MIRIAM.

CHAPTER II.

Before Mrs. King had left her own room the next morning, a letter was brought to her. She divined whence it came, although she had never before seen the handwriting; and it was with more nervousness than she would have cared to acknowledge that she broke the seal. It was dated the previous night, and began abruptly.

"My presence was, of course, no such surprise to you as yours was to me. I recognized you instantly. It is necessary that we should meet alone for once; there are some words that must be said between us; then I need trouble you no more. Will you please select place and arrange time of meeting?"

Miriam perused this twice, a look of disdain on her face. Then came a knock at the door.

"If you please, ma'am," said the housemaid, putting in her head, "the boy is waiting below for an answer."

"He shall not wait long," said Miriam, and, tearing the note into four pieces, she flung them carelessly into the fire burning newly in her grate. Then she turned to a devonport standing in the window of her pleasant room, and wrote her reply.

"You are mistaken; your presence was as great a surprise to me as mine was to you. I see no necessity for the interview of which you speak. It would be an annoyance to me in every way. I decline to grant it."

Having despatched this concise epistle, Miriam proceeded with her interrupted toilette, brushing her long hair at the glass which gave back to her vision a scornful lip, a proud and steady eye.

"He thinks I knew that he was here; he thinks—great Heaven—I sought him! He shall find out his mistake," she said, and twisted her abundant wavy locks about her head with firm unwavering touch.

In the course of that day another letter was brought to her.

"I insist on speaking to you," it ran. "I will wait for you by the chapel on the Newton road from three to four o'clock this afternoon. If you fail to appear, I shall call on Mr. Archer, and explain to him the difficulty in which I am placed."

To this Miriam deigned no reply.

"Let him insist, let him explain!" she muttered. "I am not bound to do his bidding, I thank Heaven!"

However, as the appointed time drew near, she saw fit to alter her first decision.

"He shall not think I am afraid," she said. "Better see him, and have done with it!"

"Going out?" cried Mrs. Archer, in surprised accents, looking up from her book, as Miriam presented herself before her. "My dear, what a day! Better by half stay at home over the fire with me!"

"The day isn't so bad, Georgie—dull, but the wind is high enough to keep off the rain. Good-bye. I shall be back before dusk."

"Come forward and let me look at you. Are you well wrapped up?"

The girl showed herself in her long sealskin coat and hat, her friend regarding her with admiring eyes.

"Mind no one runs away with you," she said, laughing "You always look your best in your furs."

"Little fear of that!" Miriam declared, as she nodded farewell.

The parish of Eastwick was but a suburb of the town of Newton, and the town encroached yearly on the suburb. The road along which Miriam briskly walked was adorned with villa-residences, let and unlet, while many more were in the course of building. The road was not picturesque in any way, nor a favorite of Miriam's. The chapel, a thorn in the flesh of Sir Robert Hicks and his *protege*, the Rector, stood by itself at the boundary of the parish. It was a dreary edifice enough, the villa-residences for the present holding aloof; but fields on either hand were marked out for building purposes, and black boards therein on tall poles called the attention of the rich and speculative to the admirable sites to be disposed of. A dreary lane, looking miserable and uninviting enough on this bleak November day, ran up one side of the chapel, and it was at the entrance to this lane that Kingston Keene stood as his wife came up. She silently bowed her head to him as he silently raised his hat, then turned into the muddy lane.

"Will you be good enough to come this way?" he said. "We shall not be interrupted here."

Miriam walked by his side in silence, her head well erect, an air of protest in her face, looking like a beautiful captive princess. He switched restlessly at the branches with his umbrella as he walked, a look of embarassment on his bronzed face, a huskiness in his voice when he began to speak.

"I have asked you to come," he said. "It seemed right to me that a few things should be settled between us. I have to thank you for complying with my request." She bowed her head; and, after a moment, he went on—"It was a surprise for me to see you last night—a very great surprise!"

"It was not a less one for me to see you," she interrupted. "I should not have been likely to seek to make a home here, had I known."

"And yet," he rejoined, "it was not such a very unlikely thing to contemplate that I might at one time or another visit my sister."

"And could I guess that Lady Hicks was your sister?" she asked hotly, resenting something in his tone. "A moment's thought will remind you that you never told me anything of yourself or your belongings. Your after-conduct proved that my antecedents were of importance to you—they were important enough for a pretext, at least; but you did not condescend to treat me as a rational being who might have possessed some interest in yours."

