

# The True Witness,

AND

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## MIRIAM'S THREE CHANCES.

### CHAPTER I.—CHANCE THE FIRST.

The wedding was over, the guests were all gone; the dining-room was left a prey to the waiters and the drawing-room to the housemaids, in preparation for the ball to be held that evening at Mrs. Crewe's, in honor of the marriage of her niece, Ada Tracey, to Sir Gilbert Acres.

The day had been one of great fatigue and excitement, and when about five o'clock Mrs. Crewe found herself at liberty to retire to her own room for rest, quiet and a cup of tea, she sat down with a deep sigh of relief and the inward ejaculation, "Thank Heaven, that's over!"

There is such a thing as pleasurable fatigue. When you feel you have played a game for a great stake and won, you rest on your oars with a sort of pleasant exhaustion, and think the object gained well worth the price paid for it; but this was not Mrs. Crewe's case; this was anything but her state of mind. That day, and many days and weeks preceding it, had been to her fraught with vexation of spirit and keen disappointment, aggravated by the necessity of acting a part the whole time, and appearing happy and delighted, whereas she was cut to the heart by the destruction of a castle which she had built, as she thought, on the securest of foundations, in the air.

Just one year before this eventful day Mrs. Crewe had lost an only sister, Lady Tracey, who, having lived for upwards of fifteen years at Florence, had become a sort of naturalized Italian, and had cut herself off from all her friends in England as well as from this only sister, Mrs. Crewe, who, being in affluent circumstances, had spent the widowhood which was equally the fate of each sister in dignified London, decorously educating a daughter who had the advantage over Ada Tracey of five years of seniority.

The cousins had never met. They had only heard of each other at distant intervals; and Lady Tracey, having an idea that she was too delicate to keep up a regular correspondence, had all but dropped it with her sister.

This, Mrs. Crewe could have forgiven: also her death, because Mrs. Crewe was *tant soit peu* worldly, and it did not in any way interfere with her, since Lady Tracey had not been so inconsiderate as to depart in the season, and so throw the family into an unbecoming mourning; but what she could not forgive was the fact that Lady Tracey had left her only child to Mrs. Crewe's care and entire guardianship, without fortune and without permission.

"To have a young girl in the house as a resident, just as I had surrounded Miriam with an eligible circle!" she mentally exclaimed, "and perhaps a girl of great personal attractions, interfering with Miriam in every way, and filling up the brougham at night!"

To say that Mrs. Crewe was annoyed would be saying a great deal too little. She was offended, she was angry, she was indignant, she was disgusted, and she did not hesitate to tell the executors that she considered this legacy (the only one her sister had left) an unwarrantable liberty. Still, as the girl was an orphan and houseless, she must naturally come to her only relative, and Mrs. Crewe knew she must receive her with smiles and welcome her with open arms.

Miriam Crewe was very passive on the subject. She did not care to have a companion, but since there was no help for it, she rather liked the idea. "She can go to all the slow parties with you, mamma," was the first bright idea that struck her, and the next was in the shape of a query. "Is she likely to be pretty, mamma?" and she glanced, as she spoke, at a mirror which reflected a face that need not have feared a rival.

"Your aunt Tracey," said Mrs. Crewe, severely, "was a dashing brunette. When we were girls together, she used to turn the heads of all the officers in my father's regiment. She might have done very well for herself had she played her cards well, but she fell in love with Sir Cotton Tracey, the most vapid young ensign in the garrison, with nothing on earth but his title and four hundred a year, and she ran away with him."

"Then she was a beauty, I suppose," said Miriam.

"She was a belle," replied her mother; "there is a distinction, though hardly a difference. She was thought very fascinating, and I recollect she gave us a great deal of trouble. I only hope and trust," added Mrs. Crewe, suddenly lashing herself into indignation again, "that her daughter in no wise resembles her, otherwise my task will be a pleasant one."

"Perhaps better, be pretty than a fright, for one's credit sake," remarked Miriam, with a provoking little laugh.

"I don't agree with you, Miriam," retorted her mother. "The arrival of a very pretty, fascinating, dashing girl, such as her mother, your aunt Tracey, was, as an inmate of our house just at this moment, is about the most annoying, inconvenient and unfortunate circumstance that could possibly have happened."

