THE DISAPPEARANCE OF JOHN LONGWORTHY.

M. F. EGAN IN AVE MARIA.

XXVI.—He Speaks, but Says Nothing.

ESTHER expected that Mary would hardly approve of her proceedings in the O'Connor household. But she had made it a point from her earliest childhood of telling her sister everything, and she would have felt very guilty had she attempted to hide the episode of the poker.

Mary was in the act of ascending the sombre stone steps, which decorate the front of nearly all New York houses, when Esther and Arthur Fitzgerald arrived. Mary looked tired and worn; a morning's teaching in a public school is not the best refresher in the world. There was chalk dust on the sleeve of her coat, and she felt as she neared the smiling duo, that the word "school-teacher" was written all over her. The consciousness was not exhilirating.

Fitzgerald and Esther seemed to be in the highest spirits; she was smiling at something he had said, and the sight of the two gave Mary a pang she had never felt before. She became conscious of the chalk mark; the dripping umbrella in her hand annoyed her; her impulse was to turn the knob of the door and escape, but that was impossible; so she had to wait until Fitzgerald and her sister ascended the stoop.

At sight of Mary, Fitzgerald ceased to hear what Esther was saying. He had sufficient recollection of what was due to the amenities to close her umbrella; after that he forgot all about her. His heart went out to the pale, tired girl, who stood there waiting. How sweet, how gentle, how gracious, she seemed to him! And so, while Mary imagined he was thinking only of the chalk mark, he was utterly forgetful of all minor details in the sight of her. He took her umbrella with a trembling hand, as if it were a sacred relic. What a crime it was, he reflected, that this exquisite creature should be compelled to face the wind and the rain and the city dust every day of her life! If he only dared to ask for the privilege of protecting her from the ills of life! He was almost impelled to say this as they entered the hall; but there was Esther, very pretty, very smiling, and very much in the way.

As usual—for often we take the sound of an angel's wings for the singing of gnats—Mary interpreted Fitzgerald's evident embarrassment to mean that he wanted *her* out of the way. She looked at his pleasant, sincere face, his eyes in which the spirit of truth seemed to rest, and she said to herself that Esther was a happy girl.

At no time in her life had Esther been so desirous to get rid of anybody as she was at this moment to elude Fitzgerald. She was anxious to unburden her mind to Mary, and have the worst over. She had, perhaps, been unladylike in her manner and words to Bastien; and that business of the poker had been rather more dramatic than refined. She would know whether it was right or not in a moment—if Fitzgerald would only go! Mary opened the parlor door and they entered that apartment, which is generally so sepulchral and terrible in the daytime.

A theatre in the glare of noon is a more impressive reminder of the nothingness of life than the skeleton of the Egyptian feast; but of all sad and tearful *momenti* the New York parlor—or drawing-room they probably call it now—is the most sad and lachrymose. This one was dim and cold. Mary raised a blind, and revealed a view of mist and looming brown steps on the other side of the street. Fitzgerald was asked to sit down; he accepted the invitation by falling over a concealed footstool into a large arm-chair clothed in brown linen; other chairs in ghostly linen were ranged about him. Esther, who took a seat near the window, seemed to join in the silent voice of the chairs in asking him why he did not go.

Mary said to herself that she would leave the young people alone. Her brother had hinted to her how matters stood, and the change from smiles and chatter to gravity and silence on her appearance had confirmed his hint.

"Excuse me," she said. "I shall come back in a few minutes. I must see about the luncheon."

Fitzgerald, being a polite man, did not ask why Esther could not see about the luncheon; if he had been as uncivilized as the young men in Nellie Mulligan's set, he would have asked that question, and Mary would have been spared the heartache that accompanied her downstairs. Why was it, she asked herself as she entered the dining-room—which to-day was as gloomy as the parlor,—why was it that she should have to bear the burdens of life, to be old before her time, to spend her life in shielding others from the thorns and to have so few roses for herself?

Mary was not bitter in feeling; she did not demand the joys of life as a right, but she wished God would give them to her as privileges. She raised the blinds in the dining-room and revealed the iron bars that protected the windows. Outside everything was gloomy and desolate. Hurrying feet, mud-bespattered, passed before her; and the legs of a horse, also mud-bespattered, were just on a level with her eyes as she gazed out, in search, perhaps, of consolation. God *knew*, she said to herself; she would go on doing her best, and let Esther have the roses of life.

She turned from the window with a sigh, to notice that Miles had left a big coffee stain on the table-cloth. In the interest of effacing this before the object of her thoughts should come down to luncheon, she forgot herself for a moment. She put the only scarlet geranium in bloom in the centre of the table. At least—though he would never know it—she might make this voiceless and only sign of a regard for him which she dared not acknowledge to herself.

In the meantime Esther and Fitzgerald were having an unhappy quarter of an hour. Fitzgerald kept his eyes fixed on the door, in the hope that Mary would return. Esther looked impatiently in that direction, too, in the equally fervent hope that Fitzgerald would go.

"It is a wretched day," he said at last, remembering that he ought to say something.

"Yes," Esther answered.

There was silence then.

"Oh, dear!" Esther said to herself. "Mary will be off to school in three-quarters of an hour, and I shall have no chance to tell her until to night! Why doesn't he go?"

And, remembering that she, too, must be polite, she looked toward Fitzgerald and said:

"It *is* a wretched day!"

He, awakening from a brown-study, was bewildered for a moment.

"Oh, I forgot!—beg pardon!—yes, it is a wretched day."

Then she drifted toward the piano and picked up at random a sheet of music; he followed her, and when Mary reached the door she saw them both looking at the same sheet of music, without in the least knowing what it was.

Mary came in at this auspicious moment. Fitzgerald started, and gladly accepted her invitation to take a cup of coffee. Having done so, with his eyes wandering constantly toward Mary, he took his leave.

Mary had only time enough to get ready and be off to school.

"O Esther," she said, kissing her sister, "and so he has spoken! I hope you will be happy."

And she ran down the steps, for fear that Esther would see her rapidly falling tears.

Esther, with her hand on the door knob, looked after her, indignant and surprised. Who had spoken? Miles or John O'Connor or Mr. Bastien? And what had he spoken about?

XXVII.—Miles and Nellie.

As the day went on Esther thought less of her disappointment. After all, what was there to tell? If she had been rude to Mr. Bastien, she had only told the truth with her usual vehemence; and if she had threatened John O'Connor with a poker, who could blame her? A poker was the only argument that John could understand. But she thought a great deal about Bastien. There was a mystery in all his ways that provoked her interest. There was no doubt that he meant well; and now she had come to the conclusion that he might reasonably cherish a grievance against her. Her grievances against him grew less; she even began to feel that she might be friendly to him, and give him more whole-