"When we, together, committed that mad act five years ago," he began, but she interrupted him.

"I beg your pardon, the madness was yours alone; I was sane enough. I simply did as I was told, as I had always done. The project was distasteful to me, as you must have known all along, although you pretended that the knowledge came upon you as a shock; but my feelings in the matter were not consulted, if you remember. My mother's consent was asked and given."

"Of course I must leave you your woman's privilege," he sneered. "You must make wild statements and use opprobrious epithets unreproved; but do not forget that something has to be said on my side—something!" he repeated, with a bitter laugh. "You were a child—granted; but not so much a child that you could not tell right from wrong, nor know the meaning of what you did; not too much of a child to have had lovers by the score, to have been jilted by them; not so much of a child that you did not know the meaning of the word 'adventuress'—and that your mother was—nor the meaning of the word 'convict'—and that your father was; not so childish nor so innocent but that you had learnt the art of making dupes, and you made one of me!"

All the little color natural to the girl's cheeks faded at the cruel words, leaving her face white as marble.

"As Heaven is my witness," she said, in trembling, solemn tones, "of that last disgrace of—of my father, I knew nothing until that fearful day—I knew no more than you! I knew that we had no money—my mother and I—that we were in debt, that we moved constantly from place to place, that—that I was to be married as the only chance of escape from such a life; the rest had mercifully been kept from me."

"And from me," he returned bitterly, "till I learned it all too late—thanks to your disappointed lover. And so you see the wrong is not all on your side. I was tricked—tricked into allying my honorable name with one that in every conceivable manner had been dragged through the dirt. I was to have been tricked into paying your mother's debts and spending my life with the daughter of a forger for my companion. I declined. Who could blame me? There is nothing for which I can blame myself. You spoke just now of your poverty—at least, I guarded you against that—I saved you and your mother too from the life you were leading. That you are fortunately, however mysteriously, circumstanced to be able now to dispense with all assistance from me is gratifying no doubt to you; but I am of course anxious to continue to do what is right in the matter."

"Thank you," she said, with ironical calm; "you are too liberal. Do not, however, imagine that the allowance to which you allude ever benefited me. Do you think that I would have touched your money," she cried, with sudden fire—"one farthing of it? My mother took what you gave; I could not help that; but I—I worked for my bread. I drudged for years in second-class schools until I had fitted myself for something better, for when you freed me from yourself you freed me from another bondage. I was a slave to my poor mother no more; I have been mistress of myself since then, and shall ever be. When you wrote to me just now that you 'insisted' on an interview, did you think that such a paltry show of authority would influence me? I came entirely of my free will—as, presently, I shall leave. I acknowledge no right of yours, and I fear no threat."

"Nevertheless," he remarked, "I must still ask you to answer one question which"—with a cold smile—"I fear I shall have to 'insist' on your answering. What are your means of support at present? At the second-class schools did you make your fortune, or—"

"Do not trouble to make any further conjectures," she interrupted quickly. "I have no objection in the world to tell you. My money—a few hundreds a year—came to me from a brother of my mother's, who refused to help us while he lived, for the same reason which induced you to turn your back on us when we were in trouble and needed help."

"And you selected Eastwick as a place of residence—not permanent, I imagine?"

"Why not? I have every intention of making it permanent."

"Eastwick," he said, "is hardly big enough to hold you and me at the same time. One of us, I think, will have to go" He spoke with intentional cruelty, his eyes fixed upon the darkening landscape. "One of us must go."

"Then it will not be I," she answered, with quick decision.

"Very good," he rejoined calmly. "In that case you leave me no choice."

The short dull day was nearly over, the daylight fading slowly from the sky. The wind had dropped unnoticed as they talked, a drizzling rain had come on. Mechanically Mr. Keene, having opened his umbrella, held it over his wife's preoccupied head; so, walking side by side, they regained the entrance of the lane. Here Miriam, looking about her for the first time, became conscious of the increasing darkness, of the down-falling rain.

"If that is all you have to say to me, I should be glad to be getting home," she said.

"I think I need trouble you no further," he replied; then, after a moment's hesitation—"It is dark and wet, and you have no umbrella; I will walk by your side, if you will allow me."

"I should not dream of allowing it," she answered shortly; and, bowing her head, partly to free it from the protecting umbrella, partly in farewell to Mr. Keene, she left his side and walked away quickly down the sloppy road.

