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MIRIAM'S THREE CHANCES.

CHAPTER I.—CHANCE THE FIRST.

CHAPTER I.—(Continued.)

"Not so," returned Sir Gilbert, with equal haste; "but because I feel that you are the most calculated of the two to make me happy."

"But it seems strange that such very little things should have turned you from one you once—"

"Admired," interposed Sir Gilbert; "yes; but smaller—much smaller—things than these have turned many away from the object of his—"

"Affection," interposed Ada, in her turn.

"No, admiration," corrected Sir Gilbert; and rising and shaking himself like a large Newfoundland dog, he took his leave, to meet her again the next day at the altar.

CHAPTER II.—CHANCE THE SECOND.

Three years have passed since we parted with Miriam Crewe. She has gone through the regular routine of three more seasons, and still, as before, with no result. She is Miriam Crewe still, and as likely to remain so as ever. In vain had Mrs. Crewe heroically encountered every kind of fatigue in her behalf; but Miriam was incorrigible. She had refused to encourage a single eligible chance, and had drawn on three young men without a guinea amongst them to propose to her.

"Positively," exclaimed Mrs. Crewe, "she has not had a single chance worth having since Sir Gilbert Acres' affair; and I am sure, if ever a match was made in Heaven, that man ought to have been Miriam's husband."

"I am told he is not happy," said the friend to whom Mrs. Crewe was making these confidences; "and it must be his own fault, for your niece was so amiable."

"I really cannot say," returned Mrs. Crewe, who never could hear the name of Lady Acres without bitterness; "I only know that she has a very jealous disposition; and that she was as nearly as possible throwing Sir Gilbert over the evening before the wedding, because he owned to having once admired Miriam."

And Miriam was still admired. She was still beautiful, perhaps more so than ever; there was still the smile that brought worshippers to her shrine, and still the winning manners which never failed to lure on her victims and then—leave them in the lurch!

"I really see no use in staying any longer in town," said Mrs. Crewe one day; "it is very unpleasant continually meeting these men to whom you have really behaved so badly, Miriam; therefore, I do not think we can do better than go to Clarendon Park for Goodwood. It is a pleasant house, and we can go on after that to the sea side."

"With all my heart," said Miriam; "I am quite agreeable to Clarendon Park and the races, where mankind in general will have better to do than admiring me, and thereby offending you."

"You are unjust, Miriam," said her mother. "I am only offended when I see you throwing away your time—"

"And my chances," laughed Miriam. So to Clarendon Park, on a lovely day in July, did Mrs. and Miss Crewe wend their way, the well-appointed carriage of the Clarendons meeting them at Buswirth Station. "There is another of the Clarendon carriages waiting for some one," said Miriam, as her mother was arranging herself.

"More of the guests, Miriam, I suppose," returned Mrs. Crewe; and at that moment a fine-looking man, with an iron-gray moustache and beard, attended by three men servants, and almost as much luggage as a lady, emerged from the station with a sort of sensation, exclaiming loudly that a tin box was missing.

"Let us get on before him," said Miriam, "and arrive whilst he is storming over his tin box."

On arriving at Clarendon Park, both Mrs. Crewe and her daughter uttered exclamations of admiration as they drove up the long avenue, through the noble trees of which glimpses of the beautiful country were at intervals perceptible.

"I should not mind such a place as this," murmured Miriam; "no man ever gave me the chance."

"How do you know?" said her mother. "Broad acres may be just as beautiful. However, what does it signify? You would have thrown him over all the same," she added; and Miriam had nothing to say.

By this time they had reached the house. Lady Grace Clarendon was sitting on the lawn. She rose, delighted to receive them, and asked them, in the same train. Mrs. Crewe explained that a gentleman was at the station, with quite a suite, but was detained by missing a tin box.

"That is Sir Rice Curry, the great Indian judge," said Lady Grace. "He always brings his own servants, for we do not get up early enough for him. He has his breakfast at four in the morning and his horses round at five. You must have heard of his reception in India?—quite as great a man as the Governor-General—a regular prince in his way; and, my

dear," she laughed, giving Miriam's hand a little squeeze, "an immense party, come here on sick leave, as he calls it, but in reality, to look for a wife. He shall take you in to dinner; so look better than usual, if possible, and don't wear white—these Indians get so tired of white."

