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THE TWO MARYS; OR, THE DONNELLS OF INNISMORE.

CHAPTER XIV.—Continued.

Mrs. Somers at once hurried back, and Mary returned to Maria, who was kneeling beside the bed, the hand of the corpse clasped within her own.

Yet, Maria rose not till he stood beside her, that dead hand still within her own; and then, after he, too, had pressed his lips on the marble brow, and had mastered the emotion which he felt, sufficiently to speak, he greeted the daughter of his dead wife, with affectionate warmth, saying,—

'I little thought, Maria Von Alstein, that our meeting would be here, and under such circumstances as these; yet, am I rejoiced to find you by her side; consider this home as your own; and, as the daughter of my wife, look on me as your father; yourself as the sister of my children; only too late, dear Maria, is your true position known and recognized, and that with deepest sorrow for the past.'

Maria's heart was too full to speak, but she managed to stammer out a few words of grateful acknowledgment, and to press the hand of her step-father. Then she took up the book, pointed to the open pages, and, in answer to George Montague's fervent 'God be thanked,' said,—

'Mr. Montague, I do bless God, so much, my poor mother did know me for her child, before she died. The past seems only like some sad dream. To have known her only to lose her. And yet, to lose her, seeing how well she died,' she added, pointing to the book 'ought to make me rejoice; and see, how calm that face looks. One cannot think that she did not feel happy; she does look so peaceful.'

It truly was as Maria said, such a placid smile rested on the countenance of the corpse, one might surely believe, and hope, that the sincere repentance of the last two days, succeeding the mental agony she had experienced, had been followed by the most perfect peace; indeed, it were doubtful if death had not come with so gentle and stealthy a summons, that the soul might almost be said, in her case, as in many, who die from disease of the heart, to have passed from time to eternity without a struggle.

The last sad duties were then performed by Maria, who steadily refused any assistance save that which Mary rendered her, after which she joined Mr. Montague, in the drawing room. It was arranged that the interment of the deceased lady should take place at Fairview, and that the body should be conveyed thither with as little delay as possible.

'And you, Maria, will accompany me thither,' said Mr. Montague, 'and Millicent and Alice will be there, unconscious yet, of the light in which they will have to regard you.'

'I would rather not come to Fairview, yet,' said Maria, bursting into tears; 'many persons, at Fairview, must know of—that robbery—and, and there will be some who will say of her, what we should not like to hear. To see me will bring it all to their minds again. Am I not right?'

'Quite, quite right, my dear Maria,' said Mr. Montague, instantly acknowledging and appreciating the motive which caused her to speak thus. 'But you will allow me to hope, that a few weeks hence you will come home, for you must consider Fairview as your home, Maria.'

'I will indeed, I will, dear Mr. Montague,' replied Maria, 'when these sad events shall have died away, and my poor mother's death shall no more be talked of, then I will be sure to come home for some time before I go back to Germany with my uncle.'

The next day was appointed for the removal of the body, and Maria determined on remaining at the house in Harley Street, till this had taken place, passing, to the intense astonishment of Mr. Montague, many hours together, quite alone, in the death chamber, engaged in prayer for the repose of her mother's soul.

It was with feelings of undisguised admiration, that he regarded this young woman, whose life, in the few months that she had passed beneath his roof, and the exquisite misery of those that had succeeded them, had been so marked with trial. Truly, too, had Fraulein learned a lesson of the emptiness of worldly grandeur, as she knelt beside those poor remains. For ever, ever came to her mind, however much she might strive to repress it, the thought of the past in which poverty had been borne with a spirit so rebellious that scarce any sin had been deemed too grievous, could it but be cast aside. 'Fairview, Fairview,' she murmured to herself.—'Alas! no; I could not go to Fairview, till the

sod has grown green upon her grave; till this heart of mine aches less heavily, till people forget all about that sad mistake of hers; and her neglect of me.'

