

## Our Serial.

## MURIEL'S KEY-NOTE.

BY AUNES GIBBERNE.

## CHAPTER XXV.

## THE CRISIS.

There are iron natures which may be crushed or broken, but which will not bend beneath the strongest pressure. Yet another mode lies open. For the mass of cold unyielding iron, upon which the mighty steam-hammer shall be used in vain, can be moulded with ease into shape—after the furnace heat.

Mr. Rivers was entering into that furnace. Nay, he stood in it already. But the metal would not soften quickly. The heat had to be increased.

Did he deceive himself, any more than others, with the thought that he did not care?

He sat alone one evening in his study. Rain pelted outside, and the fire had burnt low, and the lights were dim. He did not wish the room to look bright. He could do nothing. Books failed in interest. Letters were a disgust to him. John filled the horizon of his mind.

John! ah, how that simple name seemed to be burnt in upon his brain! John—once the pride of his heart. John—once the delight of his life.

And suppose now that John were not to recover!

Mr. Rivers groaned aloud unknowingly. He sat leaning forward, a listless broken man—his hands trembling, his lips parched. The sound of his groan came back to his own ears. He was almost startled. What, did he really care so much?

He tried to think how John had offended him, how John had crossed his will, how John had checked his purposes. It would not do. A pale reproachful face seemed to haunt him. He could not shake it off. He could not work up any genuine indignation. His heart was aching bitterly for a sight of John.

Yet when there sounded a decisive tapping at the door, the old man sat upright, stern and resolute once more. Give way! Confess himself wrong! Never!

Chesney came in, cloaked, grave, hat in hand.

"Father, I have driven over for a word with you. I want you to come back with me."

Mr. Rivers met his eyes coldly.

"What for, if you please?"

"John is sinking. The doctors do not think he can live through the night."

"Doctors are occasionally mistaken."

"They are. Would to God they might be so now!"

Chesney passed his hand across his face. The old man was trembling visibly.

"Unless this sinking can be arrested—and the doctors give almost no hope—John is dying."

There was no reply.

"Father, you understand me? John is dying. He has asked for you—and you are coming to see him. Are you not?"

Dead silence continued. Mr. Rivers' face was rigid as steel.

"Will you refuse him his last wish?"

I don't ask you as to forgiveness. If you have anything to forgive, surely now is the time to put it aside. He may be gone before morning. How would you feel if you knew that he had died, longing for one kind word from you—and that word denied him?"

An answer dropped slowly—hollow and sepulchral in tone—from Mr. Rivers' grey lips. "I have told you before! John Rivers is my grandson no longer."

"He is the son of your old age."

"He is not."

"He was," said Chesney sadly.

"I have nothing to do with that."

"He is a sufferer, if no more. That alone is a claim. Would any humane man refuse another's dying wish—so easily granted?"

"I do not believe he is dying."

"And if you hear to-morrow that all is over—"

No answer came.

"Have you at least no message to send him?"

"I have—not."

"And this is your final decision?"

"Yes."

"Then may God forgive you, father," said Chesney, with indignant sorrow hardly to be controlled. "If this is the drop too much, and John dies where a word might help to save him, who will be to blame then?"

Mr. Rivers' head had sunk on his chest.

"Will you not think better of it?" pleaded Chesney. "To-morrow may be too late. To-night is not. If John dies, you will never be happy again. What can you gain by holding out? Forgiveness is noble. This is simply a misery to all."

But the iron was not yet fit for the welding. The shackles of pride would not yield.

"Leave me," said Mr. Rivers haughtily.

"And you will not come?"

"No."

"The carriage is waiting. I told John I thought he would see you."

"Not by my authority."

"Father, do come!" said Chesney earnestly.

"No. Go and leave me."

Chesney sorrowfully withdrew, closing the door behind him.

Then the flood-tide of woe, held back so far by resolute force of will, broke through all barriers and rolled in upon the old man's heart. Once more alone, he sat bowed beneath the anguish of the yoke which he had put upon his own neck. Verily the heavenly yoke is light and easy, while Satan loads his servants with grievous burdens.

"John dying—dying—dying!"

How the words echoed and rang through the air of the room. How they sounded in his ears, and thrilled through his brain, and wrung his soul with pain. Stern composure was at an end. He groaned, and rocked himself to and fro.

"John dying! John!"