"But I shall wear white," said Miriam to her mother, when they were alone; and it took quite one hour for Mrs. Crewe to talk her daughter into the belief that for a daylight dinner a color was much more effective.

At eight o'clock Miriam followed Mrs. Crewe into the drawing-room arrayed in a blue net, flounced and bouillonne, till she seemed to rise out of it as an angel rises from a cloud; so said the French maids who watched her over the banister in ecstasies sweeping down the stairs. Down the white shoulder hung one long sunny curl, like a piece of spun gold, and in her hair was a white lily.

No more effective guest ever took her place at a brilliant dinner-table; and so thought Sir Rice Curry, who took her in to dinner, as arranged, and gazed on her, entranced.

Before the ladies rose, Miriam had heard his whole history; his mode of life in India and a description of his various abodes.

"And I hope you found the tin box," laughed Miriam.

"Ah! you heard of my loss?" said he.—"You have no idea what that box contains, or you would not laugh at the disturbance I made about it. The idiot behind me," he continued, with a motion of his head which indicated that he was speaking of his own servant, who stood unmoved behind him, "actually overlooked it! Imagine overlooking that tin box! It contains treasures I value more than gold. I have gems in that box, historical from their antiquity—pearls, priceless from their associations. Do you admire pearls, Miss Crewe?"

"I admire jewels of every description," she replied.

"Yet you wear none," he said.

"Simply because I do not possess them," said Miriam.

Sir Rice grew very red; a sort of brick-dust. He was spreading out a hand which he seemed to be blushing over, and yet there was something on it to which he wished to draw attention, could he have done so without exhibiting its colossal proportions. So he hit upon the clever expedient of slipping a ring off his finger.

"This is one of my treasures, Miss Crewe," said he, as he placed it in Miriam's small white palm, "and it never leaves my finger. That diamond was offered me as a present for some insignificant favor I was able to grant a native of high rank; but in my position in India presents are not allowable, and I declined it, but I kept my eye on it. I said to myself, 'if money can buy it, that diamond shall be mine.' A few months afterwards that native died, and the diamond was in the market—by what means I cannot tell. At all events I bought it, and I give you my word it has not its fellow in Europe."

"I can easily believe it," replied Miriam, turning the beautiful stone to the light, "but it must have cost a fortune!"

"No—no—no," was the careless answer, in an off-hand tone; it cost nothing at all out of the way; a mere song in fact."

"Now, may I venture to ask," said Miriam, with one of her most winning smiles, "what you call a 'mere song,' Sir Rice?"

A pleased expression came over the face of the millionaire. The guests were all listening.

"Well, I gave a thousand pounds for it," he replied. "Not dear. They asked me guineas; but I said no—pounds; and the fools took it. If they had stood out for guineas they should have had them. I wanted the diamond, and I was determined to have it."

When the ladies clustered out on the lawn in the lovely summer twilight after dinner, Miriam was playfully rallied on the conquest she had made. There could be no doubt that Sir Rice was very much struck, and Miriam's perfect unconsciousness of the fact and unconcern on the subject impressed the other guests with an idea that her blindness was affectation.

"Why, he devoted himself to you all dinner time!" exclaimed the young lady of the house, with a little tinge of asperity in her tone.

Yes; and so he did after dinner too. He sat down by Miriam, told her stories of princes, stories of palaces, Indian stories and tiger stories; and finished off by sending for the tin box and exhibiting the pearl necklace.

Meanwhile Miriam leant back in the easiest of chairs, saying little, but smiling sweetly; not a shadow of flirtation or encouragement in her manner. And this was what attracted Sir Rice; this it was that kept him spell-bound. He had been accustomed to adulation, and had been flattered and followed till he positively trembled at the sight of young ladies, and turned more a coward when seized by a dowager than ever he had done when hunting a tiger and the animal had turned upon him. But Miriam merely listened to him and smiled. She never mentioned that she had a mother in India?—quite as great a man as the Governor-General—a regular prince in his way; and, my

dignity of her manners, reserved and almost distant, reassured him, and he gave himself up to the fascinations of the hour.