"Why at this moment more than another?" asked Miriam, still bent on provoking.

"Because, as I have told you a thousand

times, Miriam, of the marked attention Sir Gilbert Acres is paying you," replied her mother.

A little silvery laugh rang out, and a little satin-slipped foot gave a little fling of derision.

"No more paying me attention (any more than anybody else, at least), than the man in the moon," said Miriam.

"You are mistaken, Miriam. I have seen it a long time," persisted Mrs. Crewe; "and I don't mind saying I have been very glad to see it. Sir Gilbert is a suitable match, and I shall be much vexed if you throw such a chance away."

"I don't count him one of my chances at all," said Miriam, pouting.

"It rests with yourself," replied her mother; "and all I beg is, don't coquette with him—he is not the man to stand it; if you do, you will lose him. Remember, you will now have a companion to share in your games. Don't lose the best chance you have yet had."

"As far as Sir Gilbert Acres is concerned," persisted Miriam; "Ada Tracey is quite welcome to try for him. Our chances are quite equal at present, although she has never seen or heard of the man in her life."

Mrs. Crewe shrugged her shoulders.

"If you will be so blind to your own interests," she said, "I cannot help it; but I do not consider it fair upon me for you to throw away six thousand a year and all that landed property."

"Dear at the price, mamma," said Miriam; "and so shy is he, that I am always in a state of exhaustion after an evening in trying to amuse him. However, don't be alarmed; I can hold him fast if I choose."

Mrs. Crewe gave her daughter a quick, keen glance. There was perversity and coquettishness in every feature of that fair young face—and a most attractive one it was; but still Sir Gilbert Acres was not a likely man to be trifled with. He had never been known to admire any one until an accidental introduction made him acquainted with Miriam Crewe. He was a country baronet, very shy, and very little in London; but still, like most country baronets, he had a great idea of his position, and knew exactly what kind of a wife he would like to see seated at the head of his table at Broadacres. No one had as yet so completely come up to his ideas of what Lady Acres ought to be as Miriam Crewe; therefore Mrs. Crewe was quite right in her suspicions, and no wonder she trembled lest the prize should slip between her daughter's fingers. Miriam was a difficult character to deal with—she was perversity itself. She had been out three years, and had met with a great deal of admiration, but not a single proposal had been the result, and it was entirely her own fault. The moment any serious intentions were manifested, Miriam Crewe, like a beautiful butterfly, spread her light wings and flew, taking refuge in a sort of derisive coquettishness, which first held the admirer at a distance, and then dismissed him altogether.

Mrs. Crewe had now watched this game for three years. Miriam was one-and-twenty and still Miriam Crewe, with an untouched heart. How long was it to go on? If she played the same game with Sir Gilbert Acres, no maternal management on earth could help her, although she had so haughtily boasted that she could hold him fast if she chose, for Sir Gilbert was as sensitive as he was shy. As yet Miriam had not tried him at all, but she had wit enough to perceive that he required skillful treatment. Surrounded as she always was by admirers, she had never yet dared to "play him off," as the saying is, with other men. He would have bowed and retreated, and she knew it. But where a rival for herself was in the case, her pride rose.

"If he ends by preferring her to me, let him. Who cares?" she said to herself a few days before the arrival of Ada Tracey, and it was in this spirit she awaited the guest whom her mother so mistrusted.

In the dead of winter, with snow on the ground, scavengers carting it away, and noisy street boys sweeping the door steps, a cab with luggage drove up to Mrs. Crewe's door, and deposited inside it a small, half-frozen creature, habited in deep mourning.

Though Mrs. Crewe did not approve of the invasion, and had endeavored to think she should be very off-hand with the intruder, the wintry cold without seemed to warm the human instincts within, and she caught herself kissing a frozen cheek with something very like cordiality, and repeating the embrace in a still more maternal manner when she saw before her, not the dashing brunette who was to contend with Miriam for all her laurels, but a little dark girl, graceful and foreign in air and carriage, but without a single trace of her mother's good looks.

Even Miriam laughed when she saw her new companion, her unknown cousin, her future friend, the girl who was to work her so much mischief! Plain was not the word. She was positively ugly.

