

The True Witness.

AND

CATHOLIC CHRONICLE.

VOL. XXI.

MONTREAL, FRIDAY, JULY 28, 1871.

NO. 50.

MIRIAM'S THREE CHANCES.

CHAPTER III.—CHANCE THE THIRD. —(Continued.)

"Yes," explained Miriam, "quite settled for a month or two at all events, and we are in St. John's Park. I am sure mamma will be very glad to see you, Captain Loftus."

Miriam could not avoid this conventional sentence, although she well knew that if there was one person in the world whom her mother cordially disapproved and disliked, it was that forward, fascinating, penniless Captain Loftus. "Depend upon it," said he, "I shall take the earliest opportunity of paying my respects to Mrs. Crewe and her charming daughter. I am not staying at Ryde. I am quartered at Parkhurst, but I shall come in as often as ever I can."

Miriam walked home with a queer feeling at her heart. This was one of her quondam loves. It had never come to anything because he was poor, but he had said all that a poor man could say—told her she was the angel of the cloud too far above his head ever to reach—told her he was afraid of being in her society—implored her to impute his backwardness to the right motive—said his lips were sealed and his hands tied.

What then could he mean by this delight at meeting her?—this eager jumping at her casual invitation? There was a moment's consultation with herself, and then she saw it all.

"Oh, of course—he has heard of my engagement. Poor, dear fellow, how well he has behaved!" she said; and she walked home, not knowing whether she was happy or miserable.

But Mrs. Crewe? The turning up of this dreadful young man at this crucial moment was more vexatious than words could possibly express. She stormed, she scolded; she gave orders to say "Not at home," and she issued a thousand stringent directions to Miriam as to her conduct; but Miriam listened in silence, with tight lips and a blanched cheek. Whatever her mother might say, she was determined to see Captain Loftus when he called—yes, even if she lived in the garden, which commanded the high road—from morning till night; for, in spite of her position, there was an evil spirit whispering at her ear. "He is worth a dozen of Rice Curry."

And so it happened that, when he called, Miriam actually was in the garden. Mrs. Crewe closeted with the legal adviser of the family, feeling safe from intrusion by having given the order of "Not at home" to the servants. And so Miriam met the captain at the garden gate, and they sat out in the shrubberies, and never a word did she breathe as to the existence of a Sir Rice Curry.

"Mamma has a friend with her from London on business," she said. "I must not take you indoors to-day; you must come some other day."

And he was only too glad of the opportunity; but he had come over that day on a special mission. His regiment was going to give a dance, and he wanted Mrs. and Miss Crewe to grace it. Would they let him send them tickets? And Miriam, as she said good-bye to him at the garden gate, accepted the invitation. Whatever her mother or Sir Rice might say, she was determined to go to the ball; but here, again, she was silent till the next day, when the tickets arrived.

"Out of the question," said Mrs. Crewe, tossing them aside. "In your present position, Miriam, you could not possibly go to a military ball. I am only surprised at Captain Loftus asking such a thing."

Mrs. Crewe evidently took it for granted that her daughter had told the young man how she was situated, or else thought everybody must know it. At all events, there was the usual war of words between the two, and it ended by Miriam's gaining her own way, and they went.

All that evening, in the brilliantly lighted ball-room, Mrs. Crewe sat on thorns. Although she knew that Sir Rice was in town, she kept giving terrified looks every moment towards the door, as if expecting to see him come in with every guest. Had he done so, Mrs. Crewe would have wished the earth to open and swallow her up, for Miriam was playing her usual game with Captain Loftus, and they looked much more like an engaged couple than over Miriam and Sir Rice had done. And in good truth, the young man was pouring all sorts of adulation into the pleased ear of his listener, and Mrs. Crewe lost sight of them entirely after every dance.

"Oh Miriam, Miriam!" she thought to herself, "you must be mad to be going on in this way with that penniless young officer!" Seated next to Mrs. Crewe, passing the weary hours away in the same state of listless chaperonage, was a lady with whom Mrs. Crewe had some slight acquaintance, and they began talking of garrison society and its dangers.

