

## THE LITTLE OLD SECRETARY

### CHAPTER I

"The fireside blaze in those childish days, It was all the world to me, And whatever befell it seemed to go well, When I sat by mother's knee."

"I have found quite a new-laid egg for your breakfast to-day, dear father," said Kathleen McDermot, as she brought a little breakfast tray, one soft spring morning, to her father's bedside. "The gray hen cackled most obligingly while I was hunting for these violets, and found it amongst the straw with which I had covered the roots. It is so soft and warm out of doors, I am sure you will be able to get out when the sun is at its height; so please do eat up every bit of your breakfast, that you may be very strong."

A great deal of loving thought had evidently gone to the arrangement of the little meal Kathleen was so coaxingly setting before the invalid. The small, crisp slices of toast were so delicately brown, the cloth so white, the pat of freshest butter so prettily surrounded with leaves, and on the delicate, white china plate lay a bunch of violets, hepaticas and snowdrops, and a little scroll on which was printed:

"Winter is over and past,  
Gone is the killing blast,  
And the balmy breath of spring  
Shall health to my father bring."

The sick man set up in bed and welcomed his bright-haired little daughter with a smile.

"How nice it all looks!" he exclaimed. Then, as his eyes fell on Kathleen's greeting, his cheek flushed, and handing the scroll to his wife, who was sitting by him with an open letter in her hand, he continued: "How strange she should have brought me this to-day, wife! Is it a prophecy of a second Spring?"

Kathleen, delighted at having hit upon something to give her father pleasure, looked up in her mother's face, expecting to see there the reflection of her own content. But instead she met with a look of anxiety, and the eager question which had sprung to her lips, "Has anything good happened to us to-day?" was checked and left unspoken. Turning again to her father she put the toast into his thin, wasted fingers.

"I have got the old wheel-chair out of the shed," she said, smiling, "it is airing by the kitchen fire, and it is going to have new cushions in honor of your first drive. It will quite revive you to go out in the warm sunshine for half-an-hour. Don't you think so, mother?"

"I do, indeed," said Mrs. McDermot, cheerfully, "but your father must not speak a word till he has finished his breakfast. Read this letter, dear child; your father and I would like to hear what you think about the plan proposed in it."

Kathleen settled herself on the floor at her mother's feet, and read the following letter:

"MY DEAR SISTER—I have heard with great regret from Philip of your husband's severe illness, and sincerely trust he is now recovering. It seems a hard-hearted proposal to ask you under such circumstances to part with your little Kathleen even for a few weeks, but I hope the motive of my invitation will be its excuse. Do you remember in the old days, when we were together at home, our cousin, Mary Fitzgerald, being married in London at the end of a fortnight's acquaintance to the Commander-in-Chief of the Indian Army, General Lord Melton? Don't you recollect how we romanced about the great Indian magnate whom we none of us ever saw; and how sad we all felt, when, after four years spent in almost princely splendor, we heard she was dead, and the impression which got hold of us that

she had not found her brilliant position a happy one?

"Well, a few days ago, to my great surprise, I received a letter from Lord Melton, saying he was in England for a very short visit, and that he particularly wanted to make the acquaintance of his wife's relations, especially the younger members of the family, and that as he could not possibly go to Ireland, he should feel himself extremely indebted to me to allow him to spend a few days with us *en famille*. That if I found it possible to invite a little family gathering of cousins, so as to enable him to make friends with those towards whom he could not feel a stranger, it would be conferring a favor on him he should remember gratefully for his life."

"I was amazed at the letter and still more at its tone, for he has the reputation of being a proud, stern man, and we have believed he had prevented Mary from having any intercourse with her own people. However, I wrote to say he would be very welcome, and that I would invite as many members as I could to meet him."

"We have long wanted to see Kathleen over here, and this is such a special occasion that, if you can possibly spare her, I hope you will let her come. It may be an advantageous thing for our children to be personally known to the great man. I have no faith in reports, but it has been said, I do not know on what grounds, that he wants to find an heiress for the little Irish estate his wife brought as her dowry."

"I wish with all my heart you could bring your little maiden yourself, but this is out of the question. The sooner she comes the better, as my girls want to make her quite at home before our distinguished guest arrives."

"Please accept the enclosed cheque as a little brotherly remembrance after such a long silence."

Your affectionate brother

PAUL FITZGERALD.

"P. S.—Best wishes to McDermot. When he is convalescent if he feels inclined to try our Devonshire air, we shall all be delighted to see him."

"I could not possibly go anywhere till you are well, dearest father," said Kathleen, decidedly, after reading her uncle's letter all through.

"Ah! I am getting better," said the invalid, hurriedly. "I feel quite different to-day. I should like you to get acquainted with your uncle and your cousins. It will do you good to have a little change, and to be with companions of your own age. You have been shut up here with your own sick father too long."

"I couldn't leave mother alone to—" began Kathleen, but she stopped short. She and her mother had carefully kept from the sick man any knowledge of the laborious duties which had fallen upon them in the ruined state of their fortunes.

"I thought you liked to have me about you always, much more since you were ill," she continued, after a little pause, the quick tears rising at the idea that her father was so ready to part with her.

"You have been the one sunbeam of my winter, my darling, and I believe you will be the harbinger of coming spring," said her father, fondly. But he was too weak to bear the agitation of contending feelings, and a violent fit of coughing checked his utterance. "You talk to her, Margaret," he whispered softly, when after a few moments he had somewhat recovered himself, "and tell her why it is best she should go."

