

Our Serial.

MURIEL'S KEY-NOTE.

BY AGNES GIBBERNE.

CHAPTER XXIV.

EXPLANATION.

Nearly a week had passed, and matters stood at much the same level. John was no better, yet not materially worse. There was greater weakness, and less fever. He might rally yet, but he was as one bearing onwards for the shores of the dark river.

"You must come in the garden with me," Chesney said to Muriel one afternoon. "You are getting to look ill yourself."

"O no, nothing makes me ill."

"Something might—don't boast too soon. Come, I want a little talk."

He caught up a shawl peremptorily, threw it round her, and would take no denial.

It was an autumn day, sober-toned, soft and mild. Dry leaves fluttered down, and lay about the paths, while the beds were still bright with flowers. Subdued chirpings came from the trees around, quietly content in tone, but lacking the exuberance of spring rejoicings.

"How about the last three hours?" Chesney inquired, as they paced slowly the gravel walk, Muriel leaning on his arm.

"John says nothing. I think he is much weaker than he has been yet."

"Poor fellow!—Poor dear fellow!" "Sometimes he gives Rose a word or a smile, but not often. He only cares to lie quiet. Rose keeps up wonderfully."

"Always was buoyant. She builds a good deal on the lessening of the feverish symptoms."

"Ah—if he has strength to battle through. I don't know what to think," said Muriel sadly.

"Don't be desponding. I don't give up hope at all. In fact, my own belief is that he will go lower still before he turns the corner. Just been to the Manor—but there is no getting the old gentleman here."

"Does he not seem to care?"

"Care!—he is skin and bone. I never saw a man more changed. Looks ghastly. But he holds out—bull-dog sort of tenacity. 'John Rivers is nothing to him.' Nothing! when the poor old man's heart is breaking for John! I declare—"

Chesney choked, and had to pause.

"Madness!" he broke out suddenly.

"What is it all for? It pleases no one—himself least of all. Why can't he give way? Just because he has said he won't, I suppose. Well, a ramrod can't bend, though it may break. Will he go on to that?"

"What did you say to him?" asked Muriel.

"Everything I could think of. Described John's state, gave doctors' opinions—told him how John talked of his coldness—asked how he would feel if—the worst came. He tried to silence me, but I was determined not to be silenced. He took refuge in his study, and I followed him. I stuck to him till I had said all I wanted to say. Not a bit of good. The yielding process may be going on below—but if it doesn't reach the surface till too late—"

"That came involuntarily. A moment later he added, 'Not that I expect the worst.'"

"Rose does not. I think I do," said Muriel in an undertone.

"You sit and watch in that room till you get low-spirited. How long have you been there to-day?"

"Some hours. Uncle, did you see Lilius?"

"Yes, poor girl. Strange how persistently Mary ignores all notion of danger in that direction."

"Does she?"

"Why, has she ever allowed it with you?"

"Yes—only once."

"Ah—poor Mary! Then she does understand. That explains her unhappy look now and then."

"Lilius is everything to mamma."

Muriel stopped short, and looked up in his face, seized by a sudden impulse.

"Uncle Chesney, I wish you would tell me why it is that mamma feels as she does about me. I know you must have heard."

"And you never did?"

"No, but I think I have a right to know. If it is a secret, I will not repeat it. I would much rather understand. It might help me to bear her manner."

"Don't think too much of that. You women put manner off and on at will."

"It is not off and on. She is always the same to me."

"Better than sickness! However, Lilius has been her pet from babyhood."

"But may I not know why? There is a reason, is there not?"

"Yes. I don't know why I should not tell you—only keep it to yourself."

"Some family disgrace?" she asked, flushing. "But what could that have to do with me apart from others?"

"Not exactly that. Your mother counts it a disgrace, but then she is very sensitive on the score of 'blue blood,' and 'sixteen quarterings.' We Rivers are well-connected. I don't myself undervalue position or descent—still one may make too much of such things."

"You are giving me a long preface," said Muriel, looking uneasy.

"I am forgetting. The long and short of the matter is that your grandmother on the Bertram side was a half-caste."

He left Muriel have leisure to digest the idea, and was amused to see that her mind had wandered off to something else.

"What now?" he asked.

"Hush!—I thought I heard Connie calling."

"Connie is too prudent a little person to make a noise."

"Fancy, I suppose. Rose said she could not wait for an hour. Well, uncle?"

"You know now," he said.

"Know what?"

"That which I told you just now."

"Oh, I see—yes—I was thinking of poor John," she said, with a sigh.

"Mind, it is a secret. I don't believe your mother would be happy to live on in Claverton, if she supposed the fact to be generally known."

"But, uncle, you were going to tell me why mamma does not love me."

"That is it. Don't you see? You inherit a certain something in the way of feature and manner, which prevents your mother from ever losing sight of the grand trial of her life."