Day after day passed, bright, beautiful weather, and the races amused the guests from morning till night, till it came to the Cup Day—for a wonder, a glorious hot morning, and not the cold, cheerless weather which generally characterizes the Thursday in Goodwood week.

By this time the whole house had noticed Sir Rice Curry's attention to Miriam, and it was considered only a question of time as to when he would make his proposal. Most of the guests were to leave Clarendon Park on the Saturday, but Lady Grace pressed Mrs. Crewe in a marked manner to prolong her stay.

"When the house is empty," she thought to herself, he will propose;" and Mrs. Crewe accepted the invitation, but without apparently noticing Lady Grace's manner. After this visit was over they were going to Ryde; so a week or two sooner or later made no difference.

There was great excitement at Clarendon Park on the morning of this Cup Day, but no one was in such a state as Sir Rice Curry and his servant, his soldier servant, whom he had brought over from India with him, the keeper of the tin box, and the man who bore more hard words from his master than any valet would ever have put up with.

The reason of this excitement was the fact, that amongst the candidates for the Goodwood Cup that day was an Arab horse of remarkable qualities, with the pedigree of which Sir Rice was intimately acquainted.

"His sire stood in my stable in India for three months," he explained. "Nothing ever beat him, and nothing will ever beat the mare that is to run to-day. I know her price. She cost three thousand guineas." Miss Crewe, he added, suddenly turning to Miriam, next to whom he was sitting at breakfast, "allow me to have a bet with you upon Lightning."

"Nay," laughed Miriam, "that is not gallant of you, Sir Rice. If you are so sure of Lightning's winning, of course I should lose, for I conclude you would bet on no other horse."

"If you like to bet upon her," returned the lover, in a low voice, "I will give way, and bet against her."

"No," she said, hastily, and turning crimson, "I should not dream of requiring so extraordinary a sacrifice of self from any living soul. I decide on betting against Lightning, Sir Rice."

"Impossible!" cried Sir Rice; "you will lose, to a dead certainty."

"Never mind," said Miriam; "I choose to bet against her. What are the stakes to be? What do you care to have, Sir Rice?—gloves?"

"Only one glove in the world and the hand it covers," was the whispered reply.

"Gloves, then," said Miriam, pretending not to hear. "And what am I to have if I win?"

"Alas, you cannot win!" replied Sir Rice; "so I am safe in saying it shall be six pair of gray gloves—eight, Miss Crewe—against this ring," and he held out the finger on which glittered the diamond which had cost a thousand pounds.

A great noise of laughing, talking and betting amongst the ladies had gone on at the table whilst this conversation, rapidly uttered, had been taking place, so that the speakers thought it had been unheard; but there happened to sit next to Miriam on the other side a quiet-looking young man, with small, delicate features, and his hair parted in the middle. His clothes had a peculiar cut about them. He wore a little red tie, and he looked rather as if he were a "gentleman rider"—Captain Pascal of the K. D. G.'s. He had heard every word.

"Do you know, Miss Crewe," said he, very calmly, "that I think you will win that Nabob's ring?"

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Miriam, laughing. "I really hope not. I should be exceedingly annoyed if I did. He said Lightning could not be beaten."

"So he did," said Captain Pascal; "but there is a vast difference between an Arab in this country and an Arab in its own. There is a vast difference between the soils. I know something of horses of every country. An Arab's fleetness is proverbial; but then the desert sand is not quite the same thing as Goodwood racecourse. They carry the feet very near the ground. Almost a pabble would bring them on their knees; and as for speed, they go like the wind for five minutes, and then they fall behind. Mark my words—you will wear that ring at dinner to-day." And Captain Pascal rose and quietly turned on his heel.

"What was he saying?" asked Sir Rice, rather savagely, for Lady Grace had been occupying his attention during the time this speech was being uttered.

"He has made me very uncomfortable," said Miriam—"I assure you honestly, he has. He says I have a chance of winning."

"Pshaw!" cried Sir Rice, contemptuously. "What does that fellow know about Arab horses? Lightning is safe to win the Goodwood Cup, or my name isn't Curry."

