

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF JOHN LONGWORTHY.

M. F. EGAN IN AVE MARIA.

XVI.—Miles Talks Politics.

MILES did not appear at dinner, which was served as soon as Mary and Esther had taken a run upstairs to see that their collars were all right, and downstairs to see that their handmaidens had not been remiss. Arthur found the dinner very pleasant. The turkey was not like other turkeys, and the mince pie, made without brandy by Mary's careful hands, seemed something rare and strange. Esther forgot her pre-occupation, and chatted with great volubility until Miles came in, with the oranges and nuts.

Fitzgerald felt a cold chill run down his back as Miles declined to eat anything, but expressed his intention of having a cigar and a cup of coffee with him. He had been out all night with some political friends, he said; and the bloodshot condition of his eyes showed the effects of this outing, while his hand trembled excessively. Still, he was in good humor. He had made up his mind that there would be no use in quarrelling with Fitzgerald. The mystery of John Longworthy's disappearance was by no means cleared up in his eyes, and yet he felt unable to see any clue to it. He determined to cling to Fitzgerald for a while with the tenacity of a bulldog.

Fitzgerald sipped his coffee in silence after the ladies had gone—Esther gladly taking the excuse to get away. Miles began to talk politics. He took high moral ground: things in New York State needed to be changed; what the State needed was a man who would resist all attempts at corruption, who would stick to his principles, and appoint honest men to the offices.

Fitzgerald, who thought he had heard this before, replied: "Of course."

Miles went on to say that if he were in the Assembly he would protect the interests of the people, but not go in for servile economy.

"The people don't want economy," he said, emphatically: "they want square dealing; they want to see the men that do good political work well rewarded. They are Americans, sir; not pettifoggng, parsimonious creatures, weighing every cent. It is not money they care for, but principles. If legislators stick to principles, the people don't care about money. But when a politician deserts his principles, then people begin to be suspicious. If I had the surplus, my dear boy, I'd use it in a way that would make every voter my personal friend, and have something left. Principles would fill the public eye to such an extent that filthy lucre would be lost sight of."

"What principles?" asked Fitzgerald still more languidly, as he wished that some power would oblige his companion to release him.

"Party principles. The moment a man ceases to be true to his own party he makes himself disliked; the moment that he forgets that his first duty is to the solidarity of that party, that moment the people distrust him and ask for his accounts. And when a public man has to answer questions of a financial nature, mark his downward course. Because why? Because, Fitzgerald, they are the hardest to answer. I hope when my turn comes to serve my country in the legislative halls I may so conduct myself that no doubt can be cast on the integrity of my principles."

"Nor of your practices," observed Fitzgerald, with a touch of sarcasm.

"I shall never go back on a friend," said Miles, trying to fix Fitzgerald with an eagle eye; "and I hope you feel the same. Come now, for old friendship's sake, tell me what you know about John Longworthy."

The question had come: it could not be evaded. To refuse to answer it would be to make an enemy of Miles, and to do away with all chance of meeting Mary; for he did not doubt that Miles could find some way of misrepresenting him. How could such a lovely girl be the sister of such a brute? But there he was, smoking a fat cigar, flipping ashes from his coat lapel with a heavy finger adorned with a ponderous onyx seal-ring—and waiting.

"I know nothing about Mr. Longworthy, except what I have seen in the newspapers and what Mr. Bastien has told me."

"But Longworthy knows you."

Fitzgerald frowned. "I never saw him; I never spoke to him; I have no interest in him."

Miles glanced quickly at Fitzgerald. He often said to himself that he could tell when a man was not telling the truth. He could see every line of Fitzgerald's face plainly. There was no lie there; but Miles felt that there must be some trick in his words.

"How about Bastien, then?"

Fitzgerald started and a flash came into his eyes. He controlled himself.

"I have known Mr. Bastien for some time. He has business relations with me. He is a man of great charity—"

"I shouldn't think that a photographer in the Bowery would have much to give away, or drop bills around in Longworthy's envelopes, or use Longworthy's pocket-handkerchiefs."

Fitzgerald dropped his coffee cup with a clatter, but still he controlled himself.

"I happened to get that handkerchief from the laundry by mistake. It belonged to Mr. Bastien, who lodged in my boarding-house for a few days; the money he claimed, and which I dropped in your house, was given me by him for a special purpose, which is nobody's business. Are you satisfied?"

"Scarcely," answered Miles, with a confidential grin, leaning across the table. "I say, Fitz, I want to make a proposition to you. You're sweet on Esther—I can see that—I know how it is myself, and I don't object. But I'm not a fool. There's money in this Bastien business somewhere—I'm sure of that. Can't we divide like—like brothers?"

Miles looked eagerly across the table. Fitzgerald did not answer. He hid down his cigar, rose from his seat, turned his back to Miles and went upstairs.

Miles stared at his retreating figure.

"Well, that's cool, in a man's own house, too! He looked a moment as if he were going to knock me down. There must be a lot in this thing," muttered Miles, taking his discomfort with the philosophy of a man who has been out all night and needed rest. He yawned several times, and concluded he would try to get some sleep. He could not see his way clear to another attack on Fitzgerald, but he said to himself that he would think it over.

Fitzgerald was hardly in a mood to meet Miles' sisters. He felt as if he had been dragged over a muddy place—as if he needed grooming before entering their presence. There was no help for it; he must at least say good-bye.

The gas was lit in the parlor; a delightful odor came from the two *pot-pourri* jars, which were Mary present to Esther. The gas fixtures were wreathed with holly; a fire burned in the old fashioned grate. Mary sat near the window, idle for the first time in many days. The brightness of the morning had changed to murk and fog, and the lamps had been made to glow in the street by the unusually early lamplighter, eager to get home to continue the Christmas festivities interrupted by his evening duty. Esther was looking over a book of part-songs, which she held in one hand, while she dipped the other occasionally into a box of bonbons on the little table at her side.

Fitzgerald was at once captured by Esther. She wanted him to hum a bar or two of an old English glee; she could not get it right. Fitzgerald tried it. Mary drew her chair near them, and a half hour passed before this young man, who dreaded to go back to his boarding-house and who felt he had no right to stay where he was, offered to take his leave. Then Mary lit the alcohol lamp and made him some tea, taking the utensils out of a little lacquered cabinet, which had been Esther's Christmas gift to her. The three managed to laugh over the making of the tea, and this process helped to make one of the brightest half hours of the day. At last, with a sigh, Fitzgerald made his bow and went away, feeling very much like a peri let out of paradise.

He had hardly passed out of the door when Miles awoke from an uneasy doze, with his head on the dining-room