It was well perhaps that she had something to take her mind from the dismalness of that return journey. There was not light enough to show her where to choose her way; the Newton road abounded in pit-falls in the shape of sloughs of slushy mud and pools of standing water; the rain came down in torrents now, running off her little sealskin hat in streams over her face. She hurried on, only dimly conscious of the discomfort, but unpleasantly conscious of the irritation caused by the regular tread of a footstep a couple of yards behind her. She hailed with delight the corner where this annoyance would cease, where she should turn off into the road leading to the Rectory, while he would still continue his straight course to Eastwick Park. This welcome spot was marked by a public-house—at what corner is there where human beings congregate which is not so distinguished? The lights from the windows and door streamed upon the road, illuminating for a space its mud and its puddles. As Miriam reached this patch of light half a dozen men, noisy and hilarious, came out. For a moment she was in the midst of this boisterous and swaggering group; then, seeing with dismay that they also bent their straggling steps in the direction of the lonely road she must pursue, she drew back, shrinking into the shadow for a moment; and in that moment Mr. Keene was again beside her.

"You are not frightened?" he questioned; and the instinctive desire to shield what was weak and defenceless had given an unconsciously softened tone to his voice. "I shall walk beside you for the rest of the way."

And so for that further half mile Miriam trudged through mud and rain at her husband's side, as though she had played Joan to his Darby for many a year. The path was narrow in many places, and he had to flounder in the gutter to give her the best of the way; she never demurred, that loftily repudiated umbrella now held carefully over her head was a signal of defeat to her; she did not try again to escape from its shelter; she was beaten, she told herself, unnerved, unstrung! The excitement of the interview she had gone through, now that it was over, began to tell on her. How could she be dignified in her present wet and cold and draggled condition? How could she attempt to assert the independence of her spirit when he had been a witness to the terror with which a handful of half-tipsy men had inspired her?

Mr. Keene could only catch glimpses now and again of the pale face beside him; but he noticed the short quick breath she drew, and understood the dejected droop of her head. In spite of his anger and unrelenting sense of injury, a feeling of pity and involuntary tenderness stirred anew at his heart as he walked by her side. A few paces from the Rectory gate they encountered Mr. Archer sallying forth at his wife's command to seek for Miriam, and Mr. Keene resigned her to his care.

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When next Miriam heard Mr. Keene's name mentioned, it was announced, amid some surprise, that he had left Eastwick Park, to the great disappointment of its inmates, and had betaken himself to London, where he had business which would detain him some little time. Two days after this news was conveyed to her she was at church, and it was somewhat of a shock to Miriam, in face of such welcome intelligence—having turned her head, at the sound of a firm footstep advancing up the aisle—to find Mr. Kingston Keene quietly taking his seat in the Eastwick pew. After that hurried glimpse of him, she looked no more, but was uncomfortably conscious all through the service of that embarrassing presence, all insufficiently separated from her by the intervening aisle—was troubled many times by the certainty that Mr. Keene's eyes were upon her.

"Why could he not have stayed away?" she asked herself, ashamed of her quickened heart-beats and her nervous self-consciousness. "He is right—there is not room in Eastwick for him and me."

Little Mrs. Archer was a good and tender-hearted woman, but she loved her ease and was a thought less devout than her indulgent husband would have preferred. Standing cloaked and bonneted by his side for afternoon service on that same Sunday, she looked a little enviously at Miriam lying back in a big chair, luxuriously at ease over the drawing-room fire.

I wonder James does not make you come to church as he makes me?" James's wife said, with a pout and a smile.

Miriam looked up, laughing, into the face of her pastor and master.

"He is wise enough not to strain his authority in my case," she said. "I am not his miserable down trodden wife, and, much as I delight in his eloquence, I should rebel at having to lend an attentive ear more than twice in one day. I shall have little Tommie down directly, and we will amuse ourselves after our usual artless Sunday afternoon fashion."

"Only don't make him ill with sweets, as you did last Sunday," the Reverend James stipulated, as he drew his wife away.

Miriam sat and dreamed on for another half hour, with a somewhat sad and troubled face, then aroused herself with a sigh, and ran up to the nursery. Tommie, a small and chubby urchin just promoted to knickerbockers, ran to her at once, and caught at her dress.

"Tommie go down with Mim," he announced, while a fat cherub of a year-old baby drew attention to itself by much infantine crowing. Miriam caught her up in her arms, cuddling the little head against her own neck as she carried her down stairs, while master Tommie, clinging to her dress, conscientiously bringing down both fat short legs on to every stair, remarked aggrievedly that—

"Baby were a bad girl. Her naughtn't to cry, and to want to come down with Mim, because her were only a baby—her weren't Mim's dear little Tommie, were he?"

