

THE LITTLE OLD SECRETARY

(CONTINUED.)

"More rain yet" was to fall upon this dreary day. At the supper, which always wound up the evening, the conversation turned upon a very clever book which had just been published by a so-called Liberal Catholic, and which was attracting universal attention. Lord Melton avowed himself charmed with the work. "It so completely realized," he said, "what he had always felt, that religious differences need not make the smallest separation in the large sympathies of educated minds."

Naturally enough, the presence of three guests who were none of them Catholics had prevented the conversation hitherto from turning on any religious topic, and Kathleen, who was exceedingly shy on any subject, which touched her keenly, instinctively felt the propriety of this reserve. But now when she heard Lord Melton descending on the freedom of educated Catholics from prejudice, and their contempt for the bead telling and superstition of the lower orders, she looked in blank dismay from one to the other of her cousins, wondering how long they would let him go on before they spoke out and vindicated the purity of their faith.

Kathleen had been brought up in an atmosphere of faith, and she had drunk in love and veneration for the Mother of God with the earliest dawn of reason. The reality of her tender offices; the response of her maternal heart to those who love her; her watchful presence with her children; all these were to Kathleen as much realities of her daily life as the earth on which she stood or the sun above her head. The intense filial affection she bore to her earthly mother had been to her a sort of sacramental shadow of what she owed to her heavenly Mother. And now to hear her devotion to this holy Mother ridiculed brought the hot blood to her cheeks, and she felt in the position of one who hears unseemly and unloving words uttered in the hearing of some cherished and venerated friend by speakers unconscious of her presence.

To Kathleen's extreme distress the only words which came from either uncle or cousins were unmeaning remarks which might easily be construed into adhesion to the sentiments which Lord Melton was enunciating and in his ignorance was evidently imagining to be the highest compliment he could pay to his Catholic auditors.

But suddenly his eye caught Kathleen's flushed, appealing face, and, turning to her, he said good-naturedly:

"I am afraid I am shocking your orthodoxy, Miss McDermot, but I am quite certain you never waste your time in that unmeaning saying of beads which seems the solitary devotion of the low Irish. You don't think us all heretics because we prefer contemplating the grand open book of nature to studying paltry legends of the Virgin."

There was a natural fearlessness in Kathleen's disposition which enabled her to face a difficulty bravely at the moment, though she went through agonies of shyness afterwards. The look of distress passed from her face at this direct appeal. She saw, in her mind's eye, that sweet maternal presence in which she was accustomed to live, and she answered the question put to her without a moment's hesitation:

"Indeed I do, I would not change the grace gained by an Ave properly said for the highest science in the world." She clasped her hands together earnestly and added softly: "Oh! the beauty of God's Mother! If you could but see it!"

There was a dead pause, and then Kathleen became conscious of the rash act she had committed.

For the first time Lord Melton looked thoroughly annoyed, and seemed at a loss for an answer, while every member of the family sent a cold, displeased glance at her, giving her plainly to understand she was damaging them as well as herself. She did not meet one sympathizing look except from Jack. His soldier-like spirit appreciated her courage, though even with him constant contact with the Protestant world had dimmed his keen perception of that great first principle that "Truth is not our's, but God's."

Lord Melton soon recovered himself, and was the first to break the gloomy silence which had fallen upon all the party.

"Why! Mr. Fitzgerald," he said, "I did not know you had such a stout little Papist under your roof. I must be careful what I say."

There was, perhaps involuntarily, a slight shade of contempt in the little laugh that accompanied his words, and, taking no further notice of Kathleen, he turned the conversation and began talking politics with her uncle.

Poor Kathleen! she wished she could have annihilated herself. Yet who shall say that the witness borne by that young voice had no effect. "Truth is God's." It has God's majesty inherent within it. It will convince men, even when they deem it repelling, because it is God's truth, and we have boldness and faith to put our trust in it.

Kathleen knew this and did trust it. Distressed as she was to have pained her uncle and offended Lord Melton, not a shadow of hesitation disturbed her conscience as to whether she had done wrong in speaking:

"Fais ce qui dois, adviene que pourra." This, her father's favorite motto, held more than ever now, when her silence would have been a case of being ashamed of that which she was bound to confess openly. Yet it was very hard to find herself recovered by an atmosphere of general disapprobation. The evening ended heavily, too; and this, of course, was all put to her account.

How thankful she was when the time came to depart for the night, and she was free to go to her own room, to which, contrary to their usual custom, neither of her cousins followed her.

She found Rose waiting outside her bedroom door, holding a letter in her hand.

"This was on the slab in the hall, Miss Kathleen," she said, "but we were in such a hurry when we came in, we did not see it."

It was a letter from home, and, in her impatience to know its contents, Kathleen opened it at once, where she stood on the landing, under the gas lamp. It was from her mother, and the news it contained was very sad. Her father, who had been getting on much better, had had another attack and was much worse. Her mother wrote very despondingly:

"If he could have but perfect freedom from anxiety," the letter said, "I do think he would get well. It is these continual agitations that do all the mischief. This last attack was brought on entirely by a lawyer's letter pressing on the sale of McDermot's Hill. Pray fervently, my child, that our dear Mother in Heaven may shine upon us in this night of storms."

Poor Kathleen's already over-taxed spirits gave way; she pressed the letter to her lips and sobbed aloud.

"Oh! my poor father! my poor father! it's all over now," she murmured, "I shall only bring back disappointment, instead of being, as you hoped, the dove with the olive-branch."

Her grief so pre-occupied her that she forgot where she was standing till aroused by some one passing her. Raising her tearful face, she met a kind, pitying look from Mr. Everard.

