, and

hot enough, to fire the heaviest sticks of wood and the hardest blocks of coal, and he may be blest with a good fire. Let him be full of love and faith, so full that he will not want any one else to make the first prayer. Let him be full of some definite subject, so full that he will not want any one else to make the first speech. Let him go to the place of prayer with heart and mind so warm and full that he will be in haste to let the warmth and fulness out, and if there be fuel of any sort in the house, it will speedily catch fire. It may not be an ideal prayer-meeting, but it will be far better than a smoking, sizzling drag. It will at least be warm and comfortable. The indifferent will take interest, the lukewarm will begin to blaze, and the pious heart will fairly glow. The prayers, too, will be different. The brother who always uses the same prayer will vary enough to get in a few fervent petitions on the subject in hand. Bro. Verbosity will almost forget half the world in his interest over the present hour. Bro. Timidity will almost forget himself, and will pour out his whole heart, while Bro. Faithful will just take the kingdom by storm. When the flame is strong enough, everything is drawn up with it.—*Journal and Messenger.*

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