Those Sunday afternoons spent in uninterrupted enjoyment of Mim's society, with leave to play with her watch and the big pocket at her throat, to search her pocket for the sweeties which always lurked there, were times of intensest enjoyment to Tommie. To-day his pleasure was a good deal marred by the uncalled for presence of baby, who had, as yet, he considered, no claim to the enjoyment of life. He eyed her discontentedly as she sat sucking her fingers and placidly staring at the blaze of the fire from the shelter of Mim's arm. That was his place on a Sunday afternoon, as baby ought to have known, and "Her's greedy!" he declared, with a grieved quiver of his lips, when the intruder made it evident she would not consent to be ousted from that pleasant resting place. Then Miriam kissed the sweet trembling mouth, and made room for him beside her in the big arm chair.

The three of them made a pretty picture sitting there—Miriam in her black dress, her dark silky hair a little ruffled, the fire playing upon broad bands of gold at her throat and wrists, the children's curly flaxen heads nestled against her.

"Tommie wants a song?" the little man announced presently—"not a Sunday song, not a hymn."

So Miriam, in her rich sad voice, sang softly to him all the nursery rhymes—not a few—that she could remember. Tommie was a quiet and appreciative listener. Baby, from the soothing effect of the singing, or of the finger she incessantly sucked, had fallen asleep, when there came a ring at the door, Miriam stopped for a moment.

"Who can that be, Tommie? Some one to see nurse, I expect."

But Tommie was impatient.

"Go on," he said—"go on! You hasn't sung me that about the pig yet—that little pig what left his mummie."

"'Where are you going to you little pig?'" began Miriam, singing Tom Hood's words to an improvised tune of her own. This tragedy of the pig was given in a manner which thrilled Tommie always.

Neither Miriam nor he heard the door open, nor noticed that some one stood for half a minute earnestly regarding that group by the fire, imprinting a picture on his memory that he would never forget, that he was to look at many a time afterwards with such a pang of longing and regret as his heart had never before known.

"'The butcher is coming, I've grown so big,'" sang Miriam, in tragic accents of woe, they broke off suddenly, with a start which woke the child in her arms and made Tommie cling closer to her.

Had the butcher really come? he wondered, looking with terror at the strange man who stood before him, putting out a hand to Miriam, which she could not or would not take. Instead, grasping the children, she rose from her chair, and moved towards the door.

"Do not go," said Mr. Keene; and Miriam, hesitating, looked him questioningly in the face, while baby, having inspected the stranger, broke into a loud wail, hiding her face on Miriam's breast. "I find that there is still a word I must say to you—you must suffer me to say it now."

Then Miriam rang the bell, and gave the child into the nurse's arms, Tommie, as he was led from the room commenting loudly on his sister's behavior.

"Her's a coward!" he declared, as he trotted off. "Tommie's not a coward; Tommie'll take care o' Mim."

Miriam's face had grown pale; but she spoke with ordinary quiet self possession, standing proudly before her husband, looking with unwavering glance into his face.

"I had hoped that we had had our last interview," she said. "Is it not possible that you can spare me this?"

"No," he answered, "it is not possible," then he paused a moment. "Will you not sit down?" he asked; but Miriam shook her head, standing erect and proud and fearless before him.

"Since I saw you," he began presently, speaking with some hesitation and even nervousness, "I have thought a great deal over things which you said. I have reviewed the circumstances of the case, all that took place five years ago. I have always told myself that I acted then in the only way in which it was possible for me, for any honorable man to act; but—I don't know—you have also your way of looking at matters, and I would not wish to have done you a wrong. My impulse was naturally to save my name from dishonor and my life from a too probable disgrace. I still think the action defensible, although it may have been, as I now see, an action fraught with more terrible importance, both to you and me, than I have ever somehow considered it before."

He paused a moment; she was still standing before him, regarding him with the same unwavering eyes.

"I have said all that I have to say on the subject," she replied coldly. "It seems to me as unnecessary as it is unpleasant to open it all up again."

"But I have told you that I had yet something to say." He turned slightly from her as he spoke, and, leaning on one hand on the mantelpiece, looked down into the fire; then he asked—"Will you come to me now? You are my wife; will you share my life, and my fortunes as my wife should?"