"The worst of it is," said the lady, "it is so very attractive. It spoils the girl for every other ball, and yet in this throng of young men I don't suppose I could point out half a dozen who could afford to marry!" Captain Loftus of course is a brilliant exception; but— "If Captain Loftus," said Mrs. Crewe, with

a little laugh, is the best party in the room, all the rest must be utter mendicants!"

"You cannot then have heard of his late piece of good fortune?" said the lady, looking a little surprised.

"Indeed I have not," returned Mrs. Crewe, "for I really know but very little of him."

The lady smiled a little spitefully. "Had it been at the beginning of the London season instead of the end," said she, "I should think it would have made a sensation, it was such a romance. There lived near Freshwater an old man who was his aunt's widower, and Captain Loftus was always kind and attentive to him, without an idea of his being anything but invalided, solitary and poor. Two months ago this old man died, and they say that in the old chest they have found deeds and documents proving him possessed of nearly a quarter of a million of money, every farthing of which he has left to Captain Loftus!"

Mrs. Crewe's breath seemed actually to stop. "I know it's all true," pursued the lady; "besides, he is just going to sell out; and when I congratulated him the other night he laughed and said he didn't know whether he should be any happier with all his heap of money than he was when his mess bill used to put him all in a tremble for want of funds to meet them."

A little later in the evening this lady found another friend, and told her of her conversation with Mrs. Crewe.

"I cannot say that I much care for Mrs. Crewe," she said; "but I thought considering how conspicuous the daughter was making herself, and how agonized the maternal countenance was, that I had better let her know he was worth having."

"Not much use," laughed her friend, for Miss Crewe is engaged to Sir Rice Curry, the Indian millionaire."

"Impossible," said the lady, "and going on in that way with poor young Loftus! Now I call that abominable!"

One hour later, and when the Crewees were gone, this lady was espied by Captain Loftus, whose attraction in the ball-room seemed now quite over, and he asked her to have some supper. "Delighted," said she, and off she tripped with him; and after a plate of chicken and tongue and two glasses of champagne, her heart expanded towards the youth, and she told him confidentially of Miriam's approaching marriage with Sir Rice Curry. Captain Loftus leant back in his chair and his face grew livid.

"Are you perfectly certain?" he stammered, with quivering lips.

"As sure as I sit here," was the reply.—"The lady who told me was staying in the same house with her for the Goodwood Races, and she heard the marriage announced by Sir Rice Curry himself."

"By Sir who?" cried the captain.

"Sir Rice Curry," replied the lady.

"By Jove, how good!" he cried, bursting into a roar of laughter. "Why, she has been killing me the whole evening with anecdotes of the old tiger eater, and makes the greatest fun of him you ever heard!"

"Don't you believe her then," said his companion; "she's fooling thee, my dear Captain Loftus. There is not a soul in Ryde who cannot tell you it is true, and a few days ago the family lawyer came down from London to Mrs. Crewe's on purpose to arrange the settlements."

Captain Loftus's countenance changed again, and the ashen hue came over his face. He remembered that day in the garden with Miriam, when she said that her mother had a friend with her, and that he must come and see her another day. He drew in his lips very tight, and the room seemed to swing round him. He seized the champagne and tossed off glass, but still the leaden hue remained upon his face. There was an ice-bolt on his heart, and it seemed to him as if its warmth could never return again.

"I am sorry for you, captain," whispered the lady by his side, "but she isn't worth it." And if those many eyes could ever have shed burning tears, they would have fallen then. * * * * *

The next morning Miriam was late at breakfast. Mrs. Crewe sat waiting for her in some anxiety, nor was she the least astonished when, as her daughter at last took her seat opposite to her at the table, she said with a slight tremor in her voice, "Mamma, I have something to say to you."

Mrs. Crewe thought it expedient to put on a severe face. "After your conduct last night," she said, "I am not surprised;" and she paused.

"Yes," continued Miriam, "you will be angry of course, and I dare say you have just cause, but I am old enough now to know my own mind, and it is fully made up on a subject which very nearly concerns my happiness. I am determined not to marry Sir Rice Curry, and the sooner you undeceive him as to the sentiments I hold towards him, the better for both of us."

