

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF JOHN LONGWORTHY.

M. F. ROAN IN AVE MARIA.

XI.—*Esther Suffers.*

ESTHER watched the scene with deep interest. She could not hear what was said, nor could Mary.

"It's too bad that Miles cannot learn to behave himself," she murmured to her sister, as she watched the amazed look on Fitzgerald's face. "What is he saying?"

"Hush!" whispered Mary, trying to go on with the business of the dinner unconcernedly. "Do not mind him; he has been a little upset."

"Oh upset! Fiddlesticks!" began Esther.

"Esther," said Mary, rapidly and imploringly, "have patience. We women must bear a great deal for the sake of those we love. Miles has almost promised to go to his duty at Christmas, and don't—don't put any obstacle in his way."

This was an argument to which Esther had no answer. Mary had sacrificed so many things for the good of Miles' soul, and Esther was so genuinely reverent at heart, that she never said words she might have said when Mary pointed to Miles in his spiritual aspect.

"Look!" she whispered.

Miles' face, at Bastien's last words, had assumed the most wonderful look of astonishment and even horror. He turned helplessly to Fitzgerald, whose eyes were fixed with a strange gaze of fear on Bastien.

"My dear friend," Bastien continued, with a foreign accentuation of the r's in the speech, "you need not look at Mr. Fitzgerald; he knows nothing. Here is my card," and he drew a small square of pasteboard from his pocket. "If you will do me the honor to call at my little *atelier* to-morrow or next day, or the Fourth of July, or any day, you shall know all that is necessary for you to know about the late respectable John Longworthy. Oh, you look at me! Did I kill him? Well I did—if the law says so; but you must first prove it according to the law. Good night!"

Miles felt himself dismissed, and he was angry at himself for turning away. What right had that man to command him? Miles felt that he was better dressed, better-looking—that he had a louder voice, and that he wore a diamond. Nevertheless, he went back to his sisters' table, and forgot to grumble because the roast duck was cold; he forgot likewise to order the Chianti, much to Mary's joy. He looked at the card and read, "R. von Bastien, Photographer, No.—Bowery."

In the meantime Bastien asked very respectfully who the ladies were. Fitzgerald answered briefly, and Bastien went on:

"I have met the elder. She is a sweet and charitable gentlewoman. God be thanked that there are such women in the world!"

"Where did you meet her?" asked Fitzgerald, looking at his companion with distrust.

"At the bedside of the sick," Bastien answered. Then he continued: "Are they poor?"

"Who?" asked Fitzgerald, beginning to be irritated.

"Those ladies."

"They are not rich; they work every day for their living."

"And I think you said the younger is a musician?"

"I did," responded Fitzgerald, shortly.

Bastien smiled grimly.

"Come, come," he said; "let us finish our dinner. Trust me awhile, and you shall know all. If I did put the worthy Longworthy out of the way, believe me it was in self-defence."

He scanned Fitzgerald's face with a mocking look.

"For Heaven's sake, don't joke, Bastien! I have known nothing but good about you—have seen nothing but good. But if you go on this way—"

Fitzgerald stopped; Miles and his sisters had finished their coffee and were going. The young ladies repeated their cool nods, and Miles gave a sulky "Good-night." Vespucci followed them down-stairs graciously; and as the host was too preoccupied to ask Mary to lend him the price of the score,

Vespucci, who was the politest of men, put it down to Miles' account.

Esther made up her mind that a dinner at Vespucci's was not so gay as she had expected, but still it made her think of St. Mark's at Venice, of Mount Vesuvius, and the Doges; so she felt that it had somehow or other brought her nearer Europe.

Miles went up to his den after they reached home. Esther saw that Mary intended to make a long meditation, and when this had begun, and Mary was lost to all earthly things, she threw her fur cloak around her, glided through the hall, and knocked at Miles' door.

Miles had just arranged himself comfortably for a period of thought. His feet were on one chair and his body on another, and his corn-cob pipe was alight. His forehead was corrugated, for he was actually thinking with all his might. What did Bastien mean? He could not make out what all this meant. Were Fitzgerald and Bastien in league? Miles cursed his folly in blurting out his question. He ought to have waited. It was evident that Bastien was the most audacious and coolest villain possible. Miles' head swam; the knot was too tight for him.

Esther's knock aroused him, and before he knew what he was doing he had said:

"Come in!"

He was surprised to see Esther. It was generally Mary who brought him the salutary pitcher of lemonade.

Esther, uninvited, took a seat on a chair covered with newspapers, near the table. The light from the lamp showed Miles an unusual expression of determination on her face.

"Don't disturb yourself, Miles," she said: "I shall not stay long—but I shall not leave until I have found out what all this mystery means. What has Mr. Fitzgerald done?"

"I don't see what right you have to ask," responded her brother, sulkily. "I don't want to be badgered any more by you girls."

"I have a right to ask this question—you know I have. You introduce a gentleman to your sisters, and then, without any explanation, insist that we shall refuse to see him."

Miles looked at Esther's determined face and calculated, or tried to calculate, what would be the effect of his telling his thoughts to her. He had gotten himself into that state of mind which peremptorily required a confidant. He knew that he could trust Esther implicitly. If she chose to spurn his suspicions, she would be perfectly safe, at any rate. And she was the nearest person to him just now. He *must* tell somebody. Besides, he reasoned, if Esther really liked Arthur Fitzgerald she might be induced to raise money somehow in order to save that young gentleman's reputation. Miles was desperate enough to play any card. He held the opinion that Esther had an untold hoard of money somewhere, as she never gave him any, and he had on several occasions, when times were good, given her various gifts. Bastien had thrown him off the track. There was no use in attempting to run down a man of such unparalleled coolness. And Miles knew he must have money very soon, or a thing would happen from which he shrunk.

In the meantime Esther waited.

"You can't tire me out, Miles," she said, toying with the paper-knife. "Come, tell me the truth."

He puffed at his pipe and made his decision.

"The truth is, I believe Fitzgerald knows a great deal about the murder of John Longworthy."

Esther smiled. "Why do you say such a foolish thing? I am not a baby. It is easy to put Mary off with any story that comes into your head, but I am not Mary. And the only difference is that she tries to make herself believe she believes you, while I don't."

"I have proof of it," Miles said, calmly.

"How many times have you had all sorts of proofs in this Longworthy case? I wish you'd drop it and go to work."

Miles puffed at his pipe and watched Esther furtively. Then he told her about the handkerchief and the envelope. Esther's face whitened as she listened. She recalled Fitz-