A few evenings afterwards Miriam met Sir Gilbert Acres at a dinner-party. Whenever

this occurred it seemed a settled thing that he should take her down to table.

"And when do you expect your cousin?" he asked in the course of conversation.

"She has arrived," replied Miriam, "but her mourning prevents her going out with us at present."

"How curious it must be," said he, "to be thrown into such intimate contact with a relation you never saw before, Miss Crewe!"

"I don't think the relationship strikes me as much as the guest does. I am so unused to a companion," replied Miriam.

"And do you dislike companionship?" he asked.

"No, not exactly," she replied; "but I think one rather likes to choose one's companion. I don't quite like feeling that your relation must absolutely be your friend."

"I quite agree with you," returned Sir Gilbert, warmly; "having no relations, though, I have never been so tried, but I feel what you mean. Between friends there must be sympathy; and where there is sympathy, companionship is delightful; don't you think so?"

"Indeed I do," said Miriam, quickly; and then, by the flash of his eye, she saw he had taken her reply to himself, and the color rushed over her face.

"To spend a lifetime with the one person one most admires and—loves—in the world," he added in a lower voice.

"I dare say I should get tired to death even of that person," was the prompt reply; and Sir Gilbert, like an offended snail, withdrew himself into his shell. He felt as if she were making game of him.

"Wouldn't you?" she continued, laughing.

"Certainly not, provided I were convinced of the suitability of my choice," replied Sir Gilbert, not mollified.

"Well, I cannot say; people differ, I suppose," said Miriam, lightly; "you know I never tried. I never had a companion before. I don't know what qualities she ought to require for my perfect happiness."

"There I have the advantage of you," exclaimed Sir Gilbert, coming round; "I know exactly the kind of being who would suit me."

"A piece of absolute perfection, of course," was Miriam's reply; and again her cheeks burnt like fire.

Sir Gilbert leant his elbow on the table, and, shading for a moment the eyes that were fixed on her with his hand, said in a voice that trembled with emotion, "May I describe her to you?"

"No, I will describe her to you instead. I know your taste so well," cried his tormentor.

He looked surprised, but listened.

"You like a *petite* person," she continued, "very slight and very dark, small eyes, largish nose, pale and sad."

"Who on earth are you describing?" exclaimed Sir Gilbert, half disposed to be angry.

"You shall see," said Miriam, laughing (the ladies were rising from table), "you shall see the very first day you come to our house."

"Miss Crewe," he said, in an undertone, "I shall never understand you."

Sir Gilbert might have said more, but Miriam fluttered by in all her gauzy draperies, with the mocking smile on her beautiful lips, and he resumed his seat moodily, for he was put out.

By the time the gentlemen came into the drawing-room Mrs. and Miss Crewe were making their adieux. They were going to a ball. Sir Gilbert thought Miriam looked rather shy of him, and proudly held himself aloof, but Mrs. Crewe, as she passed him, said, cordially, "I suppose I may say *au revoir*? You will be coming on to Lady Geraldine's?" and he therefore hastily answered,

"In the course of the evening."

Mrs. Crewe was sharp enough to see something was wrong.

"You will repent, Miriam; you will repent," said she, as they drove along; but she had better have let matters alone. It only irritated the young coquette.

"Pray let me manage my own affairs," was the retort. "I know perfectly well how to deal with Sir Gilbert, and if he thinks I am one of the many who are trying for the prize, he will find himself mistaken."

"My dear, he cannot think we are drawing him on," said her mother. "Nothing can be plainer than his devotion; and to a certain extent a man may reasonably be encouraged by daughter as well as mother; but you seem to be keeping him off."

"No hurry," murmured Miriam, and in another moment they were in Lady Geraldine's brilliant rooms, where there was scarcely room to move.

By the time Sir Gilbert arrived, the doorway was nearly blocked up, but his head was seen, as he moved step by step, towering over everybody.

Miriam, seated by a favorite partner, (a smart young captain in a hussar regiment), watched his approach from her seat in the conservatory. She watched him looking everywhere; she laughed within herself at the anxious search he was making. At last he espied her, and seemed suddenly to stop. Miriam, to his imagination, seemed engaged in an animated

conversation, whilst the devoted air of her companion could not be mistaken.