"You have had news, I fear?" he inquired gently, looking at the letter in her hand.

The tone of sympathy made the poor child's tears break out afresh, and it was with difficulty she could command her voice enough to answer him.

"My father is worse," she sobbed out at last; then turning away quickly hurried to her room.

For a short time after she had laid her head upon her pillow, Kathleen's sorrowful thoughts kept her wakeful; but youth and her innocent heart soon brought her the blessing of calm and refreshing sleep. Yet, as was natural after the various and strong excitements of the day, she dreamed, and the day's events mingled themselves in her dream.

She was standing, as she fancied, upon the seashore, the waves rippling up close to where she stood. A path of silvery light seemed to span the sea, and upon it, approaching her, appeared a female form and face of wondrous, heavenly beauty. Around her feet, as she advanced, the light foam that crested the waves gathered itself like a cloud of incense, while the stars seemed falling everywhere, and as they fell they fashioned themselves into angelic shapes, encircling, as with an aureole, the shining whiteness of her figure. Sounds of exquisite music seemed to fill the air, shaping themselves into the words of an old rhythm her mother used to sing, and the burden of which was:

"Oh! happy Virgin!
Let all that love thee, bless thee!
Bless us, oh! holy Virgin!
Together with thy Son. Amen.
Oh! happy Virgin! oh! holy Virgin!
Oh! Mother of God!
Let all that love thee, bless thee."

The melodious strains floated in and out, now nearer, now further off, as though the sea and the earth and the sky were together sending forth those sweet harmonies, separate yet concordant; Kathleen fancied that she too joined the song, and was singing her heart out in ecstasy. Presently the radiant vision gliding past her seemed to fade away upon the shore, and all was silence, save the soft rippling of the waves.

Kathleen felt spell-bound. She could not move her eyes from the spot where the lovely apparition had vanished, absorbed in the intense longing that it might come again. As she remained thus entranced, her lips seemed in her dream to keep syllabing the words, "Why could I not speak better of thy beauty, oh! my mother? Why could I only say so feebly, 'If you could but see?' Suddenly, as the plaintive cry waivered from her lips, the brilliant vision reappeared.

Again she saw the path of light, and this time the bright form upon it seemed to approach closer, and closer, till she could distinguish the features of the Holy Virgin, and could see that in her loving arms lay cradled the little child she and Rose had saved that day. It seemed to Kathleen that the heavenly Mother bent over her with a tender look of maternal love and plesed her, and the babe stretched out its little hands and smiled—then all began to ascend.

Kathleen gazed earnestly after the departing forms, longing to follow them, and as she looked she saw drop from the infant's hand what appeared like a spray of olive.

She stooped to pick it up, grasping it tightly. When she raised her head again the beautiful vision had disappeared and she was alone; the stars were shining brightly in the dark blue heavens and the rippling waves were washing over her feet.

She woke with a start and found herself grasping tightly a small

wooden cross she always wore at night.

She sat up. The moon was shining brightly into her room, and so vivid had been her dream that she looked round her expecting almost to see the Blessed Virgin with the little babe standing by her bedside. She passed her hands across her eyes to arouse herself.

"I have been dreaming," she murmured, half out loud, "dreaming a lovely dream. Perhaps what I hope for so much may come true. Perhaps that little infant has gone to heaven and will pray for me; or, if not, its angel, who always beholds the face of our Father, Who is in heaven, will be sure to intercede for me."

CHAPTER VIII.

"Her spirit seemed as seated on a throne Apart from the surrounding world, and strong In its own strength, most strange for one so young."—BYRON.

The next morning Kathleen went early to the morning room, to put some finishing touches to her sea piece for the tableaux. She determined to be as obliging and sympathetic as she possibly could on matters indifferent, to make amends for the rude shock she had given to everyone's feelings the evening before. She rather expected to be taken to task for what she had said, but her heart was too full of the "Vision of her head upon her bed" to be greatly troubled at the prospect.

"I must do the same again to-day if they speak slightly of my mother," she said to herself. "I cannot put up with it, and they ought not."

To her surprise, Mr. Everard walked in, evidently on the look out for her. He came up to her quickly and spoke to her in a tone of undisguised sympathy:

"You must not be angry with me," he said, "for having overheard your words of distress under the lamp last night. Did you mean when you said, 'It's all over,' that the account you had yesterday of your father makes you hopeless of his recovery?"

"Oh, no, no, no! Thank God! It's not so bad as that," replied Kathleen. "My darling father has been a great deal better lately; but a fresh pressure of anxiety has brought on a fresh increase of illness, and—" she stopped and hesitated; then, prompted by her own natural openness, and encouraged by her listener's look of sympathy, she went on, though she turned her head aside shyly and spoke hurriedly, "I had a wild fancy that I could have done something to help him, but that is all over now. I can't think how I could have forgotten where I was standing."

Mr. Everard did not seem satisfied.

"If I could but help in any way?" he said, feelingly.

"I know you would if you could," responded Kathleen, touched by his tone of genuine sympathy. "But that is always the way in this world: those who have the means will not; those who have the will cannot."

"If you would only tell me what your wild fancy was," he persisted; "two heads are often better than one."

Kathleen thought for a moment. "If you would give me your honor not to repeat what I say to Lord Melton, I should like to tell you. Indeed, I am quite certain you would not like any more than I should to ask help in that quarter; besides my fancy was too foolish to be repeated."

"I give you my word unhesitatingly," replied Mr. Everard with a smile. "I do not wonder at your disliking backstair-influences. Tell me your fancy. Wild as you think it, some germs of wisdom may be hidden in its folds."

"Well," said Kathleen, blushing, "there was a myth about that Lord

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