

The Catholic Journal

—THE LEADING DIOCESAN NEWSPAPER—

Twenty-first Year, No. 34

Rochester, N. Y., Friday, May 28, 1926

The Story of Mary Kerrigan

Everybody knew that the wealthy and aristocratic Mrs. Wilbur had been for years a most unreasonable unbeliever. She never lost an opportunity to scatter the seeds of infidelity; and though her dislike for religion in any form was very marked, for Catholicity she had an especial aversion. So strong were her prejudices that she would not have a Roman Catholic in her employ nor would she in any manner patronize one; but when it came to distributing charity, neither creed nor nationality biased her.

Though a woman otherwise lovable—and charitable because it gave her pleasure to make others happy—if the subject of religion was broached, she was so unreasonable that her friends deemed it wise not to discuss it. Her opinions were very strong; no amount of reasoning could alter them. No one ever attempted to suggest to her. She wanted no interference in her private affairs. To churches and religious institutions she gave on emphatic refusal when called upon for aid in any way. For public praise she cared nothing. She never wished her charities known. She chose her beneficiaries, and to them she gave generously.

Among those in whom she had an especial interest was a beautiful young orphan girl, who was struggling to fit herself to earn a living as an artist; she was remarkably talented, and through her work she first became known to Mrs. Wilbur. She had one fault, however, and that, in Mrs. Wilbur's eyes, was a serious one—she was a "devout Roman Catholic."

"But," said Mrs. Wilbur, "I read one day discussing Mary; she is young, and through my influence and example, she will outgrow her foolish tendencies. I will take her into my home; my life will become a part of her life, and in time she will feel as I do."

So Mary Kerrigan became the petted protégée of the wealthy widow, who had no children of her own. She gave her all the educational advantages possible, and in addition bestowed upon her all the wealth of love that her strong, affectionate nature possessed; for, despite all her peculiarities, Mrs. Wilbur was a woman of unshakable sympathies. She was devoted, to her friends, and was as loyal as she was loving.

It was not long before Mary had so ingratiated herself into affections of the childless woman that to give her up seemed out of the question. The only thing that disturbed her—and it did bother her a great deal—was Mary's adherence to her Catholic practices; yet so great was her love for the girl that she would not mar her happiness by forbidding them. Occasionally she would remonstrate gently with her, and express a wish that she would not be "so foolish," telling her that Catholic practices were idolatrous and that it really distressed her "to see her little girl so gullible."

In her pretty, playful manner, Mary would parry such attacks with a tender caress, and smilingly predict that one day Mrs. Wilbur would be a better Catholic than herself.

While Mary in no manner obtruded her religion upon her benefactress, the silent, serene beauty of her lovely young life affected strangely, and subdued in a most remarkable manner, the proud, irreligious woman; and as time went on she found herself involuntarily surrendering her opinion on many matters to that of her "peerless child," as she now began to call her.

Of all this Mary seemed unconscious; she never had a selfish motive in caressing and comforting her friend; she followed only the impulses of a warm, grateful heart. She appreciated to the fullest the advantages she was you will be; and pray for him all in a few months, and Charlie did not return to this country.

her pure young heart in return for the favors received.

In such sweet, original ways did she express her appreciation, that each manifestation made the strong nature of the woman yield more and more to that of her protégée; and when she saw that it was impossible to shake Mary's love in a Divine Saviour, when she realized the wonderful comfort the girl seemed to derive from the practice of her religion above all when she saw that her remarks derogatory to Christianity wounded the young girl, she ceased her endeavors to effect a change.

Mrs. Wilbur decided that, if it was her religion that made her so rare a child, there might, after all, be something in it. One day, while Mary was absent, Mrs. Wilbur picked up a book that she had been reading—"The Dream of Gerontius." As she read it over and noted the marked passages, she realized more than ever the depth of the girl's intellect; for she herself was a superior woman. That night she mentioned to Mary that she had been reading her book and enjoyed it. The girl quickly suggested that there was a letter in the book that might interest her even more.

"It has been my strongest prop in life," she said. I value it more than all the world could possibly offer. It is a letter written by my mother on her death-bed, and it is a constant reminder of what I am, and what I should be."

She unfolded the letter and handed it to her. This is what Mrs. Wilbur read:

My dearest little girl—Our dear Lord sees fit to take me from you before you are old enough to realize what a mother's loss may mean. And, that you may know what my desires for you are, I will leave these few words (which I am scarcely able to write), to be given to you when you are old enough to understand their import. They will be a comfort to you, perhaps. I cannot write all that I would say—my strength is not sufficient—so I must be brief.

I am leaving you, my dearest baby, feeling assured that the good God who is taking me from you, will raise up friends kind and true, who will take my place in caring for you, providing you do what is pleasing to Him at all times. I commit you to His care, and to that of His Blessed Mother. Keep always close to them; let nothing ever tempt you to stray. For the gain of wealth or ease of pleasures, never turn from them. Remember always, that every life, however humble, exerts an influence for good or evil on some other life or lives; and I want my little girl so to live that she will sweeten and brighten the lives of all with whom she will be associated; that she will, under all circumstances, do what is right. Unconsciously we lead; unconsciously some one follows. How necessary, then, it is for each one to strive to do what is right! Even a passer-by is often influenced by a look, a word, or a gesture of an entire stranger.

