

THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 28, 1907.

THE TRUE WITNESS AND CATHOLIC CHRONICLE.

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### A Marriage of Reason

By Maurice Francis Egan, Author of "The Land of St. Laurence," "Tales of Sexton Maginnis," "The Fate of John Longworthy," "Songs and Sonnets," "The Ghost in Hamlet," Etc.

CHAPTER XVI.—A Mystery.

Lord Marchmont did not linger long in Philadelphia; he went off to New York in search of an heiress, and Mrs. Sherwood saw his card, with "P.P.C." on it, in genuine grief. It was impossible for her to scold Katharine for telling Wirt Percival what she believed to be the truth. Her next anxiety was to prevent the lie from spreading further. Mrs. Sherwood knew by experience that, when a lie starts, no earthly creature can tell where it will cease its peregrinations or what forms it will take.

Katharine had defeated her, not by intrigue, but by simplicity. She acknowledged it—Wirt Percival had been rejected, and Lord Marchmont frightened off. She said to herself that if she could only command some good introductions in England, she would shake the dust of Philadelphia from her feet and try to settle Katharine there. She reflected that no doubt there were certain young Catholic baronets, perhaps even peers, in want of money, who might be induced to propose to Katharine. She had heard that Lord Beaumont was a Catholic, but she had also heard that he was married. She shut her lips tightly and made a vow that since Katharine would not make a marriage of reason with her eyes open, she must be deluded into one. Since she had entertained a live lord—though his title was only such by courtesy—she despised all the Wirt Percivals, the Ferdinand Careys, the Rittenhouses, and all the personages of her own city. She knew that Lord Marchmont would not return in a few days after his departure; the newspapers announced that he had had two collisions with Miss Van Golden, of New York, and that he had very nearly completed his Textbook of American Slang, for which the young Lord had a natural liking.

It would be useless to speak of that episode to her aunt; she must wait until her uncle should return. As she made out from a map of the city, the address would lead her far uptown. She did not know the city, and she was acquainted with nobody who could guide her. But she could wait, and she reflected that there might be more harm done by her wandering about the city in search of unknown persons than by refusing to act until her uncle should advise her.

She had one trial of freedom and she enjoyed it thoroughly. And she needed some enjoyment to make up for the fall of her castle in Spain. Mrs. Sherwood informed her one day, just as she had settled several important details in her life as a concert singer, that the affairs of Mr. Sherwood had miraculously improved—there was no need now for Mr. Wirt Percival's assistance.

"Oh, dear!" said Katharine, "I am so sorry—I thought—" and then, brought to her senses by the disapproving look on her aunt's face, she added, "It is fortunate."

But, nevertheless, she regretted with all her heart the disappearance of the visions of independence and of the details of the cottage life, including the silver candlesticks. Mrs. Sherwood was anxious that any rumor of her husband's insolvency should be contradicted. She was not sure that Wirt Percival would not mention it to his aunt. In that case, Mrs. Vavasour would soon gain possession of the precious morsel. To counteract such gossip she announced in the papers—she had of late become very polite to the "society" reporters—that her dinner and cotillon for Katharine would be a thing of unusual splendor.

"Dear me!" she said, as she unfolded the papers, "how these writing people do get hold of things. There is really no privacy nowadays. Listen to this!"—and Mrs. Sherwood read aloud:

"Mrs. Sherwood's dinner and cotillon, to introduce the niece socially, will be the smartest event of the season. The fashionable folk are leaving Lenox, Tuxedo, and their country-houses to be in season for this event. Miss Katharine O'Connor, cousin of the Lady Alicia St. John, daughter of the Earl of Bolingbroke, is one of the beauties of the season. Their favors for the cotillon, imported from Paris, will consist of silver roses, silver scarf-pins, and examples of Neapolitan filagree work."

"I must really write and ask that this thing be stopped," continued Mrs. Sherwood, watching Katharine over the paper. "It's vulgar—How stupid they are!"

