

MIRIAM.

CHAPTER II.—CONTINUED.

Mr. Keene was silent for a while, wrestling with himself, striving to keep down a question which, in spite of himself, would rise to his lips, and which burst forth at last.

"You—love this man?" he questioned hoarsely.

"I do not see that I need answer that question," she returned calmly. "I should have married him thankfully had it not been for you." She paused for an instant, and then, as if in spite of herself, went on—"He was an angel of goodness to me," she said, "a thrill of deep feeling in her voice. He came to me when I was hopeless and penniless and friendless—"

"Penniless?" Mr. Keene interrupted—"penniless?"

"Yes, penniless. He comforted and helped me, and—thanks to you—I had to give him the worst trouble of his life in return. He thought that I was free to marry when he asked me to be his wife, and I had to tell him all my dismal tale. He—who would not submit, he could not believe in such a cruel fate; but it was too hard for him."

"And why—why do you tell this thing to me?"

"Why? That you may be doubly sure of the uselessness of such a request as that you have made to me to-day. Why do I tell you? I will tell you more. It may be beneficial to you to contrast his conduct with your own. He, this man who loved me, attended my mother in her last illness—he is a clever and successful London doctor—and when I, who had left the school where I was working for my bread, fell ill too, he attended me. What money my mother had was spent to pay her bills and for her funeral—had there been thousands, I would not have touched it—it was yours; but there was nothing left. The little salary I had drawn went in the first week of my illness; and then he, my doctor, learnt that I was penniless and without a friend in the world. He sent me nurses, he supplied me for many weeks with every comfort and luxury, he gave me his constant care; and, when I could listen to him, he asked me—begged me—me, friendless, moneyless, unknown—to be his wife. Then what a tale I had to tell him! I believe him to be one of the noblest men that walk the earth; but he cursed you, then. I did not beg for mercy on you. It seemed to me that you merited the contempt of all good men."

Kingston Keene answered her, as she finished, with a short laugh.

"Their contempt will not hurt me," he said. "I ought to thank you, I suppose, for your confidence, for entrusting me with the interesting tale of how you, the wife of a man, were thwarted in your desire to marry another—I ought to thank you, and I do. Such a woman, it is plain, is not the kind of person I would care to share my home and my life. Be sure that I will not trouble you with a repetition of my request. That is all, I think, which remains to be said; and I will go."

"Will you?" he asked. "Will you, Miriam? Let us obliterate these empty years we have spent alone—I have been as lonely as you—let us begin again together. What do you say?"

But, before he reached the door, Miriam knew by the sound of familiar voices in the hall that the Archers had returned.

"You had better wait a moment, if you please," she said rather hurriedly. "You can explain your presence as you think best; and so, with a whispered word of 'the children' to Mrs. Archer as she passed her at the door, Miriam escaped, and left Mr. Keene to the hospitable cares of the Reverend James and his wife."

"What an odd thing for him to call to bid us 'good-bye' in the middle of a Sunday afternoon, when he might have known we were at church!" said Mrs. Archer to her husband, a quarter of an hour later. "And did you ever hear of anything so mad as his rushing back to Jamaica in this ridiculous fashion?"

"He is a most estimable person," answered her charitable husband, "and his sister's devotion to him is—really touching; but he certainly does appear to have odd manners."

Meanwhile Mr. Keene, standing on the gravel sweep, sheltered by the fast-increasing gloom of that winter's afternoon, looked up at the windows of the house he had left.

"Then that is over," he was thinking. "I have done what appeared to me to be my duty—I have offered to make restitution, if I owed it, and it is over. Very good. Better so—better, I am sure, for me. I am too old to bring such a change into my life, and the risk is tremendous. Better so!"

Repeating this phrase many times, as though to impress it on his memory, he turned away. But, before the rectory was quite hidden from view, he halted, stood irresolute a moment, and then retraced his steps. The window of the room he had just left glowed with the firelight within; he approached it, treading softly on the grass border, and looked in. Mrs. Archer, still in her out door dress, was standing on the hearth rug talking to her husband. Keene heard the sound of her voice as she chattered to him, although the words did not reach him, and her light laughter fell with a discordant sound on his ear, not attuned to mirth to-night. His eyes wandered over the fire-lit cosy room in search of one other form, and came back unsatisfied to the two on the rug.

"Go and get off your bonnet," Mr. Archer was saying imperatively, "and let me have some tea."

But, before she turned slowly to obey him, he put out a hand and drew his wife close to him and kissed her.

The man at the window turned away

quickly, with a grim smile and a curious sudden pain at his heart.

"When we part—my wife and I—we do not find it necessary to exchange caresses," he said to himself, "although we part for ever! I wish it had pleased my lady to come down, that I might have seen her once again before I go; but it is as well—the sooner she is forgotten the better—please Heaven it will be no heavy matter for me!"