"And you are resigning this brilliant position, I conclude, in favor of—"

"One quite as brilliant," interrupted Miriam. "Captain Loftus has long cared for me, and I like him better than Sir Rice Curry. Captain Loftus had hitherto been prevented by circumstances from marrying; but now that he has three thousand a year and a nice home in this beautiful island, he has asked me to be his wife."

"Sir Gilbert Acres was a richer man," murmured Mrs. Crewe.

"He never did me the honor to ask me," said Miriam.

"Your own fault, Miriam," said her mother. "You had the chance."

"Well, I prefer the chance now offered to me," retorted Miriam; "so I hope, mamma, you will write to Sir Rice without a moment's delay. At half-past two, Captain Loftus proposes calling on you."

Mrs. Crewe said nothing, but rose and left the room. It was no use arguing with Miriam, no use placing before her the odium attached to the character of a jilt; if her mind was made up, no power on earth would change it; and so Mrs. Crewe bowed before the necessity, and quietly went off to write her letter, painful and humiliating as she felt the task to be.

There was but one small lump of sugar in this bitter cup, and that was Captain Loftus's wealth, by which Miriam's fate in the great balance of life was equalized. Had he been a poor man, nothing would have induced Mrs. Crewe to have given way. She would have telegraphed to Sir Rice and washed her hands of Captain Loftus. She would not have said "Not at home" to him; no, she would have seen him, and placed before him the enormity of his conduct, and then have chassed him for ever. But he was rich.

"Miriam must marry somebody," she argued. "She will wear my life out if she goes on in this way; so the sooner I place her in a husband's hands the better; and, after all, the man is suitable, though I cannot say he was ever one of my favorites. However, she has not done so badly for herself, and Sir Rice, with all his advantages, was certainly a little too old for her."

With thoughts like these, Mrs. Crewe sat down to pen the dismissal of Sir Rice Curry, and then rose to calm her spirits and seat herself in state to receive the promised visit of Captain Loftus.

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Miriam's three chances! Has she had them all? Is there to be another still?

Now I am going to astonish my readers.

Five years have passed since we left Mrs. Crewe sitting waiting for Captain Loftus. During all these years she has visited many countries and climes, and if this can be called waiting, she has waited ever since, for Captain Loftus never came. She never heard from him; she saw his marriage announced in the papers, and Miriam, her daughter, is Miriam Crewe still.

When five years are added to four-and-twenty, a woman, though not perhaps *passer*, is still trembling on that painful verge; and Miriam, now permitted to walk about by herself as much as she pleased without a single remonstrance, often heard remarks which taught her too plainly the light in which she was viewed by a younger set of girls. Always exquisitely dressed, her toilette often elicited remarks which she could not help hearing; but the worst of it was they were sometimes accompanied by a disparaging sentence, and one day in particular Miriam heard what was a more stinging truism than any she had yet suffered, and this was in the library of the sea-side resort where Mrs. Crewe was spending the summer.

"How pretty she must have been!" said a bride to the bridegroom.

"Yes, all the *beaux vestes* of a lovely woman," was the answer.

After hearing that remark, Miriam went and wandered on the sands for hours and choked down burning tears, though the rebellious and retrospective thoughts persisted in rising to the surface.

"Is that all that is left of me," she thought. Is that the light in which people see me? Good heavens, how I have spoilt my own game, which was once so completely in my hands! Had I been a married woman these foolish geese of a young married couple would have said, 'Very pretty,' or 'How nice-looking!' 'How *distingue!*' and so on; but because I am Miss Crewe (for I heard them ask my name), they speak in the past tense, and call my good looks *beaux vestes!*'

Yes, she had outlived her youth and her opportunities, or rather her "chances," as Mrs. Crewe used always to call them, and she was now apparently settled down for life by the side of an invalid mother, who really could hardly have spared her, even had she any temptation to leave her.