"This fellow has actually said that I am to have the Marine Band from Washington, when I wrote distinctly that it would be the Mandolin Orchestra—" She paused, and colored slightly. Katharine discreetly examined the tracery on her plate, and her aunt congratulated herself that her involuntary revelation had been unheard. Katharine, however, did not need enlightenment; she had seen this same paragraph in Mrs. Sherwood's desk when that lady had sent her upstairs for her smelling-salts the day before, and it was her aunt's handwriting.

Mrs. Sherwood had to consider the matter of this great function carefully. The invitations alone would give her many days of anxiety. She determined to "cut" relentlessly everybody who was not willing to be presented to Mrs. Percival—no matter what their claims were. She would give something later, she resolved, to those second-rate people. She was terribly anxious to secure the Percivals, and she knew that it could only be done through Katharine's influence. She had no fear of filling her rooms. She knew well that society would be glad to ask for invitations, after the announcement that Wirt Percival and Lord Marchmont had dined at her house, and that Lady Alicia was a relative of Katharine's. But if society came, and found that Mrs. Percival and one or two other women of her set were absent, it would be a tremendous blow at her prestige.

"I wish you would go into town this afternoon," she said to Katharine. "I am busy, and I hear that Mr. Percival is not well. It would be good to call and ask about him; he seems to like you. You can be driven down to the station, and then take a hansom from Broad street."

"Oh, may I?" said Katharine. "I should like it. I am sure I can easily find the Percival house."

"Of course, and you might take six of the Baron de Rothschild roses—six, mind—six is all I can spare. You ought to wear your black tail—made gown as a background, if you were mad."

Katharine had barely risen from

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the table.

"Thank you, aunt."

"You may go at once, if you like, I suppose Herr Teufelisch does not come to-day."

"No."

Katharine copied several letters for her aunt, and, fortified by a cup of coffee and a roll, went to the station.

It was true that her dreams had been shattered by her aunt's contradiction of her previous story of her uncle's poverty. There would be no congenial work now for her, no pleasant sense of repaying her uncle for his kindness; but, after all, who can remember a vanished castle in Spain on a clear day with the sun shining, a novel journey before one, and a bunch of the biggest roses ever sent up their perfumes? Katharine certainly looked very happy. She reached the Broad street station in the swiftest possible state of mind. She examined and admired the interior of that ideal station, sat in an unoccupied seat, and watched the grate fire with the air of a waiting traveller. The bustle around her delighted her. Here passed a young girl with an alligator-skin bag and a little brother, just aroused to the fact that her train was about to start. There were three school-girls, with large portmanteaus, a mandolin, and a big box of candy, evidently late pupils for a boarding school. Near her was an old lady, neatly but poorly dressed, who wiped her eyes from time to time, and sat watching the clock. Katharine looked at her and longed to ask her if she could be of use. But a certain shyness and delicacy prevented this. She saw a shining tear fall on the rusty black of the lady's dress. She started up from her seat and stood in front of the fire irresolutely. What was the matter? Perhaps the old lady was on her way to the bedside of a dying son? Perhaps she had just left a grave, and perhaps she was alone in the world. Katharine stood still with her magnificent roses clasped in her hands, wishing that she might ask a question of the sorrowful woman. But she had not the courage to intrude on a grief that seemed so sacred. She turned to go, with her eyes fixed on the white, wrinkled, but gentle face under the black bonnet. Then she remembered her roses. Surely there had never been seen such great and vivid roses as those in her hand, half buried in green, polished leaves. Doubtless Mrs. Sherwood had intended that they should bring out exclamations of wonder from some envy. Of a dark pink, with close-set petals, each shaped like the shell of a heart, with an glimpse of powdery gold centres and hints of richer red, they were indeed sumptuous. People stared as they passed at the slender girl, who seemed but a stem for a bright flower-face and this incomparable bunch of roses. The Baroness de Rothschild is not so exquisite as the tea rose or the Marchale Niel; sometimes, when full-blown, it, like the Jacqueminot, has an air of over-richness which seems vulgar. But these special roses were even sweeter than the American Beauties, and without that faded look that sometimes marks those fine flowers. Katharine's roses were as vivid as a flash of pink flame, and their scent seemed to envelope her as in a cloud.

