

OUR LIGHT AFFLICTION.

"Lord, dost thou call this our affliction light?"
Is all this anguish little in thy sight?
Child, bring thy balance out; put in one scale
All thine afflictions; give them in full tale:
All thy bereavements, griefs and fears,
Then add the utmost limits of man's years.
Now put my cross into the other side,
That which I suffered when I lived and died.

"I can not, Lord, it is beyond my might;
And lo! my sorrows are gone out of sight.
Then try another way. Put in the scale
The glory now unseen within the veil;
The glory given to thine own estate;
Use the 'exceeding and eternal weight,'
Which kicks the beam?"

"Ah, Lord, thy word is right;
Thou weighest, my sorrow doth indeed
seem light."

Our Serial.

MURIEL'S KEY-NOTE.

BY AGNES GIBBERNE.

CHAPTER XXIII.

SICKNESS.

One afternoon a railway cab drove to the door, and Chesney Rivers sprang out. He left his bag on the seat, told the driver to wait, and strode into the house. The first person whom he came across was his sister. They met in the hall, and she started back in surprise. Her dainty frills were not often ruffled by so hasty a movement.

"How do you do, Mary? Where is my father?"

"In his study. You did not send us word that you were coming."

"I didn't know it myself till this morning. John is worse."

"How did you hear? Are you sure?"

"Rose wrote me word. She has been making little of the attack for Sybel's sake, and we had no notion how ill he was. Things look bad now. I have come off by the first train."

"You don't mean that he is in actual danger?"

"It is not hopeless."

"I don't know whether papa will be pleased to have you here. He was very much displeased at your visiting Constance."

"No end to the fancies," said Chesney curtly. "I am out of patience with the whole concern. He shall not banish me, at all events. He is in his room, you say?"

As if in answer, the study-door opened, and Mr. Rivers came slowly out. No sign of welcome showed in his face. The lines imprinted there seemed suddenly to deepen and grow hard. Chesney's hand went out frankly, but met with a touch instead of a grasp.

"I have come to see John," he said. "Do you know how ill the poor fellow is?"

No answer, beyond a stern bracing up of the aged figure.

"Rose's account is very sad. His strength seems to have gone down fearfully, and last night he was thought to be sinking—the night before last, I mean. He may be even worse now. Not typhoid—no infection—only low fever from overstrain. He never was robust. They say that in delirium he talks of you incessantly. You will come and see him, father?"

Mr. Rivers' features had turned to a grey whiteness, and his very limbs looked rigid—whether with distress or anger Chesney knew not. The answer was a brief—"No."

"He may be dying. It is impossible to say. Accounts are very bad. Can you willingly throw away what may be your last chance of seeing John?"

Mr. Rivers turned sharply, and went into his study, banging the door after him. Chesney opened it, and stood holding the handle.

"I beg your pardon, father, but—" "Will you be so good as to leave me alone?"

"One moment. I intend to take Muriel with me. She is needed, and John might be the better for seeing her. I have not spoken to Muriel yet, so the responsibility is mine. You refuse John the greater comfort, but he shall have the lesser."

And Chesney shut the door—with something of a bang himself, for his generous blood was stirred within him.

"He will be fearfully angry if Muriel does go," said Mrs. Bertram.

"Can't help that. We must risk it. Rose is done up, and needs Muriel's help, and John must have her. Where is she?"

Not far distant, or hard to find. A few minutes were enough for explanation, and Muriel flew up-stairs, to thrust a few necessities into a small bag. While so doing, Lillias came softly in. Her step was never active now.

"I hope John will soon be better," she said. "It will be a great pleasure for you to be among them all, Muriel."

"Yes. I shall be thinking of you, though," and the words came naturally.

"Not when you have John and Rose."

"Yes."

Muriel turned the key in the small padlock, rose from her stooping posture, and shook out her dress.

"If I want more things they can be sent. Let me know how you are, Lillias. I may be there some days, you see."

"Or weeks," suggested Lillias. "But what will grandpapa say?"

"I don't know. Uncle Chesney has settled all that. No need for us to look forward," said Muriel, resisting the heart-sinking which assailed her.

"John may get better very quickly. Only let me know often how you are."

That was all they had time for. Chesney was very impatient to be off. Possibly he had a fear of interference on the part of his father, but Mr. Rivers remained hidden. No one saw him again throughout the rest of that day. At dinner-time he refused to be present, and when Mrs. Bertram went to his locked door, she was ordered away.

Meanwhile Muriel sat beside her uncle, hearing particulars, so far as he was acquainted with them. She had suffered from almost a dearth of news during the last week.

John had been gradually getting worse, ever since Chesney and Sybel left the house; but Rose, hoping always for improvement, and hardly realizing the serious nature of the illness, could not bear to distress Sybel, while still so poorly.