"Losing papa must have been that," said Muriel gravely. Then with a little start, "But she hardly ever speaks of papa. Why not? I have wondered sometimes."

"She never quite got over this."

"Papa could not help it."

"No, but he did not tell her. She married him very young, and when she reached India, this fact coming out unexpectedly was a great blow to her pride. It made her miserable."

"Did papa not show it in his face?"

"He was very dark and handsome—but the Eastern look did not strike one in him as it does in you. Besides, such an idea never occurred to us."

"I can't help my looks," said Muriel.

"The thing itself does not affect me any more than Lilius."

"No. But your face is a carrying on of your mother's trouble."

The walk became silent for a while.

"What made my grandfather marry her?" asked Muriel.

"Marry a half-caste! She was beautiful, and he thought her attractive. They say he was an impulsive man, never looking ahead. Such things occasionally happen."

"And mamma counts it such a disgrace that she can't love me—only on that account?"

"I have no doubt she does love you, but you bring up uncomfortable feelings—unavoidably. She counts the whole thing a disgrace. Any manner of connection with those beneath her in rank would be a serious trial to your mother—and this most of all."

"I think family quarrels are much more of a disgrace."

"You have not been in India, or you would better understand her feeling. I am not defending her—but still—"

"I don't understand it now. I don't," repeated Muriel gravely, with a slight flush. Coming straight from the possible death-bed of one ripe for another world, the things of this world looked small. "It seems to me unimportant. She might feel vexation and disappointment on first hearing it. But to carry on such a feeling for a lifetime—to dislike her child for it—"

"No, not dislike."

"Uncle, you don't know—you don't see all."

"Your mother judges of the weight of such matters by the position they hold in the eyes of the world," said Chesney.

"But then I don't take my stand as a woman of the world."

Chesney smiled slightly.

"Still I am glad I know. So many things are clear to me now that used to be a puzzle. Will mamma never forget me my dark skin, do you think?"

"How can I? I can't touch this, you see. It can't be done away. Only, knowing the reason will make her manner easier to bear."

"Are you sure that your manner does not try her?" asked Chesney suddenly. "Is it all on one side?"

"My manner!" Muriel was very much surprised. "My Eastern ways?"

"No; simply your manner to her."

"I did not know I was to blame."

"Well, I don't settle the question for you. It might be worth looking into."

"Won't you explain what you mean?" she asked.

"I did not think the coldness was entirely on one side."

"But how can I help that? She always checks me."

"Checks what? Advances on your part?"

Muriel hesitated. "She used to do so. I have not tried lately."

"For weeks or months?"

"Years," was the honest answer.

Muriel blushed at her own confession.

"No, I dare say not. The fact is, Lilius' gentleness compared with—forgive me!—with your brusquerie towards your mother, partly explains her feeling. I am a blunt fellow, Muriel. This is an ill-chosen time for fault-finding."

"I would rather know the truth," Muriel said with blinded eyes. "I never thought of such a thing. Mamma has always been cold to me ever since I can remember."

"No need for you to be cold to her in return. You have plenty of winning power, as we all know. Why not make her love you?"

Muriel glanced silently over past years, and knew that the rebuke was a deserved one. She had too fully accepted her fixed position as an unloved daughter of the house, falling in with the notion, and acting back accordingly. Words and looks of affection on her own part had been studiously repressed. Why needed they to have been, unless under the influence of pride.

Pride had crept, in undoubtedly. If Mrs. Bertram showed no love for her, she would show no love back. If Mrs. Bertram did not care for Muriel's presence, Muriel would hold aloof. These had been her rules of action.

"I never meant to be stiff to mamma," she said. "But I see I have been."

"You are a girl worth giving a hint to," said Chesney. "Wise folks will always learn."

"I hope things will be different when I go home," Muriel answered soberly. And then they went back to thoughts of John.

HEART TO HEART.

We want to get at people. Then we must approach them on the line of what is common between them and us. So the insurance agent or the sewing machine man learns to talk crops to the farmer, and iron to the blacksmith, and poetry to the school-teacher. He knows that if he can get *en rapport*, his point is gained. So he approaches the man on the road the man has travelled, and not on some other road new to him, and for which he does not care.

There is one road on which all people travel—it is the way of the heart. It is therefore the short road for access to the people. An American child expressed surprise that the children in Paris laughed in English. We laugh and cry in a common dialect. Everywhere tears are understood and smiles are cosmopolitan, can travel anywhere and always be interpreted.