Then, as he walked down the dark and quiet road, his thoughts wandered off to old times. He saw again the girl with the foreshadowings of the beauty now so amply fulfilled, he remembered the gray eyes, identical with those so cold and proud, which had met his so short a time ago, but widely different in their timid veiled expression, eyes which then had power to quicken his blood and to madden his brain, and to cause him to commit the one great act of folly which had come near to ruin his life. He saw her shrinking from him and his wild caresses, he saw her nervously obedient, humbly subservient to her mother and to him—he saw her white and deathlike face, the appealing terror in her eyes as she sank at his feet by the altar steps—saw it as he had seen full many a time since then in his dreams—and then again there came to him a vision, but recently beheld, but henceforth never to be effaced from his memory, of a beautiful woman who, lying back in her chair, sang very softly to the children in her arms.

CHAPTER III.

During the mists and fogs of that damp November, Mr. Archer caught a cold which settled on his lungs, and from the effects of which he seemed unable to rid himself. In spite of the anxiety of his wife and household, he would not be prevailed on to take proper care of himself, but would go out in all weathers to visit the sick or sorrowful, and would persist in attending certain evening-classes just established, and at that time very near his heart. So from relapse to relapse he fell, till his wife grew frantic with terror, and lost heart through her own impotence to control the man. At last Sir Robert Hick, whose word at Eastwick, at least, was law, came to her aid, and declared that for a month or so the Rectory should be compelled to rest. To this effect it was necessary to remove him from the scene of his labors; and to this end he was compelled to accept the loan of a house at Bournemouth belonging to Sir Robert, and to which he and his family occasionally resorted, where it was hoped the enforced idleness and the milder climate might work a beneficial effect. The Rectory was shut up, the children and servants going with the Archers, and Lady Hicks, who had planned everything which Sir Robert had proposed, finally carried off Mrs. King to pass with the family at Eastwick Park the period of the Archers' absence.

Miriam had stood out stoutly against this kindly proposition for some time; she would fain have kept the Hickses at a distance, if that could have been possible, but was obliged to yield at last. For one thing, unless she accompanied the Archers—about whom she had a feeling that, at such a time, drawn closer than ever to each other by the fear of a possible separation, they would be happier left to each other—she had nowhere to go. She knew—for she had cause to know—the difficulties and unpleasantness attending a young and handsome woman who goes unprotected and unattended to a fresh neighborhood. She had little desire to renew that old experience. Mr. Archer advised, his wife implored, Lady Hicks persisted; Mr. Keene was on his lonely way to Jamaica. It was, after all, the easiest course open to her; and she desperately wanted to do easy things for the rest of her life—she was so weary of fighting and struggling alone. And so it came to pass that she went, and in a few days had made an easy conquest of the household. Sir Robert, used to dumpy and insignificant-looking women around him, was never tired of admiring his pompous politeness before this beautiful woman, who accepted it with such queenly ease. Lady Hicks was proud of the new attraction her house boasted, and was anxious to gather her friends around her to display the quite uncommon treasure she had discovered. Ella, the only daughter, a somewhat gushing but generous and unselfish girl, raved about her new friend, hung on Miriam's words, and even round her neck sometimes, copied quite frankly her dress and the manner in which her hair was worn, and delightfully took lessons from her in singing. Miriam found the adulation wearisome at times; but she was so unused to feel herself of much importance that, as a rule, the new sensation pleased her.

She found the abundant interest which kindly Lady Hicks had at her command now pretty evenly divided between the reports from Bournemouth of Mr. Archer's progress, and so much as was known to her of the movements of her only brother. Miriam was joint recipient with Ella of the manifold conjectures and surmises arising from inefficient knowledge in the case of the latter.

"It is so vexing to me," Lady Hicks said, "to think that all this time he has been wasting over his tiresome business in London he ought to have spent with us. When he took leave in that hurried way I thought he sailed at once, but a month is gone and he is still here. Sir Robert however tells me that the vessel in which he is really to sail starts to-morrow. It does seem heartless, don't you think, that we should be having all those people to-morrow, and should be so happy in welcoming Bob home, and my only brother—in this wretched weather too—tossing on the wide sea."

"Why, dear mother," Ella remarked, laughing, "uncle Kingston is the very last to want us to mourn on his account. And although, for my part, I am sorry he should go away, still one can't forget

that if he had wished he could have stayed, could he not now, mother? He meant to stay for months when he came, and he got tired of us in about three days."

"My dear," her mother answered, "you know nothing about my brother Kingston; he has known what great sorrow and disappointment are. He may not be judged as may more fortunate men."

Ella turned to Miriam. "You know," she said, with solemnly lowered voice, "uncle Kingston is married—isn't that dreadful?"

"Dreadful!" acquiesced Miriam, with a quite natural shudder. "But then he is not singular in that misfortune. Many people are married."