Thus gently did Fraulein try to think of her mother's grievous sin; and knelt and wept away the long, long hours, and prayed God, in His great mercy, to accept that sincere repentance, and receive that guilty, but contrite soul, into eternal rest.

The following morning the hearse arrived which was to convey the remains of the deceased lady to Manchester, and, dressed in the deepest mourning, Maria went into the room where the body lay, to take her last farewell, accompanied by Mary and Mr. Montague.

'Remember, Maria,' he said, pressing her hand warmly within his own, as the carriage drove up which was to convey him to the station, 'remember your promise; I shall expect to see you at Fairview before long.'

Maria returned to her kind friends the Mainwarings, little dreaming how long a time was to elapse ere she was to visit Fairview, or return to her German home.

CHAPTER XV.—A WEDDING ON THE TAPIS.—NO JOY WITHOUT A SORROW.

Fever, raging fever, laid Maria prostrate for many weeks. In her mad delirium she raved about the court, about her mother, and all the distressing scenes she had recently encountered. Nervous excitement raised to the highest pitch, had ended in a long and well nigh fatal illness, so that winter came and passed away, and the young green things put forth their tender blossoms, and Maria yet remained with her friends, the Mainwarings.

It is a balmy evening in Spring, the night after the return of Mrs. Mainwaring to Dovercourt, and Maria is anxiously expecting the coming of her step-father, and half-sisters, the former of whom she has not seen since her mother's death, the latter from the time of the robbery.

Maria, still a sort of invalid, reclined on a couch, a book in her hand, but her thoughts far away; now they were fixed on Mary, the bride of the cloister, whose reception was very nigh at hand, then on herself, and the momentous monosyllable 'yes,' she had uttered a short half-hour since, when the barrister, who had so indefatigably labored in her service when she was the poor unknown Maria Flohrberg, had asked her to become his wife. And I wonder now what Herbert Mainwaring could see in that plain Maria, to make him wish to kneel with her before the altar at Dovercourt? Ah, what, indeed? Why nothing; but that she had been very patient in her illness, and was also very unselfish and warm-hearted, in fact, without being an angel, was a good-hearted little body, who always strove to make exceedingly happy every one who came in her way.

Every one at Dovercourt, then, loved Maria, and so, when a little later, Mrs. Mainwaring came into the library, lighted up only by the soft rays of the setting sun, which lent a roseate gloom to Maria's pale cheek, and the good lady took her place beside her, on the couch, she raised her blushing face to that of her friend, saying, 'Do you know, Mrs. Mainwaring, that Herbert—'

'Wishes Maria Von Alstein to be his wife, and we shall be very happy to receive her as our daughter.'

Maria spoke not, but pressed one of that good friend's hands to her heart, exclaiming—

'What can he have seen in me to lead him to make me the object of his choice?'

'Virtue, Maria; and may you, my daughter, for so from this day I consider you, long live, loving and beloved as the wife of the future master of Dovercourt.'

At this moment the sound of carriage wheels was heard advancing up the avenue, and Maria arose to meet her step-father, and half-sisters.

George Montague met her with his old cordial frankness, and with a something of fatherly affection mingled therewith. Little Alice bounded forwards, calling Maria by the name of sister; but Millicent's greeting, though affectionate, was more constrained.

But while the three sisters are talking together, Mrs. Mainwaring draws George Montague into one of the deep recesses of a bay window, and communicates to him the intelligence, that very soon Maria will become the bride of Herbert, and, consequently, that her future home will be in England, and that she hopes she will soon have recovered her health, and the union take place early in the summer.

And it was with no small pleasure that the worthy gentleman listened to the information imparted to him, and then approaching Maria, he said,—

'I find bridal favors will be in request, shortly and must therefore exact a promise before I leave Dovercourt; it is, Maria, that you will promise to be married from Fairview; I stand to you, in the light of a father, and trust you will not deny my request.'