"It seems she tried to open communication with my father and failed," said Chesney. "I don't think Rose took alarm till three or four days ago. This morning's letter is in an anxious strain altogether—and it takes a good deal to make Rose anxious. She wrote it late at night, and the morning post-scrip says—where is it?—she crosses her sheet about so confusedly—ah, here! 'A very bad night. John much worse. Less delirium, but extreme weakness. Once we thought he was sinking. He has rallied somewhat since then, but I am afraid it is no real improvement.' But you will like to read the whole letter."

"Did you tell grandpapa all this?"

"Why, no. He would not listen to me. Besides, my chief concern was to get you off safely. When I have seen John, I can try my hand again upon my father. But he is hard to move."

Muriel thought of John's words—"If I were dying you might come to me at all hazards, I think." She looked out of the window, unable to speak.

"What is all this about Maxwell?" asked Chesney suddenly.

"He is forbidden the house."

"He too! Who next?" Secretly Chesney was not sorry for Muriel's sake, though vexed for Montgomery.

"He gave offence. There was no real reason. Grandpapa can't stand a word about religion."

"And Maxwell went against his will. I didn't know the poor fellow had pluck for that."

"There is much more force of character in him than appears at first sight."

"No doubt—though you don't call mine a first sight of him, I hope. Tell me how it all happened."

Muriel obeyed, finding some diversion for her own thoughts in doing so.

"My father seems to rejoice in variety. And Maxwell is really going abroad?"

"Very soon. I don't know exactly when, but he just leaving Claverton. Why he goes abroad I can't imagine. He seems to look upon it as a duty, in some mysterious way."

"He has his own reasons, of course. You will all find him a loss."

"O yes, indeed. He has been a father to me, and to Arthur. What should I have done without him?"

Chesney was satisfied with the frankly-expressed regrets and unconscious manner. The less said thereafter on that particular subject the better, he thought. They drove in silence till the Rectory was reached.

Rose came swiftly down stairs with outstretched hands and haggard look, having caught the sound of carriage-wheels. She threw herself into Muriel's arms.

"O this is good—this is a comfort," she said. "I did not dare to hope for so much. Chesney, how kind of you—how dear of Sybel to spare you! And grandpapa consented to our having Muriel?"

"He didn't forbid it," said Chesney, with a slight shrug. "How is John?"

"Very sadly. Just now conscious and easy—but he is up one hour and down the next. He wants to know who it is that has come."

"Then he notices things?"

"Sometimes—not always."

"Rose, you want help in the nursing," said Muriel.

"I never leave him except when he makes me—but we have a nurse. I can't stay away now. Will you have something to eat before you see John? I must tell him you are here."

Little telling seemed to be needed.

Muriel was speedily summoned into the shaded bedroom, and John's burning fingers closed round hers for a moment, only to unloose instantly. She would hardly have recognized John in the wasted figure, bound by weakness as by iron bands. He lifted his eyes to hers, with a faint smile, and then the lids drooped again. It was not the greeting Muriel had expected.

"He is so tired," Rose said sadly. "Muriel saw his lips move, and bent lower."

"Grandfather—" he said. "Quite well, John."

"And Lillias?"

"Much the same."

"Sybel—"

"Better than she was—is she not, uncle?"

"Much," Chesney answered. "John, you must improve next."

The same flitting smile crossed his face.

"So good of you both to come."

"O no, John, only a pleasure," said Muriel.

John made no answer. He lay with half-closed eyes, breathing heavily, like one exhausted.

"How long has he been in this state?" Chesney inquired of Rose.

"Two or three days—not more, I think. The delirium was more constant before. He wanders still a good deal, but just now he knows you both."

"Would he not always?"

Rose shook her head. John presently said distinctly—

"Rose must lie down."

"Not now, John dear. I can't."

"Muriel—" he said appealingly.

"She shall. I will make her," said Muriel.

"Thank you."

The promise was one difficult to fulfill, but Muriel had her way at length. Having safely disposed of Rose in another room, she came back to find Chesney seated by the bed, listening intently. John was saying,

"You'll see to Rose?"

"Yes, my dear fellow—only don't worry yourself."

"No. But if I don't get well—she will need—"

"Yes, I understand. I quite understand. Only you are going to get well so no need to talk over particulars."

"As God wills."

"Yes—just so. Why, you are a degree better already, I think—not so feverish."

"I am very weak. It will be as God wills," the quiet faint voice said.

The nurse interposed, and checked further talk. Chesney went away, while Muriel sat to watch and think. How strange it would be if John were taken in the height of his noonday usefulness! John taken, to be so sorely missed—and the old grandfather allowed to remain on year after year, a comfort and blessing to none. What a contrast, the thirty years of the one, the eighty years of the other! Then she remembered the story of the barren fig-tree, the vainly expected fruit, and the solemn decision allowing but one year more. One year more, or one month more, or one week more! It might be that for John—but he was ready. His had been no barren fig-tree's life.