"Ella is not deploring the fact of his marriage, you see," explained Lady Hicks, seriously, "but the peculiar misfortune attending it. There is no reason why you should not be told. My dear, he actually parted from his wife at the church door."

Miriam was sitting over the fire in the dark with the other ladies, waiting for tea to be brought in, when this was told her. Ella, lying on the hearth-rug at her feet, turned and laid her arms across her new friend's knees, looking up into her face to watch the effect there of this startling disclosure. She looked for signs of surprise and dismay. She could not understand the sudden light of appeal which came into the deep gray eyes she was watching.

"Ah, do not tell me!" Miriam said. "Dear Lady Hicks, I do not want to hear. I have my own trouble—do not tell me!"

Ella laid down her soft cheek consolingly on the white hands which trembled a little on Mrs. King's lap.

"It is nothing to recall your own trouble, my dear," the elder lady said. "He did not lose his wife—poor Kingston—so mercifully as—as you lost—not by death. He found that she was unworthy."

Ella lying against her felt the shiver which passed through Mrs. King's frame at the words.

"I hope uncle Kingston is sure," she said, a doubt of the infallibility of his judgment arising for the first time in her mind. "Some one might have fibbed, mother. It would be a horrid thing if he left this poor girl, and after all he had no just cause for doing so."

Miriam released one hand from under the girl's cheek, and gently smoothed Ella's hair with it.

"My dear, there was no mistake," replied the mother, with sad conviction. "Kingston, in such a vital matter, would satisfy every doubt, you may be sure. No; everything was proved up to the very hilt."

"And was that—the unworthiness all her own, or was it the unworthiness of others—of her parents, perhaps?" Miriam asked a little unsteadily.

"Her own—her own entirely," she was assured, and felt for the moment a sense of gratitude towards Mr. Keene for his reticence.

"I wonder," Ella observed, after a pause, "if uncle Kingston remembers—if he thinks of her, or even regrets her, perhaps."

"You may be sure he remembers," answered Lady Hicks. "He will not speak of his misfortune even to me; but each time that I look into his eyes I know that he remembers. I believe that he deeply loved this miserable woman."

"Oh no!" Miriam cried to this with eager haste. "Oh, no!"

"You think not? He is cold and passionless now! but that is the result of self-repression; he was not always so. His conduct throughout, the rashness of this unhappy marriage, proves to me he must have madly loved this girl. There was, however, something he loved more, his honor and the stainlessness of his name. He does not enlarge to me upon his griefs; but I have not fallen into the error of ignoring them. I know too well what he must have suffered."

"She—the woman—probably suffered too," Miriam said softly. "You have not heard two sides of the question, Lady Hicks. Be sure she had her grievances too."

"Poor uncle Kingston!" laughed Ella. "Picture him, Mrs. King, with blighted hopes and a broken heart and lifelong regrets!—uncle Kingston with his sturdy frame and copper-colored face and hair! I do hope that heavy, heavy moustache of his is not going to turn gray too; it really is the only interesting thing about him."

"Poor boy!" sighed Lady Hicks. "My poor old playfellow and protector and friend—poor Kingston! To think that that curly hair of his should be turning gray, that he should be getting quite—quite old, that he should be alone!"

Great excitement prevailed at Eastwick Park when Bob—the only son—came home from college for good, to be enrolled at once as partner in the great brewing firm, henceforth to be known as that of "Hicks and Son."

He was not a bad-looking or a bad dispositioned young fellow, considering how he had been feted and spoiled industriously from his babyhood. He was a little free with his money—but what could one expect?—and there was plenty of it—a little self-conceited—which was inevitable—as little unbearable generally as is possible to only sons of rich parents. Such as he was his mother, at least, adored him, and looked up into his face now admiringly as he stood on the rug in the room which was always set apart as "Bob's Study." Not many signs of study were apparent—mostly signs of hunting, shooting proclivities. Bob, standing with his back to the fire, a big cigar between his beardless lips, was surveying with complacency the many adornments of his walls.

"There are some people coming to-night to welcome you, dear," his mother said to him fondly.

"Old lot, I suppose?" queried Bob

indifferently. "They are a slow lot of duffers, mother; I should have made myself at home without their welcome. Any one staying in the house?"

"Your cousins came to-day, dear, and Mrs. King is with us."

"And who the dickens is Mrs. King?"

Then it was explained to him that Mrs. King was a lady living with the Archers, and staying at the park in their absence.

"Ah, how is the old boy?" Rob inquired with polite interest in his mother's pet parson; and so the conversation drifted.

An hour later the ladies of the party were taking tea in the—at present—but dimly-lighted drawing-room.

"The gentlemen do not honor us," one of them said.

"Rob is entertaining his cousins in his study," Ella explained. "Boys always have such a vast amount of important things to say to each other, and they are so 'mum' when we are present. I don't know what papa can be doing, or why he does not come."