"Was it for this I came here?" thought Sir Gilbert, and he turned on his heel. Miriam saw the action—saw that he was going away—rose from her seat, and by passing out of the end of the conservatory, cleverly met him on the stair.

"Not going?" said she, with one of her usual smiles; and somehow or other, as he retraced his steps to the dancing-room, Miss Crewe was on his arm.

"The cotillion with me, Miss Crewe?" whispered Captain Loftus over her shoulder, and Miriam smilingly bent her head. Sir Gilbert's brow grew black as night.

"I am surprised—I mean—I—" he began.

"You are surprised at my dancing a cotillion?" she said.

"Well, tastes differ—of course, you see—I mean some people like the cotillion—I don't," he replied, and the words came out brusquely.

"That is a prejudice you should try to overcome, Sir Gilbert," said Miriam.

"I might try," said he, "but I should fail."

"Oh no, you would not," said Miriam.—"Begin and try to-night."

"Not to-night of all nights," said Sir Gilbert, emphatically.

"And why not?" she asked.

"Can you ask? Are you not engaged to dance it with Captain Loftus?" he said.

"I could teach you all the same—"

Sir Gilbert bit his lip.

"And besides," she continued, "I don't see that my dancing it with any one else can make any difference."

This really was too much.

"Miss Crewe," said the offended lover, "I told you at dinner to-day that I never should understand you. It now appears to me that you are quite determined not to understand me."

"Our dance, I think, Miss Crewe?" said a partner coming up.

"With pleasure," said Miriam, much too willingly, and she went with the smiling stroke to Sir Gilbert's partner. When the dance was over he was gone, and Miriam felt a little uncomfortable. She felt that she had gone a little far. She ought to have complained of fatigue—asked to be allowed to excuse herself—sat it out, or done anything—not gone off in such pleased haste at such a moment, just as he was on the very point.

"Never mind, I can bring him round again to-morrow," she thought; and so at breakfast she asked her mother to make up a quiet party to Richmond Park. "Ada will not mind a quiet party—just a little picnic; she has never seen Hampton Court or Bushey Park," said Miriam; and so a party was speedily arranged.

"There is one person, however," said Mrs. Crewe, "whom I will not ask, and that is Captain Loftus, Miriam."

"Then better not attempt the party, mamma, for he has always been the life of every one we have given," said Miriam.

"But under present circumstances," said her mother, "the monopoly he generally makes of your attention would be destruction, Miriam. Do not imagine that I did not observe you last night. I do not complain, Miriam, but I only warn you and caution you to be careful."

"I know perfectly what I am about," retorted Miriam. "I shall pair off Captain Loftus and Ada Tracey, and he will keep her and everybody else alive."

Deceived for the moment, Mrs. Crewe arranged the party, and its dawn opened successfully, Miss Tracey being carried off by the hussar according to his instruction and Mrs. Crewe satisfied that he was well out of the way. But unfortunately the day, so well begun, clouded over before the cold collation was served.

Seated on the grass in a thickly-wooded spot, resting against trees, the whole party arranged themselves, excepting Miriam, Sir Gilbert, and few other gentlemen, Captain Loftus amongst them.

"By-the-by," said Miriam, with a sudden impulse to Sir Gilbert, "don't you remember I told you I knew your taste in beauty? Come here one moment—Ada, let me introduce Sir Gilbert Acres."

Before he could recover from his surprise, Sir Gilbert was bending over this little plain creature, pretending to make himself agreeable, furiously watching Miriam doing the honors, with Captain Loftus as aide-de-camp, and feeling very much like what a school-boy would call "sold." Insensibly, however, the sweetness of a prettily modulated voice made itself favorably heard in his ear, and the charm of the intelligent and sparkling conversation made an impression on him for the first time. Half unconsciously, from standing fretfully at her side, he came to seating himself on the grass and looking in her face.

"Not a good feature," he thought to himself; "nothing but lovely teeth." In another half hour he had added, "and the prettiest laugh—rather like her cousin's."