'Ah, Meine Liebe,' said Maria, affectionately pressing the hand of Mrs. Mainwaring, 'have you then told papa my secret? With all my heart let it be from Fairview, then; and then Herbert and I mean to visit Innismore, for I fancy we shall be in time to witness the reception of dear Mary.'

In consequence of the long illness of Fraulein, and the necessarily protracted stay of Mrs. Mainwaring in London, both her uncles, Von Alstein, and Flohrberg, had left England for Germany, and the Montagues had never returned from Fairview, Mr. Montague rightly conjecturing that the sad affair to which his deceased wife had so unjustly implicated her own daughter would die away more quietly in the country than in the very place in which so much that was distressing had occurred. Thus, neither himself nor his daughters had seen Fraulein until this evening, she having returned to Dovercourt on the previous day.

The blow occasioned to his two daughters, by the sudden death of their mother, had been very great; the amiable Millicent, whose disposition resembled, unfortunately, that of the late Mrs. Montague, shocking her father by expressing herself to the effect that she thought it a very sad thing Herr Von Alstein had ever presented himself at all, as it was mainly owing to her mother's recognition of him, that the fact of who Maria was became known to her, and consequently it was to the sudden shock this had occasioned that they owed the loss of their mother.

However, the young lady managed to hide her real feelings, though she could not disguise from Maria the fact, that the avowal of her birth had gained her no sisterly love in that quarter, and even contrived to appear well pleased, when Mrs. Mainwaring hinted that she had thought that the four bridesmaids, on a certain occasion, had best be her two half-sisters and her own daughters, Bertha and Margaret.

Having then extorted a promise that Maria and her friends would drive over to Fairview, on the following day, the worthy mill-owner took his leave.

Herbert accompanied the ladies thither, but he was distressed to find that Maria had done violence to herself in accepting the invitation.—No sooner did the white walls of Fairview appear in sight, through the still scanty spring foliage of the trees, than she beheld that of the first night she had spent at Fairview; and then came rushing on her mind the remembrance of the reception she had met with the next day at the hands of her mother.

She sat for some moments absorbed in thought, when the voice of her friends disturbed the mournful reverie into which she had fallen, and then making a forcible effort to drive the past from her mind, she leaned from the carriage window, to answer, with somewhat like a cheerful face, the recognition of Mr. Montague and Alice, who stood at the entrance of the hall to receive them.

'How changed do all things seem,' thought Maria to herself, as stood within the spacious vestibule, paved with marble, and gazed upon the noble stone staircase, with its balustrades of carved oak, and then upon her own form, enveloped, as it was, in expensive mourning, trimmed with the richest fur, for the weather was still variable and cold, for one yet an invalid, and imagination pictured to her mind's eye, herself clad in a plain and cheap merino, with, mayhap, that old-fashioned, unlucky shawl, which had excited the risibility of the crowded court; hurrying up that same staircase, or sitting in that dreaded study, teaching Alice, whilst in some things she felt that she wanted teaching herself.

Now, the master of the mansion was there to welcome the plain little German maid, and she addressed him as 'father,' and those of old, her pupils, especially Alice, claimed that sweet tie of affinity, a loving sisterhood; whilst the servants were respectful in their homage, every one ready to do her bidding. And yet, one familiar face was missed, one face so dreared of yore; but yet, in those two latter days of her life, it had become so wondrously dear; dear by reason of her repentance and sorrow; dear because of her newly awakened love; dear, doubly dear, because it was the face of her mother.

Yet it ever must be, that with earthly joy there must be a taint of sorrow, and these memories of the past, formed to Fraulein, the perchance needful alloy in the happy future, that now seemed spread before her, for verily, we should dread that that happiness will not be lasting which is not without some bitterness to remind us that it is of the earth, earthly!

CHAPTER XVI.—THE WEDDING AT FAIRVIEW.—THE SPOUSALS AT INNISMORE.—THE CONCLUSION.