And, in her heart, Miriam actually did hope this might be the case, for the value of the prize she was to win against the poor half-dozen of gloves which she was to use, really frightened her. A sort of uneasy feeling took possession of her. Supposing she won, would taking the ring compromise her? "Yes," said Conscience. "No," said Vanity—"it is a fair bet." And then all the carriages came round.

There was a tremendous rush towards the ring. The Arab racer was being led up and down, and "Lightning! Lightning!" was the cry of the day.

Lady Grace Clarendon's luncheon was laid out under the trees, just above the Ladies' Lawn. At two o'clock the race for the Cup would commence. The whole party seemed silent and almost breathless with excitement. There were only two persons calm—Sir Rice, who paced up and down, like a tiger in a cage, and twirled his gray moustaches complacently, and Captain Pascal, who was lurching on salad. "to keep him cool," he said.

"Depend upon it," whispered Lady Grace, "he has heavy bets on this race. He looks more placid than usual, and I always know by that whether he is easy in his mind or not."

And now the moment arrived. The horses, one by one, were ranged across the course.—Every eye was fixed on them. Every available corner on the Grand Stand was filled; every fair occupant of the seats on the Lawn was standing in breathless expectation—and then came the well-known cry, "They're off!" and the Arab shot, like an arrow from the bow, far ahead of her companions.

Miriam turned with a deep sigh of relief and a brilliant smile, and looked at Sir Rice.

"I knew it!" he cried exultingly. "I knew there could be no doubt; but I am sorry, Miss Crewe, that you have lost the diamond."

"Or rather the gloves," laughed Miriam.

"Don't be too sure," said Captain Pascal, very quietly; and at that moment the whole field re-appeared after the dip in the ground, and every eye and every glass was strained to catch sight of the colors. And the Arab?—Loud rose both shouts and groans. Where was the Arab? Horse after horse came tearing on. No Lightning!

Sir Rice Curry set his teeth very hard, and Miriam clasped her fingers together with a grasp which threatened destruction to her delicate gloves. The next moment Captain Pascal appeared like a spirit at Miriam's elbow, and whispered four words in her ear—"The Arab is nowhere."

There seemed a momentary struggle in Sir Rice's breast, but the next instant he recovered himself. Turning to Miriam with a gallantry which even she appreciated, he took her hand, and bowing profoundly over it, placed the diamond in the palm of it.

"Fairly and honestly won, Miss Crewe," said he; "and I rejoice that one so worthy should possess it."

Miriam could not speak. For the first time in her life she felt abashed, but she took off her glove all the same, and slipped the ring on her finger.

That evening at dinner she wore it. No one took any notice, and the indifference was so palpable, that from that moment Miriam felt that her fate was decided; no drawing back now!—she was fairly promised at last!

In the drawing room, when the ladies were laughingly counting over their gains of the day, Lady Grace Clarendon asked them to guess who had been the greatest winner in her house that day, and Miriam's cheek burnt like fire; but she need not have been alarmed.

"That quiet little Captain Pascal!" continued the hostess. "What do you suppose the creature won?"

Every one gave a guess. No one was the least near the mark.

"Twenty-seven thousand pounds!" exclaimed Lady Grace; "yet there he sat eating his dinner as if he were not possessed of a penny in the world, and perhaps by to-morrow evening he may have lost it all again!"

That night Mrs. Crewe followed her daughter into her bed-room—a very unusual thing—and Miriam saw that a crisis was approaching.

"Miriam," said her mother, in a firm, cold voice, "be so good as to tell me the meaning of that ring upon your finger?"

The words were a shock, and Miriam saw that this time her mother did not intend to be trifled with. She looked down, and twisted the diamond round and round upon her finger.

"Are you engaged to Sir Rice Curry, Miriam?"

"Oh, dear no, mamma."

"Then how came you possessed of that ring?" continued her mother.

"I won it, mamma."

"Won it?" repeated Mrs. Crewe, in a tone of almost horror; "won a jewel of that immense value, and actually wearing it, yet not engaged to the man whose property it was?—Miriam, are you in your senses?"

"Why?—what is the harm," stammered the culprit.