As evening drew near John's silent feebleness was exchanged for feverish restlessness, with pain and wandering. To lie still for a moment seemed impossible, and he talked incessantly, though in tones so low that words were not always easy to distinguish.

"Grandfather" was an oft-repeated sound, coming mechanically, perhaps. Muriel stood holding his hands, bathing his head, changing his pillow—doing everything she could think of to soothe his suffering. She doubted whether he knew her, but a while, with a moan she caught the sound of "Muriel."

"So much pain, dear John?" she asked. "Is it your head?"

"So weary. If I could but rest."

Yet the next instant he looked up, smiling, and said, "Rejoice evermore—evermore."

"Yes, John."

"Evermore and always. Nothing to hinder that."

"I will indeed—if only you will get better."

"No if. 'Rejoice always.'"

"I can't—while you are like this."

"I!"—and a curiously peaceful look crossed the face, so tired a moment before. "That will not last. It does not touch the 'light' and 'gladness'."

His mind wandered away again, and the suffering restlessness came back, but she could hear him murmuring brokenly to himself, "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Be glad, rejoice, shout for joy, all ye—upright in heart. 'Rejoice in the Lord—in the Lord—O ye righteous.' 'Rejoice in every good thing'—evermore—evermore."

And so on, again and again, till Muriel would have given anything to

check him, but he was unconscious of her presence, and would not be checked. By-and-by he rambled off to the subject of his children, and talked tenderly of each by name, returning thence to the never-failing matter of his grandfather's displeasure.

"If you could bring us together, you know—things might be better. Muriel is that you? Not Rose?"

"Rose will come soon. Don't you know me, John?"

"Yes, you understand—you understand, Muriel. I can't get it into Rose's mind somehow. That would be—would be—the wisest plan. What was I saying?—something about—about grandfather. My head is so confused," he said, looking anxiously at Muriel, with his pain-worn eyes.

"Don't you think there may be forgetfulness? So long since we met—and he was so cold. I think sometimes coming together, you know. I am so tired, Muriel—dead tired—I can't explain. Don't you understand? The old feeling wants rousing. Yes, that was what I wanted to say. If I could have—could have—just a few—you know—words—a look—it would do me good—him I mean."

"Yes, but don't talk so much, John," said Muriel, for he seemed to be struggling with overpowering weakness.

"I must—I have things to say—messages. Only everything goes from me. God's will must be done. Chesney tried and failed—so sad, that. It takes a long long time—hard to move. And he—so unhappy—can't be happy. It makes one sick at heart, Muriel."

But he was looking at her, clearly as the last few words were spoken.

"Muriel—poor child," he muttered.

"My soul shall rejoice." Why doesn't she? So much will—but beaten back here by a feather. Muriel wondered how often that thought had been in his mind concerning her.

So the evening and the night went by, but not without worse turns than these.

LOST OPPORTUNITIES.

"As thy servant was busy here and there, he was gone."

Abbot Lee had never been accustomed to attend the sanctuary regularly, and it was a subject of remark among the church-goers when, one bright Sunday morning, he walked into the church before Sunday-school closed, and took a seat immediately in the rear of the Bible class. Day after day he occupied the same place—never coming in, however, until after the opening of the school.

He appeared to listen attentively; and more than once Mr. Kingsbury, the superintendent, resolved to speak to him about the one thing useful; but as he was busy here and there during the hour, he postponed the conversation until a more convenient season. One morning he was startled to hear the young man was dead—having been sick only a few hours. He learned that in the midst of his dying agony he had begged and prayed for a few hours more to prepare for death; but for him it had been written, "time shall be no more." How bitterly did Mr. Kingsbury regret his indecision. He had had it in his heart to do this irreligious youth good—but, as he was busy here and there the man was gone.

If he was the only busy one who neglected the present for the future that may never come, the case would not be so bad.

Are there not loving mothers, all over the land, who have it in their power to twine the tendrils of their little ones' hearts so closely around themselves and the dear Saviour, that they may never wish to go astray, who are yet so busy here and there that they lose all this sweet influence?

While they are engaged with their housekeeping, and the making of dainty garments for their loved ones, the children have grown up and grown away from them; and before they realize that they have lost their hold upon them, they are gone—gone forever from their grasp. Too late, they discover that their sons are not "as plants grow up in their youth; nor their daughters as corner-stones, polished after the similitude of a palace."

Are there not many fathers, Christian fathers, too, who neglect to impart that instruction which they owe to their sons, until the world has ensnared them?

While the father was busy with his farm, his merchandise, or, it may be, in watering the souls of others, his own boys had gone into the whirl and dissipation of life—far out of his reach. Let each one strive not to let the cares and responsibilities of life cause us to neglect the "one thing needful," and may we never be so busy here and there, as to forget to speak a word for Christ, for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not.—Baptist Teacher.

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