Miriam saw it all. It was more than she

intended. She never meant Sir Gilbert to sit by Ada Tracey. He had done it entirely of his own accord. She was annoyed; and as the day wore on, and the two walked off together, her annoyance turned to anger, and she recommenced the dangerous flirtation with Captain Loftus. She felt that Sir Gilbert was watching her, and pique gave her renewed spirit. A sort of haughty smile sat on Sir Gilbert's face the rest of the day; but the parties were all now paired off, and remained so till the carriages were called. Mrs. Crewe was miserable, yet she tried to speak as usual when she addressed Sir Gilbert before driving home, and asked him to come home to supper.

"Delighted," said he, and Miriam gave him a quick glance. He was not looking at her, and Miriam drew her veil closely over her face, and lent back in the carriage.

"Your friend is charming, *ma cousine*," said Ada Tracey; but Miriam said nothing; only in her heart were the words, "Lost, lost!"—bitterly felt, though not breathed.

Still, there was the evening yet to come—it might not be quite over. "It was absurd—just those few hours!—and that frightful girl!" she kept murmuring to herself. "No—she would bring him back again easily." However, things seemed going against her. Although Captain Loftus was not there, Sir Gilbert spent that evening by Ada Tracey's side until just before he was about to take his leave, when, with a heart beating very fast, Miriam heard him follow her into the conservatory.

"I see now what you meant by saying you know my taste, Miss Crewe," said he, whilst Miriam's face was dyed with crimson; "and I have to thank you for a very pleasant day."

"Oh," said Miriam, and she tried to laugh it off, "then you see through my little joke? You recognize in my cousin the portrait I drew you? Do you admire her very much?"

The question was put sarcastically but Sir Gilbert answered, with perfect gravity, "She has the most beautiful hand and arm I ever saw."

"She had need have some redeeming presence of mind and turning away impetuously. Sir Gilbert smiled, took leave with calm courtesy and was gone.

"Lost," said her mother, as she dragged her weary steps up to bed, "lost—and all by her own folly. Oh, I could cry!"

And so could Miriam; but she was too proud. She flung herself on her bed; she passed a sleepless night, but rose the next morning, resolved to conquer such weakness. Sir Gilbert came about the house as usual. She was sweet and winning as ever; but a studied politeness had taken the place of his former nervous devotion. He never sought to have any *tête-à-tête* with her; he never now took advantage of the little opportunities of conversation which she gave him; and the season was drawing to a close—fatal sound in the ears of many a disappointed belle. People began to talk about going out of town; and Mrs. Crewe, seeing that affairs looked dangerous, would have given worlds to have sent Ada to some convenient friend, and remained in town another month herself, when suddenly the thunderbolt fell.

Sir Gilbert Acres proposed to the dark, ugly girl, to whom no one else had ever given a thought; and he was accepted by her.

Now began the acting. Mrs. Crewe was delighted—her dear niece!—such a providential circumstance!—just what her poor mother would have wished to live to see, and so forth; and the *trousseau* was ordered.

"To think," said that lady, "that I should have to order a *trousseau*, and not for Miriam!"

And the time sped on until the day of the wedding. The evening before that day Sir Gilbert and his *fiancée* sat in the dusk of the back drawing-room talking over their plans. It was a moment of confidences.

"How extraordinary it seems," said the bride elect, "that you should ever have given a thought to me!"

"Why so?" asked Sir Gilbert, smiling.

"Oh, for several reasons," she replied. "The first is, what could you possibly see in me? I have not a single attraction."

"Yet I was attracted," said Sir Gilbert.

"Now for the next reason."

"Well, next, I always thought your attraction was in a very different quarter," said Ada.

"I do not pretend to misunderstand you," he said.

"I mean Miriam," replied Ada.

"Yes," said Sir Gilbert, "Miriam."

"You did admire her," said Ada.

"Very much," he replied, "and do so still; but admiration is not all that is necessary when a man seeks a companion for life."

"Yet I thought," said Ada—"yes, I thought the admiration might have led you on?"

"Yes, so it might," said he; "but it did not."

"Why not, Gilbert?—not because of me?"

"No, Ada; you are too sensible to be offended at truth. It was not exactly because you won me away from your cousin. It was something she did and something she said, and he told her of the pointed flirtation with