"None," replied her mother, "provided

you intend to accept him, Miriam; but if you do not, I have no words to express my extreme displeasure at your conduct. Now look here, Miriam. Attend to me. You have played me these games all your life, and I am getting tired of them. The day must come when your good looks will leave you, and your power of attraction will be lost. Ask yourself if you are the least likely to be a happy old maid? No, you will be wretched. You will regret the time you have wasted and the chances you have thrown away. Once again a brilliant chance is yours. I cannot believe that Sir Rice would have allowed you to win that ring without either some great encouragement on your part, or without himself having said something which you have willfully misunderstood. If you refuse me your confidence, I can only act like a blind person, and find my way in the dark; but find it I most certainly will. If you are not engaged to Sir Rice Curry before we leave this house, I shall myself return that ring to him at breakfast, before all the guests, on the morning of our departure."

With downcast eyes, crimson cheeks, and rebellious heart, Miriam saw that her mother was really in earnest at last, and within herself, though her lips were silent, she resolved upon the course she intended to pursue. Sir Rice was immensely rich, and in a position which in India would place her on a pinnacle far above her sex. Five years before, these considerations would have but little weight with her; but now—never mind, she was five years older now, and, as far as she knew, there was no one in the wide world who had ever professed such love and admiration for her as had Sir Rice Curry. Five years before, had she allowed an honest heart and truthful lips to speak out without the risk of being met by ridicule, coquetry or disdain, things might have been different. Never mind, let bygones be bygones. Nobody cared for her now except Sir Rice Curry; and on the morning of their intended departure for Ryde he was graciously permitted to propose to her, and affably referred to Mrs. Crewe for his answer.

Mrs. Crewe was highly pleased; a great weight seemed lifted off her mind. Though she knew but little of Sir Rice, she thought he was a very suitable match for her daughter, and as in his public capacity he bore the highest character, she did not see that any little private follies or failings which he might possess need prove any bar to matrimonial happiness.

Sir Rice was also in a state of the highest exultation. Business, however, obliged him to go up to town that week (during which time he meant to have all his priceless jewels set and adapted for Miriam's use), but he promised to himself the happiness and delight of joining Mrs. Crewe at Ryde the very first hour he could get away; and thus they parted.

CHAPTER III.—CHANCE THE THIRD.

In a pretty house in St. John's Park at Ryde, Mrs. and Miss Crewe located themselves whilst the preparations for the marriage went on on both sides. Mrs. Crewe was not much of a walker; one journey a day to the pier-head was as much as she could achieve, and the drive in the afternoon was infliction which Miriam very soon found insupportable. Might she not walk by herself in the morning? "Certainly not," said her mother; she was sure Sir Rice would highly disapprove it; therefore Miriam compromised the matter by taking her maid out with her; and one day in particular, whilst Mrs. Crewe was giving audience to a lace manufacturer, Miriam slipped away to enliven herself by a good constitutional.

Of course the pier was the direction she took, although that was the very resort which had been most especially forbidden by Mrs. Crewe. Even with a thick veil there was something in Miriam's air and carriage, to say nothing of the elegance of her morning costumes, which attracted general attention wherever she went. For herself she cared nothing for this. There was a sort of *fierte* about her which rendered her indifferent to common admiration.—She never condescended to appear to see it; so on she walked, the demure young maid in her wake, and betook herself to the rails over which she could lean and watch the steamers coming in. Perhaps she might see a friend or two coming over for the gaieties, the *soirees*, the band, the yachting or some such amusement, and her engagement to Sir Rice Curry was no impediment to her keeping up old friends.

Full of these pleasant thoughts, Miriam lent over the railings, her eyes fixed on the gay deck of the rapidly advancing Southsea steamer, when suddenly she saw a hat taken off by a lavender kid glove, and a beautiful set of teeth flashed delightful smiles at her. At first she was puzzled. Who could it be? Then the hasty steps came rattling up the side of the pier, and rushed to her side.

"So delighted to see you, Miss Crewe! Lost you in the London season in the most unaccountable way! Charmed to find you here, and for the season I hope."

It is very pleasant to meet an *empress* person of the other sex. He is just as delightful as an *empress* woman is odious. It gives you