It is a bright July morning, one year after the death of Mrs. Montague. All the bands at the mill have a holiday, and a goodly stock of beef and ale is to be distributed amongst them,

with tea and cakes before they return to their homes.

The two half-sisters, and Bertha and Margaret, are dressed alike, in robes of sky-blue crape, over white silk slips, with white bonnets trimmed with lilies of the valley. And Maria is attired in a dress of white moire antique, with a long veil of white lace, and a wreath of orange flowers. By the way, we think it a great shame that brides are allowed to monopolize this very pretty flower exclusively to themselves, it is one of those absurd customs which might very well be done away with. Why shouldn't maids, wives, and widows, wear them if they please?—instead of the use of this very lovely flower, being appropriated to that very brief term of a wife's existence, during which she is called 'a bride.'

'How beautiful Fraulein looks,' said many that day. 'I never thought her so pretty,' said others.

'No,' say we, 'she is not at all pretty, only engaging, and interesting.' This leads us to remark, that people are very fond of quoting the lines—

'Beauty is when unadorned, adorned the most.'

We beg leave to differ with the poet; it is all nonsense, simple nonsense. Maria was very plain, my dear reader, you know I have said so. What absurd trash it is for people to write about heroines being angels, and beauties, and all that sort of thing. Pray, in our common every day existence, how many beauties, how many paragons of loveliness, can you or I, count amongst our friends? Or how many angels, I should like to know? Oh, dear, no; good kind-hearted souls, dear, loving friends, God be blessed for the gift, do we not often meet amidst the thorns and briars, sown by rougher natures; but no angels; and the best amongst us, the truly good, would disown this hackneyed appellation. But some people must use exaggerated phrases.—And to return to the point we started with; there is a trite old saying nearer the truth than the sentiment of the poet, namely—

'Fine feathers make fine birds.'

And though they cannot give beauty to those who do not possess it, they certainly are marvellous aids in carrying off any deficiencies that may exist in natural grace, and vice versa.

'Maria's was then a case in point. 'Oh, dear, how positively handsome she looks,' says one.

'I never thought her half so pretty,' said another. While a third exclaims — 'she really looks beautiful.'

These were, in fact, simple untruths, neither more nor less. Maria looked, as she always did, very lady-like, if you will; very interesting; but she was no longer clad in plain, old-fashioned garments; and, instead of her countenance being jaded, harassed, and anxious, it was merely delicate, from the effects of her long illness.—But, all around her were her friends: a happy future before her, added to which, she was not only happy, but good, at the same time; so putting positive ugliness out of the question, show us any young woman, arrayed to the best advantage, with a face beaming with happiness, and no bad passions leaving a trace thereon, for the countenance is the index of the mind, and I am sure you will say with ourselves, that such an one may appear vastly good looking. Well, and Fraulein Maria had everything in her favor, the sun shone, and kind friends smiled upon her, and amongst them was that dear madam Flohrberg, she had so long thought her mother, and the good Herr Flohrberg, with her uncle Von Alstein, and she doubtless felt very happy, as she stepped into the carriage which was to carry her to St. Oswald's Church, at Dovercourt, a pretty little rural edifice, built in the gothic style, its grey walls mantled over with ivy.

A group of little girls, dressed in white, were already at the church door, and, of course, they strewed flowers in the path of the bride, as she blushingly took her place before the altar. Mr. Montague, as the bride's father, gave her away, and, in a very few moments, those sacred words were pronounced which made those two, one.

The mass for the bridegroom and bride was said, and, at its conclusion, the wedding party again formed in due order, and returned to Fairview.

Of course, at the wedding breakfast, there was no lack of fine sentiments, and a few speeches, some very clever, others very dull and prosy, but all alive proceeded from persons bearing the same good will to the happy pair.