She chose the largest of the roses, and walking to the old lady, dropped it in her lap as they passed. For an instant the tears were dried—the weak blue eyes caught the look of interest on Katharine's face, and then the shriveled hands caught up the great rose, and the lonely woman kissed it. Katharine went away, feeling that a blessing rested on her.

She had no thought of talking to a hansom. Could she not walk? And were there not policemen to direct her? She went slowly along her dear, delightful Chestnut street. Was there any other street in all the world so beautiful? Biddy boasted of Sackville street, and said there was no place under Heaven like Dublin during the great horse show. And Mr. Percival had praised Euclid avenue, in Cleveland. And Lord Marchmont had said that the Strand was his ideal of a city place. And Mrs. Percival had declared for Fifth avenue on Sunday at mid-day. Wirt Percival had mentioned with approval some Paris street, with its chairs and tables on the asphalt in the moonlight, but Katharine said to herself that there could be no street in any city so pleasant as Chestnut street on a clear morning.

At Thirteenth street, a church caught her eye. It was St. John's. She turned up to it and went in as a matter of course. Katharine could always pray best when she was happy. She knelt in the incense-scented gloom and said her beads. Outside sounded the rumble of carts on

the cobble-stones and the jingle of bells. Inside there was peace. She went to the altar railing and laid her five roses on the carpet in front of the altar of our Lady.

When she had sufficiently enjoyed the novelty of the shop windows, she found her way to Walnut street, and, taking a car, rode to Mrs. Percival's house.

Mrs. Percival was having luncheon in her little study, as she called it; but she ordered that Katharine should come to her. This study was lined with books all bound in white vellum, on ebony shelves, which ran around the room almost to the ceiling. A yellow-colored divan, a writing-table, on which the luncheon was placed, a tall orange tree and some palms made up the furniture of this room. Katharine declined everything but a cup of tea. Mrs. Percival seemed in a softened mood.

"Have you come to tell me that you have changed your mind about Wirt?" she asked.

"No, indeed," said Katharine. "I have come to ask after your husband. My aunt said he was ill."

"Your aunt!" repeated Mrs. Percival, with a curl of her lip. "Mr. Percival's temper is ill, and he has gone out for a walk. To tell you the truth, your aunt is the cause of a little quarrel we had a few minutes ago. She announced a big rout of some kind in the papers this morning and I told Mr. Percival I wouldn't go. He insisted that we ought to be there for your sake; so we disagreed, and he went out for a short walk; he's well enough for that now."

"Oh, don't bother about coming," said Katharine, earnestly. "I shall not mind, for those crowded affairs are very tiresome. I wish I were out of it myself. I'm sure it's much pleasanter to see you in this nice, little room. Don't bother. There will be plenty of people there without you," added Katharine cheerfully, "and my aunt will not mind after a minute or two."

Mrs. Percival gave Katharine a sharp glance. Did the girl mean to be impudent? This was an unusual way of disposing of a social magnate who was in the habit of making or unmaking the result of assemblies by her presence or absence.

Katharine was serenely unconscious and Mrs. Percival saw it.

"I suppose you are right about Wirt. Mixed marriages are generally failures," she said with a sigh.

Katharine hastened to change the subject. Here was a chance to speak to a prudent woman about the note she had received on the night of the opera. Mrs. Percival listened to her with attention. She took up a small handscreen and shaded her face while Katharine spoke.

"Jane Mavrick!" she exclaimed. "Where?—but let me see the note!"

Katharine gave it to her. She read it, with the screen still held between her and her visitor.

"Let me keep this, my dear," she said, in a low voice. "And pay no more attention to it; leave it to me; if the woman is in want, I will take care of her. Promise not to go near her—promise," she said anxiously. "Oh, I will go to your aunt's crush if you will promise—promise, I am afraid I am not well to-day!"

"Of course I will promise," answered Katharine, surprised by her excitement. "I am sure my aunt will be pleased—"

"I know—I will come,—tell her so! And now, my dear, have another cup of tea, and forget Jane Mavrick!"

(To be continued.)

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