"Yes, we will talk it all over and decide about the possibility of the plan," said his wife calmly and firmly. "You must rest now and at mid-day, after you have taken

your beef tea, perhaps you will be strong enough to gratify Kathleen by going out in the chair. Come, my child, let us leave your father to rest," and, taking Kathleen's hand, she led her down the wide, uncarpeted staircase, through a large, dismantled drawing-room, to a small morning-room, where a very sparing breakfast was prepared for them.

"I do not know whether to be glad or sorry," said Mrs. McDermot, as soon as she was alone with her daughter, "a word in your uncle's letter has aroused hope in your father's heart. I feel certain it is a false hope, raised only to be disappointed; yet, as the doctor said the other day, the only chance of his getting better is relief from the anxiety that is crushing him."

"You mean about Lord Melton?" asked Kathleen.

"Yes; just that passing hint about the estate has taken a strong hold of your father's mind. A drowning man will catch a straw, and there is a blow hanging over us, my child, which your father dreads more than death. What should you say if this home which you love so much had to be sold and pass into the hands of strangers?"

"The Hill of Dermot sold!" exclaimed Kathleen. "Strangers come and live here! Oh, mother! surely, mother, this is too bad really to happen!" and the girl, laying her head on the table, burst out into a passion of tears which she was quite unable to master.

Mrs. McDermot, intimately as she knew her child's heart, was not quite prepared for her feeling so intensely the news she had to break. Though scarcely sixteen, Kathleen had been her mother's companion and support through the two years of anxiety which had passed, since one calamity after another had impoverished the estate. She was of a very practical turn of mind, full of resources in difficulties, and so perfectly happy in her love for her parents, that troubles seemed to sit very lightly on her innocent and joyous heart. But a very strong attachment to the home of her ancestors had grown up with her from babyhood. The Hill of Dermot was like a sacred place to her, connected with all the traditions of the noble and glorious deeds with which her ardent imagination was filled. The idea of anything ever separating her from that long past of her family had never crossed her mind, and the first knowledge of this sorrow was overwhelming. But the sound of her mother's calm, patient tone recalled her to herself.

"It is not certain yet, mother, is it? Something might happen to prevent it?"

The mother shook her head.

"It could be prevented if we could find means in any other way to pay our debts. But our creditors have waited long and patiently, and they will not wait longer; nor ought we to ask them. We must not sacrifice justice to feeling, nor let the House of Dermot lose its long inheritance of truth and honor in order to keep its lands. We promised a year ago, if certain debts were not paid, that the estate should be sold and all claims fairly met. You would not have your father break a written engagement, even if they would not force him to keep it, would you?"

"No," said Kathleen, unhesitatingly; "better part from all than that. But this visit to England, mother, have you any hope it might bring help?"

"I think it would do good that you should be known and loved in your uncle's family. There is, of course, a remote possibility of Lord Melton's doing something for us, if he got interested in your father through you; and there is chance of the medicine of hope doing him good for the time, even should it end in disappointment. As to Lord Melton's intend-

ing to give away his wife's estate, I feel certain it is more gossip. Somebody has accounted for his wish to meet his wife's family by making a guess, and the story has been repeated as a fact. Do you built on that, my Kathleen?"

Kathleen looked full of thought. "On the whole, mother, would you like me to go or stay?" she asked, after a moment's silence.

"On the whole, I think you had better go. Your father has set his heart upon it, and it may be a door of hope."

"Then," said Kathleen cheerfully, "I will get my business done this morning, and in the afternoon we can settle how and when I am to go."

### CHAPTER II

"There are some who ever purely live,  
Rise like the sun in all its golden strength,  
And spend their days, like him, in nothing else  
Than shedding light and heat and killing down  
The noxious vapors of the unwholesome world." Anon.

After the first burst of grief with which Kathleen had received the news of the trial that awaited her, she seemed able, with perfect composure, to talk the matter over with her mother, and her face was as serene and joyous as ever, as she went about the house setting all in order for the time of her absence. She evidently looked forward with pleasure to her visit to England, and was much less shy at the thought of going amongst strangers than her parents had expected.

Kathleen was almost worshipped amongst the peasants, who were mostly her father's tenantry, and when it became known she was going on a visit to England, offers of assistance poured in on every side. She understood how to accept it all, so as to gratify the hearts of the poor who loved her, by letting them feel useful. The little army of shoeless urchins who could be trusted with nothing else where set to collect peat and logs for old Sarah's kitchen fire, which would last for a month. One neighbor was to take care of the hens, and to see that the new-laid eggs were sent up for the sick man's breakfast; and another was made happy by being entrusted with the office of drawing "his honor" round the garden in the wheelchair.

When the news reached the only tenant that was well-off in the world's goods; he came up to the hall with his daughter Rose, who had long been Kathleen's devoted helper in all her undertakings, and said that "neither he nor Ross could be happy to let Miss Kathleen, a descendant of their old kings, go to England without a maid; that he wanted his daughter to see something of the world, and if she might go with Miss McDermot, and have the honor of waiting upon her when she was away from the old country, in the great house of the foreigner, he would be just the proudest man in the village. He had brought his daughter's travelling money with him, and if his honor would allow him, he would take the young lady and her maid to Dublin, and see them on board the packet."

This unexpected offer brought tears to Mrs. McDermot's eyes: it was made with such a hearty goodwill, that she felt accepting it she was really making the warm-hearted Michael O'Sullivan the proudest and happiest man in Glenmore. But she tried to make Rose clearly understand that a servant's hall in a large English house might have many annoyances, from which it would be impossible for Kathleen to shield her.

To be continued.

While the passion of some is to shine, of some to govern and of others to accumulate, let one great passion alone influence our breasts, the passion which reason ratifies, which conscience approves, which heaven inspires—that of being and doing good.

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