Just then papa's voice was heard outside the door.

"Agatha is here," he said. "She will be so pleased—come in."

Then the door was opened and two gentlemen appeared, dusky and dimly seen beyond the pleasant gleam of the firelight.

"Here is a surprise for you, Agatha," one of them—Sir Robert—said.

"Ah, who is it?" Lady Hicks cried, dropping her tea-cup hastily and standing up.

"It is only I, Agatha," replied a quiet voice she knew, and she sprang forward joyously.

"Kingston, how good of you—how glad I am!" she cried, and she put her two hands on his shoulder, and lifted her face for his kiss. "How good of you!" she repeated, almost crying. "I thought I had seen the last of you; and I have been so unhappy."

"Uncle Kingston!" Ella exclaimed gaily, coming forward, "how splendid of you to come in time for to-night."

Mr. Keene patted and kissed the girl's cheek.

"Why 'to-night,' little one?" he asked and turned to shake hands with two other girls who greeted him. "I can scarcely see you," he said, laughing.

"It is Milly and Blanche," their aunt explained. "And, Kingston, you know Mrs. King? She is staying with us for a time."

Mr. Keene made a step forward, and took Miriam's reluctant hand in his.

"You mentioned in your last letter that she was here," he said to his sister. "Your husband made a mistake, Agatha; there is still a week before I sail. I thought I would run down and see you all once again. And why is it, Ella, that I have been so peculiarly fortunate in hitting on to-night for my arrival?"

Then Ella, with her arm in his, began eagerly to explain to him how Rob was home, and how to-night there was to be a "young" dinner-party, and a little dance after it—the very first dance of this year—in the midst of which Mrs. King, almost unobserved, left the room.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

On the Nile.

At evening, when the sun has sunk in ruddy splendor behind the grey desert hills, every prospect pleases on the Nile. Then the dingy yellow river is touched by ruddy reflections of the after-glow, and the waves rippling under sombre shadows of the brown banks have a purple sheen on them. The long level stretches where crops are just beginning are a vivid green. Dark belts of palm, the feathery fronds of which are swayed slowly by the breeze, stand out clearly against the sky. Between their tall shafts one sees the ridge of a distant mountain range, above which the orange light is barred and blurred by dusky belts, where dust rises from the desert. The warm golden tints fade to pale chrome, and then flush through many gradations into rosette hues and die away into the deep blue studded with stars overhead. Every now and then the darker tints are brightened by faint throbs of ruddy bright until the after-glow disappears and in its place the crescent moon, sinking low towards the western hills, throws a flood of light across the broad Nile Valley. To a lover of animate nature there is something of interest at every bend of the river, and the varieties of birds especially seems to increase rapidly as we go on. Buff-backed herons are not so plentiful as in the lagoons of the inundated Delta, but the black-headed plovers are, and the spur-winged plover may be seen fitting under the hollow bank. Kingfishers, black and white, and green and blue, dart across the water. Hoopoes hover about tamarisk and mimosa, myriads of blue rock circle in clouds above every village. Kestrels innumerable pose themselves on apparently motionless wings high above the maize; vultures gorged by gluttony and hopping heavily about with wings outstretched, cranes, and the great Dalmatian pelican may be seen on distant sandbanks. Here and there a great Dom Palm, with its crown of aloë-like spikes, reminds us that we are within the region formerly frequented by crocodiles, but we fail to see any sign of them yet. Probably the incursion of many steamboats has driven them away to more secluded quarters.

Old Judge Saunders is a great brag and has told about a dozen different stories in regard to the weight of a certain big catfish that he caught. A friend, trying to entrap him, asked: "Judge, what was the precise weight of that big fish you caught?" Judge Saunders (to colored waiter): "I say, Bob, what did I say yesterday that catfish weighed?" "What was yesterday, boss—in de mawning, at dinner-time, or after supper?"

A Good Telephone Story.

They tell a capital telephone story in Antwerp. A merchant had an instrument fitted between his house and his office, and shortly after this was finished, being one day at home with a slight indisposition, a friend called on a matter of business. To him the merchant showed the telephone, and in course of time he took his departure. Now, on leaving the mansion, the visitor detected a strong smell of beef and onions issuing from the kitchen, and on his way down the Bourse he planned a wicked little scheme, which he communicated to half a dozen congenial spirits upon 'Change. Within the next half-hour the merchant was summoned six times to the telephone to speak to six different people in his office, and every one of them ended his message with a wish that the beef and onions might be satisfactory. The following week when, fully recovered, the merchant was among his friends again, he told all of them a story of the wonders of his new instrument, the telephone. "Not only can we hear each other's voices," said he, "but last Friday everybody who spoke to me at my house could smell the beefsteak and onions that were preparing for my dejeuner!"

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