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A Marriage of Reason

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

CHAPTER XIV.—Continued.

What a sad world it was. Music, roses, glitter, rank, fashion—and death and misery lurking behind them! What would life be, if there were no benignant Mother awaiting to show, at the end of the vale of tears, the blessed vision of her Son.

CHAPTER XV.—Frankness.

Mrs. Sherwood's dinner party consisted of Wirt Percival, the Lady Alicia, Ferdinand Carey, Katharine and Lord Marchmont. She had forgotten all about Katharine's note in her interest in her new plan. Of course, she would have Lord Marchmont take her in to dinner. Percival would play host, and take in the Lady Alicia, and Katharine and Ferdinand Carey would be together—a harmless combination. She could easily draw the young Englishman into talk about himself, tell stories of Mr. Sherwood's wealth, and prepare the way for a proposal to Katharine. In the meantime, Lady Alicia might make up with Wirt Percival, who, Mrs. Sherwood confidently believed did not know his own mind. Katharine O'Connor must be the Lady Marchmont, if the two were separated on the day after the marriage. She had set her heart on this, and she would have it so.

Katharine went down to the drawing-room with a heavy heart. There seemed to be some impending danger. She was somewhat cheered by the soft light and warmth of the room, which, for the occasion, had been made a nest of roses of Mrs. Sherwood's favorite yellow. Katharine was very simply dressed in some soft material, chosen by her aunt, with silver threads drawn through it. She was a contrast to Lady Alicia, whose amber silk gown

and heavy amber ornaments lacked the gracefulness of Katharine's dress. Lord Marchmont noted the difference at once, and the Lady Alicia felt it.

Katharine was the last to come in. Mrs. Sherwood gave her a scrutinizing glance and frowned. Katharine had not put on the pearl necklace she had lent her, and she had neither fan nor nosegay—though her aunt had sent both to her room. Katharine had a dislike to the encumbering of her hands with trifles of that kind.

"How do you manage it?" said Lady Alicia, when she had kissed her. "You have the simplest gown on, and yet you contrive to make me feel over-dressed, though I assure you, Kate Reilly made this frock."

"It is beautiful," said Katharine, sincerely. "I must tell the truth, I put this dress together myself. I did not like it when it came home."

"Goodness gracious! no wonder your aunt is frowning," said Biddy, laughing. "I don't know how it is, you Americans can wear anything gracefully. I see Lord Marchmont's here," continued the quiet girl, taking a serious tone. "He could not be invited to a decent house in Dublin; he looks harmless enough, but he has been dropped from his clubs everywhere, and there are a hundred unpleasant stories about him. And yet you people make much of him! I really can't understand why a title should make you all wild, and some of you are nice enough without it."

Katharine looked at Lord Marchmont and pitied him. She could hardly believe that so young a man could have done anything very bad; he looked gay and bright, too, though he had an air of dissipation.

"Don't cultivate a desire to convert him," whispered her friend, "and I advise you to have as little to do with him as possible. He is a fortune hunter."

At this moment Mr. Sherwood's butler announced that dinner was served. Katharine took Ferdinand Carey's arm, and the dinner began. The girl, looking at the six people around the rose and fern-covered table—for the flowers left very little of the table cloth exposed—could not realize that their thoughts were not as cheerful and innocent as hers. Everybody seemed happy; she did not know that one of the indispensable requirements of a social education is that everybody should seem free from care when the dinner lights are lit and the room is lit.

Ferdinand Carey spoke little at first, but Lady Alicia and Percival made up for his silence, with the assistance of Lord Marchmont. They talked about people in London, until Mrs. Sherwood grew so delighted that she made the butler bring out some of her husband's Madeira, a wine which did not usually appear. She was almost happy; she had found her place at last. How times had changed since she had stood behind her father's counter in days gone by! She would have predicted that she would have sat at her own table, faultless in every particular, and

heard a peer's son and an Irish earl's daughter include her in their conversation, as if she knew Lady de Gray and all the other smart people in London. Not long ago she had carried her own market basket home, with the celery and the fowl's legs sticking out, and she had been rather proud of it,—for her fowl and her celery were the best to be had in Second Street market. Then she had thought respectfully of such people as the Percivals—not only respectfully, but with awe. But here she was manoeuvring to reject young Wirt Percival, that her niece might marry Lord Marchmont, who knew the Prince of Wales and who had a hundred familiar anecdotes about lords and ladies of every degree! Surely the Sherwoods had gone up in the world,—but how glad she was that her husband was not at home to spoil her plans!

She looked at Katharine very kindly now, in spite of the changes which that young woman had seen fit to make in her dress. She felt thankful that a convent education had reduced her niece to such docility. After all, she thought, there must be something in an education which makes a girl not only attractive to well-bred people, but keeps her so plastic that she can be moved about like a pawn on a chess-board. How lovely it was to be able to use this young life to further her own social advancement, Mrs. Sherwood thought. It was natural that a woman of her kind should entirely misunderstand a woman whose standards were such as Katharine's. Moreover, Katharine had been taught to believe that there was much good in human nature; Mrs. Sherwood distrusted its existence.

It was arranged that coffee should be served in the little conservatory, for Mrs. Sherwood was very proud of her palms, which had been arranged in thick groups about a choice collection of orchids.

The funniest thing happened in London one night at dinner," said Lord Marchmont, when the group had made itself comfortable and picturesque in the softly-lighted conservatory. "An American was deploring against the extravagance of the English aristocracy, and he wound up his list of horrors by saying, 'and these people actually eat orchids at five hundred dollars apiece!'"

Everybody, except Katharine, laughed.

"I suppose the fellow meant artichokes," said Wirt.

"He meant what he said," returned Lord Marchmont. "Americans are so frightfully ignorant of things of that kind."

Katharine, who had stood up to examine a magnificent purple and gold orchid, for which her uncle had paid a fabulous sum, turned hastily—

"Don't you think you are too hard on Americans?" she asked, smiling. "Or is it that you expect every American you meet to be a scholar and gentleman, and when they prove otherwise you are disappointed?"

Lord Marchmont did not answer. Ferdinand Carey laughed. "What would this girl say next? It was refreshing to find one woman who was not an Anglo-maniac. She had spoken very gently, but she evidently waited for an answer."

"Oh, you know," said Lord Marchmont, after a pause during which even the Lady Alicia declined to help him, "Americans are Americans, don't you know—and not quite up in civilization—that is, new, you know."

Katharine looked at him intently, and she made a striking picture in her white gown, with a background of palms; she was interested, and therefore not at all timid.

"I never heard that you were not civilized, and I think you are mistaken. Mother Ursula—"

"Always Mother Ursula," murmured Mrs. Sherwood, with a sneer. "—always said that Americans, when they are cultivated, have more tact and taste than any other people in the world."

"But so few are cultivated," said Lady Alicia. "I assure you one seldom sees an American at the Castle, though they tell me there are crowds of second-rate ones at the Lord Mayor's."

"You ought to stand up for Americans, Biddy," said Katharine, reproachfully, "when you remember all that America has done for Ireland."

"Done for Ireland!" cried the Lady Alicia, indignantly. "I don't know what America has done for Ireland, except to keep up the Land League and to help the tenants steal our rents."

"America has given many of you a refuge—many of us, I may say," said Katharine. "For my father took advantage of it. If I were not half an Irish girl, it might seem vulgar for me to remind you of the gratitude the Irish owe America. As it

is, I think I may say that whenever Ireland needed help, America opened her hands most generously."

Lady Alicia fanned herself vigorously. "Americans are generally upstarts," she said; "and in Dublin we consider that people who leave Ireland for America are either paupers or queer."

Katharine turned to her flowers. For a moment Ferdinand Carey wished that Mrs. Vavasour was present; she would doubtless have spiced the Lady Alicia's gums with a glance which would have put that noblewoman fit once among the "queer."

"I am glad to be the daughter of a man whom your Dublin people call a 'pauper' or 'queer.' I am happy to be called an American," said Katharine.

"Oh, your father was a gentleman," began Biddy. "He was my mother's—"

Mrs. Sherwood interrupted. She disapproved of this conversation. It put Lord Marchmont in an unpleasant position, and it would probably drive him from Katharine.

Katharine walked slowly to a large deep window, separated from the rest of the conservatory by a thick screen of fern palms. Much to her vexation Lord Marchmont saw Wirt Percival follow her. She could hear the murmur of their voices, but she could not leave Lord Marchmont, who was explaining to her the etiquette of an English house party. Carey and Lady Alicia were looking at the orchids and filling and refilling their little golden cups with coffee many times,—for they were both lovers of this Arabian beverage. If Mrs. Sherwood could have heard what was said behind the Marchmont, she would have left Lord Percival to finish his talk in monologue.

"You were not in earnest the other night when you refused to marry me," Wirt Percival said. "Or, rather, perhaps you thought I was not in earnest enough. The moment I heard you sing I knew you were the one woman I loved."