It had been arranged that the next three months should be passed in making a tour through Germany. At length the hour arrived, and Maria bade a tearful farewell to the two families, to whom she was so closely allied, gazing as long as she could see 'them, at the white walls of Fairview, and then at Dovercourt, the sombre red brick building, gleaming as intervals

through the trees, and lighted up by the resplendent beams of the July sun. But we had forgotten to mention that ere she had taken her place in the carriage, a burst of merry laughter from those whose eyes had a moment before, been diffused with tears, had attracted her attention, and hastily turning round, she discovered at her feet a white satin slipper, which the youthful damsels, Bertha and Alice, had agreed together should be thrown after the newly married couple, in accordance with the old established custom, and as an omen of good fortune.

The moon was just rising over the range of mountains skirting the valley in which the Castle of Innismore was situated, as Herbert Mainwaring and his wife, just one year after their union, arrived at the stately edifice. The scenery was grandly romantic, and wild in the extreme; not a sound to be heard, save the rushing of a distant waterfall, the cawing of the rooks, and the barking of the watch-dog. The evening air was laden with the perfume of many flowers, and the subdued light of a lamp issuing from the library window, and lights also, in that of the principal sitting room, with the passing and re-passing of many figures, told them that the household of Innismore were expecting their coming.

They were received with true Irish hospitality by the land-hearted owners of Innismore, to whom Herbert was already well known, and whose wife was doubly welcome on account of her relationship to Mary, the loss of whom Mrs. O'Donnell still deplored, as she would that of a beloved daughter.

Innismore and its romantic environs were not well known to Maria, and, aware that the profession of Mary was appointed to take place the next day but one, and that then they were immediately to return to England, she rose early the following morning, whilst yet the grass was gemmed with the dews of a lovely September, to explore the immediate locality around the Castle, even before the hour appointed for breakfast. The bright rays of the sun shone on the gray walls of the Castle, the more ancient parts of the building being thickly overgrown with ivy; the pathway was overshadowed in their summer garment: innumerable wild flowers carpeted the ground beneath her feet, inducing her at every step, to pause to gather them, and the music of a waterfall made itself heard, as it leaped down the glen, foaming and bubbling forcing its way round the rocks, till it was lost to sight.

Most unwillingly did Maria turn her steps homewards, on hearing the peaceful quiet of the scene disturbed by the breakfast bell, calling the inmates of the castle together, and with her usually pale face flushed with a glow of healthful exercise presented herself to her hospitable entertainers.

Nearly the whole of that day was spent in exploring the country round about, and, wearied with her day's ramble, through glens and valleys, with the heather-clad mountains around and above her, she passed a night of sound and refreshing slumber.

Early the next morning their host and hostess, with Herbert Mainwaring and Maria, set out on their visit to the Convent, in which Mary was about to make her final vows. And after some three hours pleasant drive, through a richly wooded country, they arrived at the humble house which she had chosen for her future home.

It was a long, low, irregular building, this Convent of Carmelite Nuns; the jasmine and honeysuckle covered with their creeping tendrils its white walls, and the birds sang merrily in the ivy which had grown so luxuriantly over the more ancient part of the building, which had been much added to in latter years. The rippling of the waters of a distant cascade, made a sweet melody amidst the otherwise unbroken quiet of a place which seemed formed for prayer and meditation, for the scenery was picturesque in the extreme, hill and dale, and wood and water, each lending their own peculiar charm to the beauty of the landscape.

This sweet and retired spot the sisters of the Order of Mount Carmel had chosen for their resting place, and if almost perfect silence, amid the beauties of nature, are aids to meditation, as they undoubtedly are, then had they chosen wisely.

It was a most austere order which Mary had selected, and many were the prophecies of her friends that she would become ill before the period of her Novitiate expired: it was, therefore, with much surprise, that Maria beheld her, with her really sweet face glowing with a brighter color than had ever worn at Dovercourt, or amidst the mountains of Innismore.

Was she happy? Oh, yes; that contented countenance, and the joy with which she prepared for her espousals, told that beyond a doubt. But hark, the chapel bell admonishes them, that the hour draws nigh, when Mary shall pronounce those awful vows which death alone shall break;