Live, my little girl, so that when you are called to give your account you may bear to the throne of a loving Father the white flower of Faith; unsullied, let your life be filled with loving, unselfish, generous deeds; and the "narrow path" will be so beautiful and bright and alluring that you will never care to stray into broader paths, where sinful pleasures lurk. Never be satisfied to practice faithfully the teachings of our Holy Church. Avoid deceit, hypocrisy, and everything that tends to turn one from the right. I want my little girl to be an inspiration good for wherever her path may lead. I want only the sweetest and purest and holiest thoughts to dwell in her heart, and in this way her life will be filled with the loftiest pleasures.

Be cheerful and sunny always; and when trials and sorrow come—as come they surely will—remember that God will always help you to bear them. Be good, dear, as you father, as I know you will be; and pray for him all in a few months, and Charlie did not return to this country.

Commending you to the keeping of our dear Lord and His Blessed Mother, I am, my precious child,

Your devoted mother,
Margaret Kerrigan.

Mrs. Wilbur read the letter twice over; then, tenderly laying it aside she drew Mary to her, and gently she caressed her, and without any word or comment, left the room.

From that day everybody noticed a great change in the happy Mrs. Wilbur. She was strangely quiet at times, and seemed to be troubled about something. Her affection for Mary, however, was undiminished. Often she reread that letter, and then would drop into a reverie or repair to her own apartment.

One day she questioned Mary about her father. All Mary could tell was that he was a very irreligious man; that, soon after her mother's death, he abandoned her; and, having married some wealthy woman, went to a foreign country—Mary knew not where.

Mrs. Wilbur turned almost white. She was strangely silent; her thoughts were far away.

"After all, perhaps I am wrong," she admitted to herself. "There must be a God, and this is the way he is doing things—of punishing wrongdoing. If there is not, then why has this child such an influence over my life? Why has she been able to turn the trend of my thoughts? Why was she sent me in my path? Why are the pleasures that I enjoyed before she came into my life, so colorless, so distasteful? Why has the whole world changed to me? Why are the friends, whose company I so eagerly sought, no longer attractive? My life, that a short time ago seemed so full, now, looking backward, is as a dreary waste. And that letter! Not a word of complaint, not one word of censure for the man who deserted her on her death-bed. And I thought that man a gentleman! I loved his society! I unconsciously helped to rob my little girl of her natural protector! Oh," she sobbed softly. "If there be a God—and I know now that there is—forgive me, forgive!"

Mary, who was withholding that silent anguish which culminated in an earnest plea for forgiveness, and not able to divine its cause, was sorely troubled. She loved her benefactress dearly, and she could not endure to see her in distress. Going over to her, she entwined her arms about her and tried to comfort her.

"Mary, my child," said Mrs. Wilbur, when she could control herself sufficiently to speak, "I have made a dreadful discovery. You think I have been a friend to you. Truly I meant to be; but long before I ever saw you I did you an irreparable wrong."

Mary stood aghast. What could she mean? Do her wrong? How?

"Years before you came into my life," continued the weeping woman, "I had a sister, young and beautiful, and wealthy, and like myself an atheist. She was married to a man too good for her. She wanted a freer life than his religious views sanctioned. She met another man. He had a wife and child, but he was handsome and dashing, reckless and care-free fellow, who led a good time, and cared not at what cost. He became enamored of my sister, and she reciprocated his affections. When his wife was ill, it was at my sister's home that he spent his evenings; and when his wife died, my sister secured a divorce and married him, and they went abroad to live. That man, dear child, was your father. I not only sanctioned that unholy union, but I aided it, fully believing that I was promoting my sister's happiness; but I never stopped to think at what a cost. I can see it all now so plain—why God has sent you to me. It was to make me repair the wrong I innocently committed. Writingly, did you for I knew that Charlie Kerrigan was deserted; and that child, my dear, was you. There married life was brief; for Isabella died within a few months, and Charlie did not return to this country."

"Never mind, dear," sobbed Mary, who was stirred to the depths by the strange recital. "God has been good. It is strange how we were brought together. I believe my mother's prayers have done it."

"Ah, yes! You certainly have been an angel sent to give me from the depths of infidelity into which I so willingly plunged myself, and from which you daily slowly but unconsciously, have been lifting me since you came to my home. From that day on which I first read your mother's farewell to you, I have known neither rest nor peace. A strange indefinable something took possession of me. I knew not what I was wanting; but an insatiable longing has filled my waking hours. And since you told me of your father, I believe I see it clearly. I am hungering for God, casting about for a place to anchor my hopes. Do not be surprised, my precious little girl. I desire to become a Christian—a Catholic—and to be as good a one as you. I desire to love and serve God, as you love and serve Him; and you must help me and teach me the way."

"At last—at last!" sobbed the now happy girl, as she threw herself into the outstretched arms of Mrs. Wilbur. "At last God has answered my prayers, and so unexpectedly! Oh, He has been so good, so good! And when you know Him and love Him as you will perhaps—in some way—help me to reach and save my poor unfortunate father."—Katherine Miles, in *The Ave Maria*.

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News From Ireland

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A verdict of accidental death was returned at the County Court, Dublin, in the case of the death of a young man, Patrick Levin, son of the late Patrick Levin, who was drowned in a canal. The deceased was found in a canal, and a stream in the canal was found a short time after the death. He was taken out and resuscitation tried, but he died. There was a wound in the chest which evidently caused the death with a stone thrown at the deceased.

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While Daniel O'Connell was Lord Mayor of Dublin a law was in existence which prohibited the Lord Mayor or Mayor attending in his robes of state any Catholic church on pain of forfeiture of office and heavy fine. Mr. O'Connell was equal to the occasion. He went in state to the church of St. Patrick's, in Marlborough street, dressed in his robes of state. He was again robes of state, and proceeded in state to the Mansion House.

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