"I am anxious to talk to you," said Katharine, with a frankness that amazed him. "But not about that. Love founded on a song will cease with the song. If I should lose my voice, what kind of a husband would I make? No, no. No. If I should marry a man outside the Church, I should be wretched and make him wretched. For my sake—for my soul's sake—I could not marry you, even," Katharine added with a smile, "if I had fallen in love with your singing."

Katharine wondered at her own ease in saying these things; where was the timidity of her first entrance into society now? She felt that she ought to say what she meant as well as she could.

"You are too scrupulous,—people keep religion in the background nowadays. I'm sure half the people in town don't know whether my aunt goes to the Cathedral or to Trinity. I know that you are too sensible to believe that I am dying for love of you,—but I do like you better than any girl I have ever seen,—and I am sure that, if we were engaged, we might learn to love each other as devotedly as—as as anybody."

Wirt was frank in his turn, and much in earnest.

"I should have no objection to going to church with you, at High Mass, you know, six o'clock would not suit me at all. And in time—who knows?—I might learn to believe myself. But at present I cannot accept any form of Christianity. We could both be tolerant. Reason can make everything right."

"Not that which is unreasonable," said Katharine.

The moonlight came in through the window, sublimating Katharine's profile and color, and intensifying the purity of her expression. Percival admired her more and more; he was not in love, but he felt that he might be. He had an uneasy idea that Mrs. Sherwood wanted to get rid of him in favor of Lord Marchmont, and he knew that the latter had begun to think of Katharine. The color rose to his cheeks as he thought of such a sacrifice, for he knew Marchmont's reputation as a worthless, idle and corrupt creature.

"Let us be engaged," he said, taking Katharine's hand. She drew it away.

"No," she answered.

"I will do anything you ask—anything; I will even go through your Catholic forms."

"It would only be going through forms," she said, with a sigh. "Religion is vital; it is more than forms. There is one object to gain which I might become your wife if I did not value my faith and freedom more than life, and that I can gain without what would mean misery to us both."

He raised his hand as if in protest.

"Yes, misery," she repeated. "I

have thought often with a shudder of the horror of being an essential part of a life which knew not my God—my Lord."

Percival looked at her with a new sense of respect. Perhaps there were things in life which meant more than mere living and enjoying from day to day.

"I could like you," she continued, "you are honest and worthy of trust."

He made a slight bow.

"And you like me because other people seem to like me."

"Because," he said, with another bow, "you are the most distinguished woman I have ever met."

They both laughed.

"I am a poor Romeo," he said. "This is not the way they make love in novels—though we have the palms and the moonlight."

"We are friends, not lovers. May I ask you to save my uncle?" she asked, hearing a rustle, and anxious to gain her object.

Percival stared at her.

"Save your uncle? Do you mean Mr. Sherwood? Save him?"

"He is in your power,—he has lost everything,—he will be a ruined man unless you arrange matters, you know what I mean. Oh, do help him!"

Katharine looked at him imploringly.

"I don't understand," he said. "I really don't. But I will do what I can—I am astonished—"

"Katharine!"

It was Mrs. Sherwood's voice. As a chaperon with a conscience she felt herself obliged to interfere. Katharine looked at Percival, asking the question with her eyes. He nodded.

"Thank you," she said, as Mrs. Sherwood parted the palm branches. Katharine drew her bewildered aunt towards her and whispered.

"Oh, aunt, I am so happy!"

"You haven't accepted him?" Mrs. Sherwood cried, frowning.

"Oh, no," exclaimed Katharine, radiantly, "but he has promised to help uncle."

Mrs. Sherwood stood as one transfixed; Katharine left her, before she could speak to join Biddy. Percival had left the winking eye. Mrs. Sherwood went behind the palm screen and stood in the moonlight composing her nerves. What did that idiot of a girl mean? A horrible suspicion entered her mind. It was confirmed in a few minutes.

"You've been monopolizing that O'Connor girl," she heard Lord Marchmont's voice saying. "You ought to have given me a chance.—her aunt says she will be a millionaire—and she's chic."

"I may as well kill your hopes at once, Marchmont," answered Percival dryly. "I have later news; she has just told me that her uncle is a beggar. We go fast in America."

"Oh," said Lord Marchmont, "thank you—that lets me out."

Mrs. Sherwood clasped her hands; then in the most unladylike manner, she shook her fist at an invisible person.

(To be continued.)

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