THE MYSTERIOUS KEY

OR, PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE.

CHAPTER II.

With a sharply indrawn breath, Gerald turned to the table, took up Miss Winchester's letter, and began to unfold it.

"I had almost forgotten it," he said wearily; "but I will read it aloud, for you will be interested in its contents."

"Perhaps there may be some things in it which I should not hear," Lady Bromley gently objected. "If there was any vital secret in connection with your mother's marriage to Mr. Brewster, it may be as well for it to remain such to every one but yourself."

"How thoughtful you always are!" Gerald replied, and bending an appreciative look upon her. "You have always been so good to me I find myself turning to you in every emergency, almost as naturally as I would if you were my mother."

"Thank you, Gerald, for that assurance, and I trust that you will always allow me to act as such in so far as I may. I am sure that our fondness for each other is mutual," responded his companion, with evident emotion.

"Then I shall have no secrets from you," he smilingly returned; "so I will follow my first impulse and read Aunt Honor's letter to you. Sit here," he added, placing a comfortable rocker for her, and then, when she was seated, he brought the dismantled Winchester heirloom and placed it before her.

"Put your feet upon this sacred repository—for as such I shall henceforth regard it—and take your ease. How this poor relic has fretted me every time I have packed my trunk! But now it could not be purchased from me for its weight in gold, and very soon we will have it made over into a fitting ornament for your room."

Then, drawing another chair opposite her, he began to read from Miss Winchester's letter.

"My dear boy," was the tender form of address, "I do not know when, if ever, this will meet your eyes, for I am greatly exercised in my mind as to the wisdom of unraveling for you the mystery which from your birth has enshrouded your life. You are far too young to be told anything about it at present, and yet I am impelled to write out the history of your mother and your origin, together with certain data and events, which may possibly become very valuable to you some time in the future, and would otherwise be utterly lost—swallowed in oblivion by some unforeseen happening to myself. If we should both live until you attain your majority, I should then feel it my duty to tell you everything, and allow you to make such use of your knowledge as you might deem best. If, on the other hand, I should be taken from you before that time, the story would be ready for you, and I should doubtless have warning sufficient to tell you where to find it, together with the record of your birth. I am not your own aunt, Gerald—you are not my brother William's child, as I have allowed you to believe. That was only a harmless fiction, to silence curious questions and gossiping tongues. He was the captain of a sailing-vessel, and died of fever on a homeward passage from South America. Your father also went across the sea, but no one has ever known why he never came back again to his wife. Your mother was Miriam Harris, the only child of my sister, who, against the wishes of her family, married Arthur Harris, a poor but talented musician. Their home was in New Haven, and when Miriam was seventeen years old her mother died very suddenly, of hemorrhage of the lungs. Her death broke her husband's heart, and he never seemed to have any courage to battle with the world afterward, and late the following winter he also passed away, after a brief struggle with that terrible enemy, pneumonia. This left Miriam entirely alone, and I offered her a home with me—I was at that time living in a neighboring town—but for some reason, unknown to me then, she preferred to remain in the city, and continue her music-teaching, which, however, barely gave her a living. She was one of the loveliest girls I ever saw, peculiarly refined in person and manner, and possessing a sweetness of temper that made her irresistible to almost every one. She told me that she should still keep the old home, which greatly astonished and displeased me, for I felt that the rental of it would materially add to her income; while I also felt that it was no right for a girl of her years to live alone. Later, I understood the strange freak and her obstinacy, as I then regarded her decision. The summer following the death of her father, which had occurred early in December, I realized that the girl's own health was failing, and again I urged her to break up housekeeping and come to me. She still refused, and seemed strangely nervous and troubled when I pressed the matter; she even appeared to be restless and uncomfortable during the little visit I was making her, and I accordingly shortened it, returning to my own lonely home earlier than I had intended. I neither heard from nor saw her again until early in winter, when, one cold, stormy day, the child suddenly appeared before me, looking very ill and wretched. I realized at once that she was in no ordinary trouble; but I took her to my heart and bade her confide everything to me. Then I learned the reason of her strange behaviour, and her persistence in living alone in the home that had always been hers. She had been a wife since the month of April previous! A young man—Adam Brewster, by name, and a student at Yale—had been attentive to her some time previous to the death of her father. He had taken lessons on the violin from Professor Harris, as a blind, and for the sole purpose of enabling him to woo and win the heart of his lovely daughter. Mr. Harris did not approve of his attentions, and had openly discouraged them; but, immediately following his death, young Brewster persuaded her to marry him secretly—at least, their relations were to remain a secret only until his college course was ended, which would be the following summer, when he would immediately establish himself in business, and then take her to a home such as he wished her to occupy——"

"Oh! how strange!" suddenly broke forth Lady Bromley, in a voice of such intense pain that Gerald turned to her in astonishment.

"I—I mean how strange it is that girls will allow themselves to be drawn into such snares," she hastened to explain, while she struggled to regain her self-control. "Why cannot they have sufficient resolution and moral courage to say 'no'—to be firm to resist temptation, and tell their lovers that when they are ready to give them their rightful place in the world as honored wives, then they will give their hand in marriage? Oh! a secret marriage is a selfish and cowardly thing for any man to urge upon an innocent maiden, and many a one has had her happiness ruined for life by weakly yielding to her lover's persuasions."

"Yes, I believe that is true," said Gerald thoughtfully.

He understood now that her ladyship must have been startled by learning that the circumstances attending the union of his father were so like the experience of her own marriage to Sir Charles Bromley; but he could not quite comprehend, in view of its happy outcome, why she should be so exceedingly bitter against the manner of it.

"Excuse me for interrupting you," she continued, smiling; "I spoke almost before I realized what I was saying."

Gerald turned to his letter and resumed:

"So Miriam trusted him fully; but upon the very day of her husband's graduation, he received a letter from his father, who was a wealthy banker of New York, summoning him immediately home—telling him that his mother, who at that time was in Paris—was on the point of joining a party to Norway, Sweden, and the North Cape, provided she could have a proper escort. The elder Brewster was unable to go himself, but insisted that Adam was to start at once in his place. The trip, he stated, would occupy about three months, and would be a pleasant change for the young man, who for so long had been closely confined to his studies. He also said that he had already cabled his mother that he would sail on the next steamer, so there was no time to lose. The young husband rebelled outright against this arbitrary command, but more against the prospective separation from his wife; but she, ever generous and considerate of others, advised him to do as his father wished, saying that she would do well enough for the little while that he would be absent—three months would soon slip away, and she would be there in the old home, to welcome him back upon his return. Adam Brewster realized but too well that it would be a very inopportune moment to confess his marriage and plead that he did not want to leave his wife; he was entirely dependent upon his father, and he felt that if he should be thrown upon his own resources, he would have a tough struggle for existence. His plan, so he said, had been to get him to establish him in some paying enterprise, when, once settled upon a firm foundation, he would tell the truth, and introduce his bride. If he hoped to yet carry out this project, he knew he must obey his father, and so he consented to the tour abroad.

"He left a handsome sum with Miriam for her immediate needs, promising to send her more, as he received his own remittances, and forward his address as soon as he knew just what his movements were to be. He said it would be best to still preserve the secret of their relations to each other; 'but ere the snows of winter fell she would be openly acknowledged before the world.' Miriam trusted him implicitly. She promised to do exactly as he wished, and that promise proved fatal to her. It signed her own death-warrant and robbed you of your birthright; for, from the hour of their parting until her dying day, she never heard one word from the man who had pledged himself before God and man to love and cherish her so long as they both should live."

"Oh! how cruel! how cruel!" murmured Lady Bromley sorrowfully, while Gerald gritted his teeth savagely, his face like a mask of chalk, a lurid light in his eyes.

"The poor girl hoped and waited until longer waiting would have compelled her either to betray her secret and produce the proofs of it, or become the target for a scandal-loving public," the young man read on. "She had not confided to her husband the fact that before the anniversary of their marriage should come round she hoped to become a mother. She feared that the knowledge might trouble him during his absence—three months would soon pass away, and her news would safely keep until then.

"This was the sad story she told me when she came to me, that dreary winter day, and asked me to give her food and shelter until she could die and hide in the grave what she had begun to believe was her shame. She would not hear one word against the author of her misery—she still loved him with idolatrous affection, and even though she could not fail to believe herself a deserted wife, yet a lawful wife she was, and she insisted that some undue influence—some treachery on the part of others, was what had caused his unfaithfulness. She commissioned me to have her house sold, and as I was fortunate enough to find a ready purchaser, her disappearance from the place where she had always lived was thus accounted for, and aroused no adverse comment.

"Her baby was born a month or six weeks later, and then I begged Miriam to let me seek her husband, or, in case anything had happened to him, seek his father, produce the proofs of her marriage, and demand that justice and proper recognition be accorded her and her child. But no; she was as firm as a rock—she had promised Adam that their union should remain a secret until he came to claim her and give her her proper place in the world, and she would never break her word. A week later, during one of her violent outbursts of grief, she ruptured a blood-vessel, and I knew that from that hour her doom was sealed—that she would go the same way her mother had gone before her. She, also, appeared to realize this, for as soon as the bleeding was stopped she insisted that I should pledge myself to bring up her boy in utter ignorance of his parentage, at least upon his father's side. I was to do the best I could for him, and trust the rest to God—if, she added wearily, there is any God. I have often wondered why she did not destroy the proofs of her marriage, and thus preclude the possibility of any future knowledge of it. I have sometimes thought she meant to do so, for she kept them constantly by her, but clung to them as long as possible, vainly hoping that her husband might come before she died. She passed away suddenly while I was absent from her room only a few minutes, and I found her marriage-certificate and her wedding-ring clasped tightly in her left hand, which was concealed beneath her pillow. I put them both into the envelope containing your baptismal-certificate, Gerald—I had had that rite performed for you unknown to her, and took the responsibilty of adding your father's name to the one she had chosen for you—and put them carefully away, feeling that, since she had not destroyed your birthright, a Higher Power had wisely ordered their preservation."

(To be continued.)

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BOBS'S HORSESHOES.

Max Mueller's Lucky Penny—How Parnell Stirred Coffee.

A man more absolutely governed by pure reason than Lord Macaulay could not well be found, but in his diary he refers to an after dinner talk about the feeling which Johnson had—of thinking oneself bound to touch a particiar rail or post and to tread in the middle of a paving stone, and he adds: "I certainly have this very strongly."

In one of his Hibbert lectures Max Mueller said to the students: "Many of you, I suspect, carry a ha'penny with a hole in it for luck. I am not ashamed to own that I have done so myself for many years."

Charles Dickens refused to lie down unless his bed was placed due north and south. He gave notice of the rule before arriving at a friend's house or a hotel, but a compass was always handy in his baggage to make sure.

Mrs. Justin McCarthy has told us Parnell gravely checked her stirring coffee "the wrong way" and insisted that she should take another cup.

A gentleman of Portrush sent Lord Roberts an old horseshoe when things looked ill in South Africa. Gratefully acknowledging it, the General added that he would keep this horseshoe in company "with one picked up the day I entered the Orange Free State and another I found at Paardeburg the day before General Cronje surrendered."

MARTIAL MUSIC.

Instances Which Testify What Soldiers Like Best.

It is an understatement of deeds of heroism which delights the British soldier, declares Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in "Through the Magic Door," Anything in the least "highfaltin" would depress a body of English troops; German troops can march to battle singing Luther's hymn; Frenchmen will work themselves into a frenzy by a song of glory; but English poets need not imagine that martial song is what the British soldier needs, as these instances testify.

Our sailors, working the heavy guns in South Africa, sang "Here's Another Lump of Sugar for the Bird," I saw a regiment go into battle to the refrain of "A Little Bit of the Top," The martial poet, unless he had the genuis and insight of a Kipling, would have wasted a good deal of ink before he had got down to such chants as these.

The Russians are not unlike us in this respect. I remember reading of some column ascending a breach and singing lustily from start to finish, until a few survivors were left victorious upon the crest, with the song still going.

A spectator inquired what wondrous chant it was which had warmed them up to such a deed of valor, and he found that the exact meaning of the words, endlessly repeated, was "Ivan is in the Garden Picking Cabbages."

The fact is, I suppose, that a mere monotonous sound may take the place of a tom-tom of savage warfare, and hypnotize the soldier into valor.

WEALTH IN PEAT.

The promise held forth by a great installation in northwest Germany, for the utilization of the immense peat-bogs that exist there, leads to the suggestion in England that the huge Bog of Allen in Ireland may next become a great centre of industry. The German undertaking contemplates the bringing of a large part of the bogs under cultivation, together with the conversion of the peat into fuel, to be employed in the development of electrical energy for agricultural purposes, as well as for supplying light and power to a number of towns situated within a radius of 50 miles.