Miriam Crewe's life was now the perfection of monotony. After a long rheumatic fever, which left her a cripple, Mrs. Crewe was ordered to reside at the sea-side, for the sake of the warm sea-baths. They happened to have a few friends among the county people in the

neighborhood of Eastbourne, and thus Eastbourne was chosen as the residence most suitable and most convenient as well as most cheerful for Miriam, of whom her mother still sometimes thought with an aching heart. But still Miriam's life was monotonous. All the morning she wandered about by herself; and all the afternoon she walked by the side of the mother's bath chair. Visitors they had but few; society they had none, for Mrs. Crewe was not in a state of health to stay out; in fact, for the time being, they really lived quite out of the world.

With a sort of bitter feeling, somewhat akin to a morbid dislike to people, Miriam's favorite resort was the tract of sand farthest from the town; and once arrived there with her book, she would sit on the low rocks for hours; and if any pedestrians reached as far as her haunts, she was generally so deeply engrossed as not even see them pass.

July, August and September slipped away; October opened gloriously, and people lingered on to cheat themselves of the winter. Miriam continued her solitary walks, still sat on her rock and read or stood on the beach and watched the tide coming in over the rippled sands. She was doing this one day, gazing dreamily on the expanse of sea and listening to its pleasant, gentle murmur, when, happening to glance at the yellow plain which was spreading beneath her feet, it suddenly occurred to her that what she had taken for indentations on the sand, caused by the incoming tide, were no such thing, but letters, distinctly traced by some hand upon the sand and intended to frame a name. With a sort of shrinking curiosity she drew nearer. It was strange to see characters recently traced on so remote a spot, on which she had seen no human being during the whole time she had been there; and glancing hurriedly round, and still seeing no one she went hastily up to the spot and looked at the characters traced. As she gazed a sort of cold tremor came over her.

"Who," thought she to herself, "has done this? Is it intentional or can it be accidental?" The word, or rather name, so clearly and deeply cut in upon the hard dry sand was nothing else but—Miriam!

Miriam?—the name was not a common one. Miriam?—who was there in the world now to call her Miriam? Her heart fluttered as she gazed, and she then looked round with a sort of frightened scrutiny. Neither far nor near was there a soul in sight, and the flat coast had no nooks and crannies in the rocks in which the writer could be hiding. Yet the thought gave her an uncomfortable feeling. Human hands had traced those characters very recently there could be no doubt—yet she had not met a soul!

She looked back towards Eastbourne—not a soul. She looked onward towards Pevensey—still no one; yet it could only be by that route that the writer had disappeared.

One moment's reflection, and then the indignant blood rushed into her cheeks. She thought of her "Three Chances!" Could it be either Sir Gilbert Acres, Sir Rice Curry or Captain Loftus?—each in his turn had called her Miriam!—but hardly. The first of these three had gone away to Madeira years before to try and stop the sands of his wife's life from running too quickly; the second had married in a fit of furious rage—married a London belle, and was to be seen every season showing her off in Rotten Row; the third was a married man within three months after Miriam had so deceived him (as he thought), and he and his wife were so notoriously unsuited to each other that the world never hesitated, when designating him with reference to their unhappy life, to say, "What could you expect when he married from pique?"

No, it could be neither of these, but it set Miriam thinking and almost trembling, and after passionately stamping out the unlucky name she hurried home with limbs which really seemed to totter under her.

How curiously she looked at every one she met, just as if she could read guilt in the careless faces of the gay crowd who passed and re-passed her on her way home; but she gained her own home unsatisfied.

Silently she rejoined her mother, and began the evening duty of reading to her; but not a word of what she uttered like a parrot did she understand. All she felt was, that she must go again the next day to that lonely spot on the far-off sands and see if it had been visited again; and so, at the usual hour, she took her lonely way along the strand.

It is proverbial that at all the fashionable watering-places the promenades are crowded in the morning, and in the evening you never see a soul, and exclaim in surprise, "Where on earth do all the people go?" Such was the case as Miriam passed swiftly along. She was provoked with herself for feeling that she did pass more swiftly than usual, and she felt, too, that long before she reached the spot she saw the disturbance of the sand where she had stamped out the letters that formed her name—saw it with an eagle's-far-sighted eye. Yes, there was the sand, but no fresh letters. She was angry with herself for feeling slightly disappointed, and she hurried

on, fearing some one might have seen her pause; but she had not proceeded a hundred yards before she stopped, as if struck by a thunderbolt. At her feet, again clear and deeply cut in the sand, was the name—Miriam!