She made no answer—she was silent through utter surprise. He looked up from the fire and turned to her again, the nervousness gone from his voice and manner. He held out his hand to her.

"Never she replied, through white but firm lips. "I say never! How could you suppose for one moment that I should consent to that? For what manner of woman do you take me? Don't you know that I would rather be dead than your wife now, that I would sooner kill myself?" Then, he remained silent, she gave a little scornful laugh, and spoke in a lighter tone. "Besides, you are not in earnest," she went on; "you have not sufficiently counted the cost. This is the day of my prosperity certainly, and that was the day of my necessity and helplessness; but I am still the daughter of my mother, remember, and the daughter of my father. You would still run the risk of sullying that honorable name of yours. And—and trouble might come again—some one might vilify and slander me once more—who knows? When once you had owned me as your wife, it might not be so easy for you to turn your back on me, to slink away and leave me to bear the burden alone. No; you have not properly considered the risk you run, Mr. Keene."

His face had grown almost as white as hers; the hand which had lain on the mantelshelf grasped the marble now with an unconscious powerful grip; his voice was hoarse when he spoke.

"Is that your final answer?" he asked.

"Final, though you asked me every day of your life on your knees for thirty years," she answered.

"I shall not do that. But you are aware perhaps that, if it were worth my while—if I liked, I could compel you to consent to my proposal."

"I do not believe it," she said calmly. "Laws are to protect liberty, not to ensure oppression. And if it were not so—if I failed with the tale which I should tell to prove my right, in spite of any law, to keep myself as far as might be free from you—why, then, as I said, I would kill myself—that is all."

And she meant it. The man knew that full well, looking at the proud fearless eyes, listening to the passionate scorn of her voice.

"No," she went on more calmly, "I cannot be forced to live with you, and you cannot be forced to let me go entirely free. I know so much of the laws of the land."

"Of the latter part of your assertion you have probably assured yourself?" he remarked suspiciously.

For the first time she turned away her eyes from him, and a rush of color stained the pale face.

"The matter was inquired into for me," she said. "There is no reason that I should not tell you that."

At sight of that suddenly crimsoned face he started upright, his hands clinched, his blood on fire with the hitherto unguessed at madness of jealousy. He waited a moment to control his voice.

"Some gentleman probably prosecuted those inquiries?"

At the sneering tone, she lifted her eyes again calmly to his face, and answered deliberately—

"Exactly! You are right; he was a—gentleman."

"And supposing that I had been dead, or the law had been more complasant?"

"In that case I should have been his wife now."

The look which came into his face nearly daunted her for a moment.

"How dare you tell me this?" he asked, suppressed fury in his voice. "How dare you?"

Why should I not dare? Of what should I be afraid? But, having told you so much, I will tell you more, that, when once it was found to be impossible, when once we knew that I must for my life or yours be bound to you, he—this man to whom you grudge the title of gentleman—and I said farewell for ever. We know how to accept the inevitable. He would have died rather than have run the risk of causing fresh trouble to me."

"Confound him!" Kingston Keene said, through clenched teeth. "Confound him!"

Miriam looked at him, infinite contempt in her eye.

"He anathematised you," she said bitterly—"perhaps with better cause."

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

The Engineer's Story of the Brakeman.

Several years ago I was running a fast express. One night we were three hours behind time, and if there's anything in the world I hate it's to finish a run behind schedule. These grade crossings of one-horse roads are nuisances to the trunk lines, and we had a habit of failing to stop, merely slackening up for 'em. At one crossing I had never seen a train at that time of night, and so I rounded the curve out of the cut at full tilt. I was astonished to see that a freight train was standing right over the crossing, evidently intending to put a few cars on our switch. I gave the danger whistle and tried to stop my train, but I had seven heavy sleepers on, and we just slid down that grade spite of everything I could do. Quicker than I can tell you the brakesman on that freight train uncoupled a car just back of our crossing and signalled his engineer to go ahead, which he did sharply, but barely in time to let us through. In fact, the pilot of my engine took the buffer off the rear car. Through that little hole we slipped, and lives and property were saved. Now, the brakesman was only a common railroader, yet saw that situation at a glance. There wasn't time to run his whole train off the crossing, nor even half of it—barely time to pull up one car length by prompt, quick work. He kept his wits about him as, I venture to say, not one man in a hundred would have done, and saved my reputation, if not my life. He is now a division superintendent on one of the best roads in this country.