About the Farm

PRODUCING MILK.

After a year's observation with the herd at Cornell University experiment station, H. H. Wing, professor of dairy husbandry, reaches the following conclusions:

1st. With a good dairy herd, carefully fed and kept, milk can be produced for sixty-five cents per cwt., and fat for sixteen cents per pound for the cost of food consumed.

2nd. That individuals of the same breed vary more widely in milk and butter produced than do the breeds themselves.

3rd. The large animals consumed less pounds of dry material per 1,000 pounds live weight per day than did the smaller animals.

4th. That in general the best yields of fat were obtained from cows that gave at least a fairly large flow of milk.

5th. In general, the cows consuming the most food produced both milk and fat at the lowest rate.

6th. For the production of milk and fat there is no food so cheap as good pasture grass.

Note particularly "6th." This being the case does it not stand to reason that the best results in winter months must come from feeding the nearest approach to green pasture grass? And is that not silage and properly cured alfaifa?

LIVE STOCK NOTES.

The sheep that furnishes a coat, both for himself and his master, does not owe the latter anything for his keep, and the better the keep the better the coat.

Many persons make the mistake of cutting off the horse's mane. This is detrimental to the horse's appearance and weakens the neck. Even the foretop should be left untouched as a protection to the poll, good horsemen say.

During the laying season it is no unusual matter for soft eggs to make their appearance now and then. This is unsatisfactory, because not only is it a sign that something is wrong with the bird that produces the shell-less egg, but these soft eggs areliable to cause some of the hens to become egg eaters.

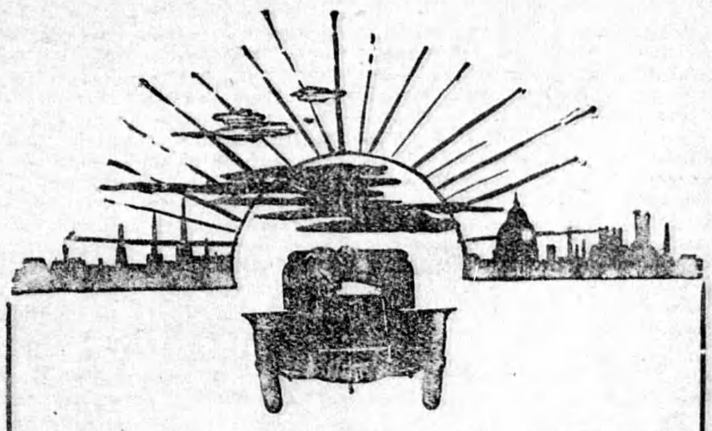
Look out for the stretches. The symptoms are known by the sheep spreading its legs out and stretching itself. The cause is too much dry feed. The remedy is a bran-mash and an ounce of raw linseed oil. If the flock are fed roots, bran and linseed meal, there is never any danger of constipation.

The skillful breeder has developed early maturity and tendency to fatten easily. He has done this by taking from the pig for many generations all trouble or care about his shelter or subsistence. The result is a breed to which good shelter and plenty of feed at all times are especially necessary, and without which they may not thrive so well as these hogs less carefully bred.

Several kinds of lice make trouble for chickens, but the most common kinds are the gray louse, which is about the size of the head of a pin and is found under the wings and about the vent, and the head louse, which is a large gray louse and attaches itself to the heads of little chickens and quickly saps their lives away. Ordinary gray lice find their best breeding place in filth, so the first step in getting rid of them is to clean up the premises thoroughly. Follow this by painting the roosts and all crevices with kerosene and dusting insect powder on the fowls. For head lice the best remedy is lard or vaseline rubbed on the heads of the little chickens.

If the roosts are painted over once a month throughout the fall and winter, the flowls will be kept in better condition and much labor and loss will be avoided next spring during nesting time. The dust bath should, of course, be supplied, for it will also help to keep vermin in subjection. As dust is quite cold it should be placed where the sun will warm it in the middle of the day. It is considerable of a task to catch every fowl in a large frock and dust them with insect powder. The use of the liquid on the roosts is a much more simple operation, and quite as efficient. Red mites can be destroyed by carefully saturating the perches, boards and cracks with coal oil and crude carbolic acid.

"I wouldn't cry like that if I were you," said a lady to little Alice. "Well," said Alice, between her sobs, "you can cry any way you like, but this is my way."



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