

table. He awoke with a start, for he had a burden on his mind which he determined to shift to his sisters as soon as possible. He dragged himself wearily up the stairs; then, putting his head between the folding-doors, he demanded:

"Is that idiot gone?"

"No," answered Esther, with a flash of her old spirit; "he's always with us!"

Miles looked sullenly at her. She had just turned herself up to tell Mary about the concerts, and the interruption was irritating. Miles, too, had his revelation to make. He wanted to make it to Mary first, and he determined to get Esther out of the room. Late on Christmas Eve he had escorted Miss Nellie Mulligan home from Lacy's great exporium, and (he did not exactly know how it had come about) he had asked her to be Mrs. Miles Galligan.

XVII. *Mary is Disenchanted.*

Mary was delighted to see her brother.

"Come sit down," she said; "we shall have Christmas evening in the old way, — all together and under one roof!"

"If Esther will leave us for a minute," Miles answered, "I shall tell you something that you ought to know, — something that will surprise you."

Esther rose from her seat and turned an astonished face toward him. So Miles was going *to tell*, after all! No doubt for some purpose of his own! It would kill Mary to know the truth, and after her own agony and doubt! To think that she had suffered in vain!

"I think Esther may hear anything you have to say," observed Mary, the smile fading from her lips. "We ought to have no secrets."

"I will save him the trouble," exclaimed Esther, rapidly; "for I know he intends to twist things in his usual way to his own advantage. I put *my* money into the bank because he told me that he had taken *ours*. Heaven knows, Mary, I did it for the best. And if I did not tell you it was because I did not want to give you the pain of knowing —"

"Knowing what, Esther?" asked Mary, looking from one to the other in bewilderment.

"Of knowing that your own brother could be capable of taking — what was not his own."

"Esther," Miles exclaimed, keep quiet! I thought you did not want *her* to know. You ought to be ashamed of yourself to get me into this scrape, when you pretended to take so much trouble to get me out of it."

"Why did you threaten to tell? You know I have never had a secret from Mary before."

"What does this mean?" asked Mary, turning very white.

"It means," answered Miles, "that Esther has betrayed my confidence. I took I'll not deny it three hundred dollars of yours as a loan, because I needed it badly. Esther replaced it, and now she is spiteful enough to accuse me of theft."

"What would *you* call it?" asked Esther, her eyes flashing at what seemed to be his unparalleled impudence.

"Do you think I would have taken anybody else's money?" Miles turned to Mary with an air of injured virtue. "I knew that Mary would not begudge me anything I needed, and I needed the money badly; it was a debt of honor. I had not the courage to confess it. I wrote your name, Mary, overcome by a sudden temptation, and paid my debt like an honest man."

Esther, her soul in her eyes, watched her sister as this insolent avowal was made. Would Mary fall prone to the earth? Esther made a step forward as if to save her.

But Mary did not fall; she turned a shade paler, and asked Miles to repeat his statement. He told his story again as pathetically as possible. He owed a man a lot of money; the man's child died, and he wanted the money at once. (Miles added this in the heat of the moment, for the money had been lost at a poker club); and, overcome by the necessity of the case, and being sure that he could replace the money, he had "borrowed" it. He was guilty, he knew; he was sorry. But Mary must remember that he had not acted with a bad intention.

Esther could not endure this sophistry; she turned from him impatiently, marvelling at Mary's calmness.

"O Miles!" Mary said, earnestly, "you must never think of doing such a thing again. The money is nothing, but think how your thoughtless act could be interpreted! People, if they knew it, would call it stealing."

"I call it theft!" cried Esther. "And Mary — Heaven knows I have not often seriously questioned your wisdom, — this is suicidal! You are condoning a sin. A man that would rob his sisters would rob anybody!"

"Esther," said Mary, her face growing stern, "is this the way the prodigal son was received?"

"But the fatted calf — no, I mean the prodigal son repented; *he* does not repent."

"It seems to me," said Miles, with his usual sullen air, adopted when speaking to Esther, "that you have a secret, too. Ask her where she got the money to make good my loan, Mary, and you will see that she does not tell you everything."

Esther went up to Mary and took her hand.

"I am anxious to tell you the first secret I have ever kept from you."

She told Mary the story of her engagement to sing at Mr. Bastien's concerts. When she had finished she felt as if she had confessed a sin.

Mary looked at her tenderly, and tears glistened in her eyelashes.

"It was well done," she said, softly; "and yet it was not prudent for a young girl like you. Miles' fault has not 'killed' me, you see. I could not be easily killed." She took Miles' hand and placed it in Esther's. "Come, now, forget; be as loving as if you were little children again. And keep no secrets from me; remember I am your mother now. Let us begin by loving one another more than ever from to-night."

Esther gave Miles a reluctant hand, which he grasped even more reluctantly.

Here was his chance, he said to himself. He would strike while the iron was hot. Surely, in this mood, Mary would hear what he had to say with complaisance. In his heart he wished he had not said anything to Nellie Mulligan; and he would not have done so had she not told him that Jim Dolan had asked to "keep company" with her. As he had done so he must tell Mary, for money must be forthcoming during the period of the engagement. Nellie would have to know, too, how his sisters looked on the proposed match. She had, as Miles knew, a spirit of her own, and she had impressed on him the necessity of fixing her statue with his sisters at once.

"I have a secret, Mary, that I want to tell."

The young girl raised her head apprehensively. Esther could see that she trembled a little.

"The truth is," he began, with a laugh that sounded foolish even to himself, "I've gone and done it, that is, I'm regularly caught. You know how it is yourself, or I mean you don't know; in fact, I'm engaged to be married!"

Mary, who had taken his hand caressingly when Esther let it go, dropped it suddenly and stared at him in amazement. Esther bent an equally bewildered gaze on him.

"You needn't stare a man out of countenance! You've heard of engagements before, haven't you? Some fellows marry when they have to borrow money to give the priest; but with my prospects it's very different."

Miles' voice died away into a silence of embarrassment. Neither Mary nor Esther spoke.

"You ought to know her," he continued, in a subdued tone. "She has more style than any girl I ever saw. She's got 'go,' she's got 'dash.' She'll liven this old house up and make things hum. There's no flies —"

"Stop, Miles!" interrupted Mary, in a tone she had never used to her brother. "Are you in your senses?"

Esther, though the feeling seemed guilty, felt stimulated by Mary's changed attitude.

"In my senses?" exclaimed Miles, glad to feel that he might assume a congenial, bullying tone. "I am very much in my senses, and I want to know what you mean."

"I mean," said Mary, sitting down for she could not stand, so great was the trembling that had seized her, — "that you have forgotten your position. How dared you speak of marriage to any girl? You know as well as I do that you have no occupation, — that you have not a cent in the world."