

The Storyteller

THE MESALLIANCE OF MARGARET

Mrs. Woods had a deep-rooted abhorrence of mixed marriages. She acknowledged that she liked this young man with whom Margaret had become so friendly of late, but he was wholly impossible as a son-in-law. He gloried in the unimpeachable patronymic of John Smith. Margaret had met him at a teachers' convention, met him through Mary Hammond, daughter of the Rev. Paul Hammond, rector of the Church of the Virgin, a girl friend such as the sentiment of school life sometimes makes.

The friendship of Margaret and Mary created not only between themselves but between their respective families a confidence of the most unquestioning and unsuspecting sort. There was nothing in the world about which the girls were not in the most hearty accord except religion, and that was a tabooed subject; not formally so, but by mutual though unexpressed assent.

On the day of the convention, which was held in John Smith's home town, he had, by virtue of a prior acquaintance with Mary, constituted himself squire to the girls, and had arisen to the full measure of the occasion and the position. So much so, in fact, that when the day was over it was strictly proper for him to receive and accept Margaret's invitation to call. Of course, it was given as a conventional second to one given by his older friend, Mary Hammond, but he detected the ring Margaret intended, which robbed it of much of its conventionality and gave warrant for his enthusiastic 'Indeed I will, the very first time I have occasion to go to Middleton.' Such an occasion came suggestively soon, and like occasions multiplied thereafter with such convincing frequency that the condition which vexed Mrs. Woods' soul was the result.

Nothing had been said in the Woods family circle about Smith and his status, but he had created the first and only stiffness that had ever disturbed its sacredness. The subject of 'John Smith' was tacitly avoided.

Mrs. Woods had once said to her husband, 'What do you think about Mr. Smith?' But she had chosen an unpropitious moment. He was engrossed in his pipe and newspaper, and only answered, 'Oh, I don't know. He seems like a good sort of a fellow,' in that don't-bother-me air which husbands sometimes assume. Mrs. Woods was hurt at the indifference and brevity of the reply, and she took her revenge in that mental determination never to mention the matter to him again, a resolve which seems so soothing to the feminine mind, and there the matter rested.

But the time had now come for action. She had made up her mind to put an end to the affair, and seized the first opportunity for taking the matter up with Margaret. It came on a Sunday morning, when she and Margaret were on their way to Mass.

'When will Mr. Smith call again, Margaret?'

'I don't know, Ma,' Margaret replied. 'He doesn't notify me when he intends to call.' She tried to keep up the casual tone of her mother, but she turned crimson as she spoke, for she had really been suspecting this talk for some time.

'Well, I know he'll call some time this week unless something happens. It must be stopped. I'm not going to have John Smith for a son-in-law unless he becomes a Catholic, and I don't know as I would want him even then. I don't want any made-to-order converts in my family, and I guess there isn't much chance of his really being converted.' Mrs. Woods was always very definite about things she had to say.

'I don't ask him to call, Ma,' Margaret replied somewhat apologetically.

'Now, don't talk nonsense to me, Margaret,' her mother answered, rather sharply. 'That might do with your father. He wasn't asked to call either, but he couldn't help himself very well. I wouldn't have to tell him not to come if I didn't want him, and I guess things are not much different now.'

This seemed to dispose of the matter and to leave nothing for Margaret to say, so nothing more was said for some time. But soon Mrs. Woods noticed Margaret suspiciously using her handkerchief, and saw tears in her eyes.

'Don't be silly, Margaret,' she said then, and added anxiously, 'I hope it hasn't gone far enough to make you miserable.'

Margaret's reply to this question was not exactly responsive. She only said, 'Oh, I don't know what to do!'

'Do!' her mother exclaimed. 'You think it over during your prayers and I guess it will appear simple enough. Has he said anything to you?'

'Not yet.'

'Not yet! Well, you must see that he doesn't, and see to it right off. The longer you let it go the harder it is going to be.'

Margaret made no promises, but she did stay in church after Mass while her mother hurried home.

'I hope you are satisfied, Jim Woods, now that you've made your daughter miserable,' she said to that gentleman, who was again absorbed in pipe and newspaper.

Jim Woods might have developed a capacity for managing a family of children if there had been occasion. He was a success in other lines of human endeavor. But he realised that he could never be the genius at managing (that his wife was, and so he simply listed himself as one of the family, and took his orders with the rest, with the distinction that he would occasionally assume a most tantalising imperturbability as to his good wife's state of mind. But just now he caught a certain mild infection in her tones that induced a more lively attention than usual.

'How have I made her miserable?' he inquired with astonishment.

'How? You've set round here and let your old pipe and your newspaper blind your sight to the fact that she was getting bound up in that John Smith. Pretty father you are to let a young man call on your daughter without knowing anything about him!'

'I didn't think Mary Hammond would introduce anybody who wasn't all right. What is the matter with him, anyway?'

'Matter! He isn't a Catholic!'

'Is that all? You knew that, too, didn't you?'

'Of course I knew it, but it wasn't my place to interfere. You are her father, and you should have put a stop to it.'

'I guess you're right, Neil,' he said humbly. 'I'll speak to him the next time he calls.'

'No, you won't. You keep your hands off it now. I have talked it over with Margaret, and we'll do the best we can without you.'

'All right, my dear,' he said, resignedly.

Margaret and her mother talked it over again that evening in Margaret's chamber, where, long after the girl should have been in bed, her mother found her on her knees. They had a long, earnest talk, and it was decided that Margaret should dismiss John Smith.

'I wish he were a Catholic, Margaret,' she said as she was leaving. 'We don't know much about him, but I believe he is a good young man and will make some girl a good husband. But mixed marriages, my dear, turn out badly very, very often. Wives have much to hear from the best of husbands, and when they are not of one faith it makes it much worse.'

But the matter of dismissing John Smith was not so easy as Mrs. Woods had thought it would be. Margaret tried all the old-fashioned methods her mother suggested, but without success. John was a modern young man, and those methods were not effective. His calls continued to be as frequent as usual, and he was even more attentive than ever. He could not understand Margaret's changed manner, which caused him considerable anxiety, but he felt that it was due to some misunderstanding that would sooner or later be explained, so he kept coming.

Margaret herself believed in John Smith. She believed that he would become in time a really devout and earnest Catholic, and she had certain more or less well-defined notions that it was her mission to bring John into the true fold; that way back before the dawn of time it had been fixed that John's everlasting salvation should be committed to her care. She suggested, though very timidly, some of those thoughts to her mother during their talk, but Mrs. Woods was a very prosaic woman, and utterly destroyed the dream by homely references to the downright foolishness of a woman's marrying a man to reform him.

It is really wonderful how womankind thrives on ordeals. So far as buoyancy and light-heartedness and all that sort of thing went, Margaret seemed to be just the same as ever, but her mother could see that she was not so happy as she was wont to be, and she herself became correspondingly depressed. Then one day there came a letter to Margaret from her elder brother, Jim Junior, who travelled for Stephens, Jenkins, and Co., and who did not come home often, wherein he said that he had accidentally met John Smith in his travels and that he was 'all right.' He treated John and her and their relations to each other with a drummer's facetiousness, too, that added to poor Mar-