She sat down on a large stone and gazed—then looked to the right and to the left—not a soul to be seen. A sudden thought struck her, and she took her parasol; the word Miriam was in bold printed letters of nearly a foot in length. She took her parasol—the sand was firm and smooth—and just before her name she traced in small but distinct characters two words which, with the one not written by herself, formed a question. It was this—"Who remembers Miriam?" and added the note of interrogation.

This was no sooner done, than like one pursued by an evil spirit, Miriam sped home, and determined to revisit the spot at an early hour next day, if possible, to catch the delinquent; but her plans were all frustrated by a circumstance sudden and unforeseen. Mrs. Crewe was seized with a paralytic attack, and for many hours her life was in danger.

Still and silent Miriam sat by her all that night, and towards evening her mother rallied; she was sensible, and, though helpless, was not speechless. With eyes swimming in tears she kept them fixed on her daughter, and at last articulated, "After all, Miriam, I shall leave you unprotected."

"Dear mother," was the hasty reply, "you think of me still as of a child. You forget my age; you forget that I am no longer young, though Heaven knows I trust it may please God still to prolong your life for my happiness and protection for many a long year."

Mrs. Crewe shook her head and relapsed into slumber, Miriam still sitting by her side, the door open on account of the heat; and many an hour passed in this silent watch, till suddenly a rapid nervous knock at the street door startled her.

"Surely," she thought, "they will never think of admitting visitors on such a day as this?" But a colloquy was going on between the footman and the visitor.

"I really don't think, sir, that Miss Crewe will leave my mistress."

"Not to a stranger, I dare say; but I may be of some use to her if you take up my card; or, stay, perhaps she would come down for an instant. My good man, I may as well tell you at once I am Mrs. Crewe's nephew."

Miriam's heart beat so fast that it took her breath away. Who was this man who so pertinaciously insisted on admission? Utterly alone in the house, except for the presence of the servants, how could she go down by herself? The visitor's last sentence bore a falsehood on the face of it—her mother had no nephew.

But Miriam did not lack courage; her hesitation lasted but a moment, the next she was advancing into the drawing-room with her usual haughty grace, and bowing to a tall, bearded man whom she had never seen in her life before. His back was to the light.

"I think," said Miriam, courteously, "there must be some mistake."

"Am I then forgotten?" he asked, advancing eagerly; "yet I remember Miriam."

"The name upon the sand! "Sir Gilbert!" she said in a low voice, and sank trembling into a chair.

* * * * *

That night Miriam knelt by her mother's side. The feeble life seemed ebbing away in deep slumbers, yet she must be roused to hear something that would soothe her last hours.

"Mother," she whispered, "if you understand what I am saying, press my hand," and a fervent pressure was the answer. "I am engaged to be married, dearest mother," she continued.

There came a half-articulate question— "To whom?"

"To Sir Gilbert Acres, mother."

"Married years ago, my child."

"Yes, married once, mother—but a widower now, and has been so for three years."

No answer—on she slept, and Sir Gilbert himself stood on the other side of the bed waiting for another moment of sensibility. The doctor looked in the last thing that night.

"She is better," he said—"she may rally yet;" and the next morning she opened a pair of clear and sensible eyes.

"Miriam," she exclaimed, "is it true, or have I been dreaming? Are you engaged to be married?"

"Yes, mother—to Sir Gilbert Acres," she replied; "he will be here at twelve."

"No he won't," said Mrs. Crewe; "Captain Loftus said the same."

"But Gilbert will come," laughed Miriam; and at that moment came the short, quick knock at the door.

He was true to his appointment.

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Mrs. Crewe rallied in mind in the course of a few days, but the use of her limbs was gone.

"Never mind, my dear," she said to Miriam when the tears trickled down her daughter's face at her helpless state. "I shall not leave you unprotected. My mind is easy on that point; and between ourselves, Miriam, I am