He began to realize what this John was to him. Feeling had before been without realization. A drama of the past rolled slowly before his eyes.

Not an unbroken succession of pictures. Some parts were dim with the uncertainty of an aged memory. Some parts were blurred with passion. Other scenes stood forth, clear as daylight.

He seemed again to see the bright-haired boy bounding into this very room—coming and going unchecked, where no living person beside might venture without leave. John could never intrude. John could never be in the way. Once again he heard the joyous-toned voice which had been the very music of his life. Once again he seemed to see himself finding interest, happiness, sympathy, in that satisfying companionship. He had wanted nothing when John was near. John had seemed to want nothing when he was near. The two had been most closely bound together. John's marriage and settling into a home of his own had not shaken the bond. Something else was needed.

Something—but what else? Mr. Rivers, spending this hour in vivid memories of earlier days, found certain after events fading into nothing. What had John done, to cause such grievous offence? He had insisted on following the leading of his own conscience. Was that unreasonable? He had helped Muriel out of a difficulty. What of that?

Mr. Rivers could hold himself to no steady train of thought. He went back to the recollection of the bright face, the shining brown hair, the buoyant step, the merry laugh. How dead and silent the room was! Even the pattering of the rain had ceased. Not a murmur of sound was audible. Would John's voice ever ring through that house again? Such a cheery voice in health. But now—the voice was failing, the eyes were dim.

"John dying! My boy—John!"

The old man muttered the words heavily. He rose and went to the writing-table, in a mechanical way, supporting himself by the backs of chairs, for he could scarcely stand. A small side drawer, carefully locked, was his aim. His shaking hands were slow to get it opened.

Within lay a knot of twine, and some dried daisies, curious remnants of John's baby days. Also a small wooden box, John's first carpentering attempt, and three or four childish sketches, and a packet of schoolboy letters. Mr. Rivers had not been to this drawer for a very long time. He had known the things were there, and he could not resolve to destroy them, so he had just let them alone.

He took up a small roll of paper, and from it dropped a long fair curl. John had been such a pretty little boy. Mr. Rivers remembered the curls, and the ruffles, and the rosy cheeks, and his own pride in them all.

A morocco case was amongst the little collection. Mr. Rivers took that up, opened it, and looked at the photograph within. John's own manly face met the gaze. John's frank brown eyes smiled pleasantly back into his.

A thick mist spread over his sight, and two reluctant tears fell heavily. For John was dying. The two had been parted long by the old man's will, but now that the parting threatened to be final, apart from his own control, a change came. Pride, which alone had been stronger than love, yielded beneath the furnace heat. Love, once more set free, sprang fiercely up, burning and melting the heart in which it had been so long buried from the light of day.

"My boy John! What have I been

about! John dying! John dying!" A strong amazement took possession of the old man. He walked to and fro with tottering footsteps, seeing nothing, hearing nothing. His eyes were dazzled, his thoughts wild. A heart-breaking anguish was upon him. What could he do? How could he bear it? John dying!—and he had refused to see John again—had refused to send one kind word!

He began to look upon things in their true light. He had some glimpses of his own evil temper and its evil work.

Forgiveness! There was nothing to forgive. It was he who stood in need of John's forgiveness! For the first time this was made clear to him.

The anguish deepened, till the old man felt as if he must almost die beneath it. His whole soul, set free from its pride-shackles, cried out in grief and distraction for John. He wanted nothing but John. He had no interest in life but John. From head to foot he was burning and throbbing with a devouring thirst for John. As the furnace-fire grew hotter, the man's frame was racked with sorrow of heart. What could he do? How should he bear it? The grief he had brought upon himself was past endurance. He had no helper.

"O God! O God!" The sound broke out at intervals, with gasps of woe. For men in deep extremity do commonly call upon God, however lightly they may reject Him and despise His love in easier days. Thus often they compel Him in very pity to plunge them into the furnace, simply that they may call upon Him. And Mr. Rivers, knowing practically nothing of prayer, in the helplessness of his deep distress took up the cry of so many, and moaned aloud, "God help me! O God, help me!"

John dying—but not dead yet. That thought came to him suddenly. The morrow would be too late, but this evening was not.

His resolution was taken instantly, and acted upon without delay. Dizzied, distracted, half-blind, looking like a man demented, he staggered out of the study. He saw no one by the way. Mechanically taking his hat, he put it on, and went forth alone into the darkness.

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