There is no such free-masonry of the mind. Brain does not answer to brain. Men do not understand each other's thoughts. To a practical man poetry is all vapor and smoke. He wonders why the poet does not say something. To the rhetorician logic is nonsense, and to the logician rhetoric is mild moonshine. What means all this high debate about theology that has been rung in the ears of sixty generations? Here is the Bible. All we have to do is, understand it. Not quite. We must also understand each other while we are talking about it. But we do not understand each other. Arminians accuse Calvinists of Fatalism, and Calvinists accuse Arminians of other bad things. And all because the human mind is such a distorter. What sort of a picture we get depends a good deal on which way we hold the oval convex mirror. One way it looks unnatural, solemn, the other way it looks too jolly. Neither view gives the truth. Looking at our doctrine when hostile criticism holds the glass—and we are indeed a fearful looking object. Turn the glass one way and we are altogether too broad and good-natured. Prejudice twists every glass, and because mind does not answer to mind, we debate and jangle and let go of hands, and travel each his way in his separate, self-righteous and self-opinionated fashion.

But the heart is truer. So the chief of questions for teacher and preacher is, How may we get at the heart? Passing some workmen on the street in a debate over ways of doing a job, one remarked, "The man who knows the most is not always the man who gets there," to which his fellow replied, "Sure, he's the one who ought to get there." Yes, he ought to, but the heart sometimes shows a shorter road and outwits the head.

How, then, shall we reach the heart? Not by sending a servant, even though

that servant be a tall, straight brain. It is to the heart that the heart responds; not to the tongue, not to the mind, not to the will. A resolution to reach the heart, and a bit of machinery in the way of a pathetic story will not do it. No form of simulated feeling can awaken feeling, and that because feeling has no counterfeit. The best coin of affected sentiment, wrought out with the genius of a Chrysostom and stamped with all holy names, will not deceive a gamin on the streets. Heart answers not to pretense or effort, but only to heart.

The world will not be converted by frantic endeavors, nor by lordly gifts. Jesus brought only a great heart. He flung it down into the sea of passionate, dark and dreadful life. Disown and spurn it men will for a while, but at last they will catch the rhythm of its beat and the color of its blood. So must we. We must look the world's wretchedness full in the face until we have a heart that is not ashamed to lay itself beside the heart of sin and sorrow. That contact will warm them into life.—*The Interior.*

THE MEMORY OF A WRONG.

There are few things more painful to an honest and conscientious man than the recollection of a wrong which he has committed, and which cannot be recalled or corrected. If we can correct a wrong and make it right, or confess a wrong and obtain forgiveness, that may end it; but to know that we have done wrong and it is forever beyond our power to make it right, is, to an honest and right-thinking person, an occasion of the keenest regret.

One of the newspaper associates of the late William C. Bryant, the poetic editor, tells the following story:

"One morning, many years ago, after reaching his office, and trying in vain to begin work, he turned to me and remarked:

"I cannot get along at all this morning."

"Why not?" I asked.

"O," he replied; "I have done wrong. When on my way here, a little boy flying a kite passed me. The string of the kite having rubbed against my face, I seized it and broke it. I did wrong. I ought to have paid him."

This tenderness of conscience went far toward making the poet the kindly, noble, honorable, and honored man that he was, whose death was felt as a loss throughout the land.

It was perhaps beyond the power of Bryant, with his wealth and influence, to find that little boy and correct the wrong which he had done him, and which made his mind uneasy and unfitted him for true work. But how many there are who have wronged others and who know that they have wronged them, and know when, and where, and how they did it, and know that it is within their power to correct their wrongs and make them right, and yet will neglect to do it. By and by will come a time when the opportunity which they have neglected will have gone; the wrongs will remain, but there will be no way of making them right. Happy are they who, before that day comes, right every wrong in the fear of God, and thus prepare to stand guiltless and accepted in the presence of the great King, who shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good or whether it be evil.

RANDOM READINGS.

Afflictions are but the shadow of God's wings.—*George MacDonald.*

"Not what we give, but what we share; The gift without the giver's bare."

It is a great shame to a man to have a poor heart and a rich purse.—*Chaucer in Fourteenth Century.*

Knowledge is that which, next to virtue, truly and essentially raises one man above another.—*Addison.*

To deny, as Peter did, is bad; but not to weep bitterly, as he did, when we have denied, is worse.—*Payson.*

Our grand business in life is not to see what lies dimly at a distance, but to do what lies clearly at hand.—*Carlyle.*

How much better is it to get wisdom than gold, and to get understanding rather to be chosen than silver.—*Proverbs.*

It is good for us to think no grace or blessing is truly ours till we are aware that God has blessed some one else with it.

The jealous man is always hunting for something he don't expect to find, and when he has found it, he is mad because he has.

Keep your conduct abreast of your conscience, and very soon your conscience will be illuminated by the radiance of God.

Our faith is the centre of the target at which God doth shoot when he tries us; and if any other graces shall escape untried, certainly faith shall not.—*Spurgeon.*

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