

A Complete Story

Faith and Science

"You will change your mind, Margaret."
 "No, I am afraid not. It would be unfair for us to marry, unfair to you especially. You are a good Catholic. I can claim to be a Catholic no longer. I am sorry to say that I have lost my faith."

"Surely, you are mistaken."

"No, John, it is just as I have told you. I should have told you before, but it is only now that I have come to see my position clearly."

The young woman, just speaking, was Margaret Austin, full of womanly grace and dignity, the talented daughter of a well-to-do business man. Her companion and suitor, John Desmond, was of her own age. He was manly in appearance, of an athletic type, and, though only a year out of college, was already making a name for himself in the mercantile world.

The two were walking through the rustic Fenway, whose winding walks were cutting in their borders of contrasting verdure. The picturesque park abounded in delightful scenes and its restful coolness made a pleasant retreat after a sultry day downtown.

Their conversation had not been long. Margaret, with accustomed directness, had asked John Desmond that she be released from a tacit agreement to marriage. She had told him the reason for her request, now that she was certain of her lack of religious belief. Desmond was taken aback and hardly knew what to say or think. At first it had occurred to him to jest, but Margaret's seriousness shortly impressed him. Then he had argued. She was firm. His dream castles for the future, so long abuilding, were tottering.

They were walking along in silence now, while John sought some thought—anything that would banish the oppressing constraint. Slowly, there crept over him the fearful conviction that what Margaret had said might be true. Still he found it difficult to reconcile a loss of faith with the one he loved. A hundred thoughts crowded through his mind, only to be rejected in turn. He prayed, hoped, and almost despaired in quick succession, and something of this interior conflict must have shown itself, for Margaret broke the silence.

"It hurts me to see you suffer so. But I had to tell you the truth and this time the truth is difficult to accept. When I went to college," she continued, "I was a militant Catholic; I defended the Church before students and even members of the faculty. But I was not prepared sufficiently for that sort of thing. After mother's death, you know, I had to instruct myself. My first error was in trusting in my own ability and not in prayer. I think that was my first mistake, now that I look back."

"They used clever arguments that I could not answer; and so many of them! I tried to reason out these difficulties and failed. As a result there came doubts and I weakened; then came weariness and apathy."

"Such was the condition of my mind a year ago, when I returned home from college. This past year, I have spent a good deal of time in reading books on scientific subjects, written by unbelievers, atheists, you would call them. I read them wilfully and my faith has slipped away. I have lost it and—you."

"You have not lost me, Margaret," he said impulsively.

"There can be no other way," was her reply.

"You are deceived by a passing notion."

"I would that it were. No, it is real enough. I am an unbeliever," she pronounced the word slowly as if afraid of the sinister sound. With a pathetic little turn of her mouth she went on: "That name sounds odd applied to me. But I am afraid that it fits."

Then with a perceptible shrug and a forced change of mood, she tried to say gayly:

"Let our last walk be a happy one. We shall try to make it like the others which we have enjoyed together."

It was a striking scene that lay before them, one deserving to waken the noblest sentiments. All about was a wealth of verdant shrubs and leafy trees, flanked by neat gravel walks that wound in and out with delightful abandon. There were unexpected vistas of green lawn and rush-lined river bank, quaint bridges spanning the little stream and handsome buildings in the distance, half hidden by dense, clustering leafage. Walking along, they met few passers-by. There was only a sprinkling of people in the parkway and an infrequent rider cantered past on the nearby bridle path.

In the hope that he might help Margaret by a show of courage, which he did not feel, John assented to the suggestion that their last walk be like the others of the dear past. But first, by a final attempt, he tried to save the critical situation.

"Tell me, what are your difficulties, Margaret? I am sure that they can be answered."

"There are too many," she sighed. "All my science courses at school attacked religion, indirectly at least; some of them were openly hostile. Even in English literature such attacks revealed themselves. And so, I have been fairly steeped in them."

She turned towards him.

"You went to a Catholic college anyway, and studied only one side of these disputed questions. How can you hope to help me?"

"By answering them one by one," he replied. "At Boston College we went even further than you did at your fashionable college. We studied both sides. You admit that you had but one phase presented to you, and that largely by false teaching. Look at the men the Church has given to science. The greatest names are Catholic or at least professedly Christian. Your pagans are not only prejudiced but superficial and absolutely illogical in their reasoning."

"Perhaps that is so," she rejoined. "But your efforts are now too late. Discussion alone about science cannot bring back my faith. That is how I lost it."

"But remember that it was the wrong kind of discussion. As for faith, I realise that it does not depend upon intellectual assent only. It is God's gift," John said gravely. "However, prayer will secure it for you."

"Prayer means nothing to me now," she said wistfully. "I cannot pray. I have tried; but it seems hollow and empty. How can I repeat a prayer when I cannot believe in its efficacy? Oh, John! Listen to that scream!"

She clutched his arm with convulsive grasp and pointed ahead to an opening in the hedge of the bridle path.

There was an oncoming clatter of hoofs; again, the piercing shriek of a terrified rider; an agonised face. John burst through the hedge and regardless of danger, leaped and caught at the bridle. He was swept aside in a cloud of dust into the darkness of the thicket.

Margaret reached the spot where the group had been lost from sight. Through the parted boughs she saw, in the dimmed evening light, John stretched upon the ground, motionless and white. The horse and its rider had disappeared. The scene, so sudden and frightful, left her dazed. What should she do? Her first impulse was to seek aid. Instinctively, she turned and called with hysteric cries. Two people, now near, a man and a woman, were running toward her. She saw them approach, lost her strength and reeled into the woman's arms.

The brightest of the sun's bright rays streamed in through an open window, shone on a polished floor, gleamed and played upon a bare, tinted wall. A vase of dark-eyed, golden marguerites on a white, metal table caught up the golden sunlight and showered brightness about the room. A nurse clothed in crisp white, looking refreshingly cool, bent over a bed which stood near the window.

"Mr. Desmond," she said, "it is medicine time and visiting hour, too."

John Desmond slowly opened his eyes, and blinked them in a sleepy, questioning way.

The answer was a glass of medicine held in the nurse's hand. She helped him to sit up. He closed his eyes and obediently gulped down the contents with a wry face.

The nurse laughed.

"My, how homely you can make yourself look!" she said. "But you must look your prettiest now. A new visitor has come today."

The words were scarcely uttered, when Margaret Austin stepped cautiously into the room, carefully closing the door.

"Why, Margaret!" Desmond shouted. "I am not dying yet. Make all the noise you like. I shall be out of here in a week, the doctor says."

She brightened at his hearty words and the merry laugh that accompanied them. Tenderly she took his outstretched hand, her heart almost too full for words. She managed to say: