

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF JOHN LONGWORTHY.

M. F. EGAN IN AVE MARIA.

A VIX.—*Miles Weeps.*

The longer Miles thought of his desolate condition—deserted, as it were, by his own blood, cast off, as he said to himself when he had finished his fourth glass of mildly diluted Scotch whiskey,—the more indignant he became, and the more resolved he was to strike his heartless sisters the deadliest blow in his power, and to bring them to repentance by the rudest shock he could devise. This would be, as Miles well knew, to go home hopelessly intoxicated.

It would cut Mary to the heart: it would cover Esther with shame; it would forever dim all the hopes Mary had founded on the virtuous lemonade. He would have preferred to go home drunk in the daylight, in face of all the old neighbors; but, then, that might injure his political chances; for the neighbors had a great respect for the Galligan girls. As to Esther, he felt that, after Mary was subdued, he could bring her to her knees by putting the thumb-screws on Arthur Fitzgerald as a man having guilty knowledge of the murder of John Longworthy.

By and by he would go home and lie prone on the steps until Mary and Esther, returning from the O'Connors, should find him in that condition, which Mary feared more than death itself. And to-morrow afternoon he would force Bastien to confess the murder; he would name his price, and go in for hard, earnest political work. He chuckled to himself as he thought of it all. Nellie Mulligan would drop down from her high horse, too, when she found there was money in it; and if she hesitated there were plenty of girls in the world,—and any girl would think twice before she refused him.

With his back turned to the incomers and outcomers, he thus pursued mentally, as it were, the primrose path of dalliance. He was not disturbed; for the bar-tender and his friends knew that Miles was indulging in one of his solitary "sprees." But to-night his mind was unusually active; hot Scotch had not its usual charms; he let a glass stand before him until it grew cold, and he was only roused from his long reverie by the striking of a clock and an altercation between the bar-tender and a wretched-looking woman, who, coming in search of her husband, had seized a handful of sandwiches from the counter, with an oath and a threat.

Miles was drowsy, and it was midnight. Perhaps Mary and Esther were home by this time. If not, they would soon be home now. He walked in the direction of the house,—very erect as regarded his body, very shaky as regarded his legs. A light, shaded and low, always burned in the front room when his sisters were at home. It was out; he lay down on the bristle of the door-mat and went to sleep, gladdened by the thought that when he awakened he would see two pallid, tearstained faces bending over him.

At one o'clock he opened his eyes with a shiver; it was cold,—an eager and biting air blew from the East River; he sneezed and sneezed again. Why did they not come? It was a pretty time for girls to be out! He was almost sober now, and very uncomfortable. If they did not come soon he should have to go in, and the whole effect of his scene, so carefully worked up, would be lost.

He cursed the deterioration of Scotch whiskey and the activity of his own brain; another blast from the river, another sneeze, and he arose and kicked at the door. After some delay the little servant, rubbing her eyes, came and let him in. He went sullenly up to his den, defeated but not conquered.

About four hours later he was awakened by footsteps, and voices, in the hall. He did not recognize them, but they were those of Bastien and Esther.

When little Rose O'Connor had gone home, Mary and the Sisters seemed to feel that Esther had endured enough. Nellie Mulligan came into the room, with her hand clasped in that of Lize Brown, who had forgiven the injury done to her shoes. They wept and wailed together, reproached themselves, and called down maledictions on everybody who had ever spoken an unkind word to little Rose. Finally, Bastien, who stood quietly near the foot of the lounge, trying to keep a blessed candle alight—the draughts at this hour were very noticeable in the room,—was obliged to ask them to leave.

He looked at Esther's pale face and reddened eyelids, but he did not dare to ask to see her to her house. Mary, however, was anxious about Esther; and, after some hesitation, she herself requested him to take her sister away. The Sisters, too, declared that her presence was not necessary; and, seeming in a dream, Esther found herself walking slowly over the muddy sidewalks with her arm in Bastien's. The dawn was in the east; the rattle of wagons had already begun. Bastien carefully helped her across a yawning sewer, and Esther felt a new delight in being taken care of.

At first little was said. Bastien, however, could not keep long from speaking of what was uppermost in his mind.

"You need not be afraid, Esther," he said, using the name as if it were familiar with him, and it did not sound singular to her. "You have brought me nearer to your God. I have needed Him long, but He seemed so far away! You are the human link that binds me to Him."

"No," she said gently, forgetting her weariness; "there is His Son. You have never understood His love, to which the topmost round in the golden ladder is His Mother."

Bastien was struck, as if with the light that flashed on St. Paul, with the fitness of this for the need he had felt.

"I once loved a woman" (Esther started); "her name was Bianca Rinaldi—I was young then,—but we parted because I could not accept her faith. She was true and gentle and sweet; she has since married. But we parted because I could not understand why she should cling to an outworn creed."

"Do you think it still outworn?" she asked, earnestly.

"My God, no!" he answered. "It is the most vital thing on earth."

Esther looked up at him, with entire trust in her eyes; his vehemence pleased her.

"You need tell me nothing more," she began. "I understand. If you are first true to God and His inspirations I need never fear."

Then an awful sense of the boldness of her words seemed to stop her heart. His face glowed with an inward light as he turned it toward her.

"Esther!" he murmured. And at that moment Bastien was happy. "But I must tell you something; it is a long story. Let us walk slowly."

He spoke rapidly after this, and Esther listened attentively, sometimes with a grave look, at others with a smile. When they reached the house there were tears in her eyes. She gave Bastien her hand, and said, in her low tones:

"Will you read the last stanza of Adelaide Procter's 'A Woman's Question'? It is my answer. Good-bye!" And the door closed.

Miles, hearing the sound, swaggered down the hall stairs, a frowzy and dilapidated object, with bleared eyes, and an unbrushed overcoat over a rudimentary toilet. He frowned at Esther, whose gaze met his serenely.

"It's the last time you'll come into this house, if you keep hours like this, young woman! Either you or I will have to leave—that's all!"

Esther did not answer until she had reached the head of the stairs. He repeated his speech then, with an oath that struck her heart like a bullet.

"You shall leave this house, and Mary, too!" he roared. "I've got my hands on your dude of a Fitzgerald's throat, and I'll teach you to defy me!"

This stung Esther, and she forgot the bullet wound.

"You are welcome to the house, Miles," she said, looking down at him over the baluster. "I shall go and Mary with me. I am engaged to be married to Mr. John Longworthy."

"It's a lie!" Miles growled. "He's dead—"

"He is alive: I saw him to-night."

Miles sat down in the hall chair and wept aloud. The hot Scotch was having its revenge.

XXX.—*The State of Mind of John Longworthy.*

Bastien had told Esther a story which did not seem wonderful to her, spoken in the weird light of the new day. At another time the shock of finding that there was no Bastien in all America, and that Mr. von Bastien was far away, following his business in Cuba, would have been very great. But after the discovery she had made—that her heart was given