

THE STORY.

BOOK THE FIRST.

CHAPTER I -THE CONFIDENCES.

IN an upper room of one of the palatial houses which are situated on the north side of Hyde Park, two ladies sat at breakfast, and gossiped over their tea.

The elder of the two was Lady Loring--still in the prime of life; possessed of the golden hair and the clear blue eyes, the delicately-florid complexion, and the freely developed figure, which are among the favorite attractions popularly associated with the beauty of Englishwomen. Her younger companion was the unknown lady admired by Major Hynd on the sea passage from France to England. With hair and eyes of the darkest brown; with a pure pallor of complexion, only changing to a faint rose tint in moments of agitation; with a tall graceful figure, incompletely developed in substance and strength--she presented an almost complete contrast to Lady Loring. Two more opposite types of beauty it would have been hardly possible to place at the same table.

The servant brought in the letters of the morning. Lady Loring ran through her correspondence rapidly, pushed away the letters in a heap, and poured herself out a second cup of tea.

"Nothing interesting this morning for me," she said. "Any news of your mother, Stella?"

The young lady handed an open letter to her hostess, with a faint smile. "See for yourself, Adelaide," she answered, with the tender sweetness of tone which made her voice irresistibly charming--"and tell me if there were ever two women so utterly unlike each other as my mother and myself."

Lady Loring ran through the letter, as she had run through her own correspondence. "Never, dearest Stella, have I enjoyed myself as I do in this delightful country house--twenty-seven at dinner every day, without including the neighbors--a little carpet dance every evening--we play billiards, and go into the smoking room--the hounds meet three times a week--all sorts of celebrities among the company, famous beauties included--such dresses! such conversation!--and serious duties, my dear, not neglected--high church and choral service in the town on Sundays--recitations in the evening from Paradise Lost, by an amateur elocutionist--oh, you foolish, headstrong child! why did you make excuses and stay in London, when you might have accompanied me to this earthly Paradise?--are you really ill?--my love to Lady Loring--and of course, if you are ill, you must have medical advice--they ask after you so kindly here--the first dinner bell is ringing, before I have half done my letter--what am I to wear?--why is my daughter not here to advise me," etc., etc., etc.

"There is time to change your mind and advise your mother," Lady Loring remarked with grave irony as she returned the letter.

"Don't even speak of it!" said Stella. "I really know no life that I should not prefer to the life that my mother is enjoying at this moment. What should I have done, Adelaide, if you had not offered me a happy refuge in your house? My 'earthly Paradise' is here, where I am allowed to dream

away my time over my drawings and my books, and to resign myself to poor health and low spirits, without being dragged into society, and (worse still) threatened with that 'medical advice' in which, when she isn't threatened with it herself, my poor dear mother believes so implicitly. I wish you would hire me as your 'companion,' and let me stay here for the rest of my life."

Lady Loring's bright face became grave while Stella was speaking.

"My dear," she said kindly, "I know well how you love retirement, and how differently you think and feel from other young women of your age. And I am far from forgetting what sad circumstances have encouraged the natural bent of your disposition. But, since you have been staying with me this time, I see something in you which my intimate knowledge of your character fails to explain. We have been friends since we were together at school--and, in those old days, we never had any secrets from each other. You are feeling some anxiety, or brooding over some sorrow, of which I know nothing. I don't ask for your confidence; I only tell you what I have noticed--and I say with all my heart, Stella, I am sorry for you."

She rose, and, with intuitive delicacy, changed the subject. "I am going out earlier than usual this morning," she resumed. "Is there anything I can do for you?" She laid her hand tenderly on Stella's shoulder, waiting for the reply. Stella lifted the hand and kissed it with passionate fondness.

"Don't think me ungrateful," she said; "I am only ashamed." Her head sank on her bosom; she burst into tears.

Lady Loring waited by her in silence. She well knew the girl's self-contained nature, always shrinking, except in moments of violent emotion, from the outward betrayal of its trials and its sufferings to

others. The true depth of feeling which is marked by this inbred modesty is most frequently found in men. The few women who possess it are without the communicative consolations of the feminine heart. They are the noblest---and but too often the unhappiest of their sex.

"Will you wait a little before you go out?" Stella asked softly.

Lady Loring returned to the chair that she had left--hesitated for a moment--and then drew it nearer to Stella. "Shall I sit by you?" she said.

"Close by me. You spoke of our school days just now Adelaide. There was some difference between us. Of all the girls I was the youngest--and you were the eldest, or nearly the eldest, I think?"

"Quite the eldest, my dear. There is a difference of ten years between us. But why do you go back to that?"

"It's only a recollection. My father was alive then. I was at first home-sick and frightened in the strange place, among the big girls. You used to let me hide my face on your shoulder, and tell me stories. May I hide in the old way and tell my story?"

She was now the calmest of the two. The elder woman turned a little pale, and looked down in silent anxiety at the darkly beautiful head that rested on her shoulder.

"After such an experience as mine has been," said Stella, "would you think it possible that I could ever again feel my heart troubled by a man--and that man a stranger?"

"My dear! I think it quite possible. You are only now in your twenty-third year. You were innocent of all blame at that wretched by-gone time which you ought never to speak of again. Love and be happy, Stella--if you can only find the man who is worthy of you. But you frighten me when you speak of a stranger. Where did you meet with him?"

"On our way back from Paris."

"Traveling in the same carriage with you?"

"No--it was in crossing the Channel. There were few travelers in the steamboat, or I might never have noticed him."

"Did he speak to you?"

"I don't think he even looked at me."

"That doesn't say much for his taste, Stella."

"You don't understand. I mean, I have not explained myself properly. He was leaning on the arm of a friend; weak and worn and wasted, as I supposed, by some long and dreadful illness. There was an angelic sweetness in his face--such patience! such resignation! For heaven's sake keep my secret. One hears of men falling in love with women at first sight. But a woman who looks at a man, and feels--oh, it's shameful! I could hardly take my eyes off him. If he had looked at me in return, I don't know what I should have done--I burn when I think of it. He was absorbed in his suffering and his sorrow. My last look at his beautiful face was on the pier, before they took me away. The perfect image of him has been in my heart ever since. In my dreams I see him as plainly as I see you now. Don't despise me, Adelaide!"

"My dear, you interest me indescribably. Do you suppose he was in our rank of life? I mean, of course, did he look like a gentleman?"

"There could be no doubt of it."

"Do try to describe him, Stella. Was he tall and well dressed?"

"Neither tall nor short--rather thin--quiet and graceful in all his movements--dressed plainly, in perfect taste. How can I describe him? When his friend brought him on board, he stood at the side of the vessel, looking out thoughtfully toward the sea. Such eyes I never saw before, Adelaide, in any human face--so divinely tender and sad--and the color of them that dark violet blue, so uncommon and so beautiful--too beautiful for a man. I may say the same of his hair. I saw it completely. For a minute or two he removed his hat--his head was fevered, I think--and he let the sea breeze blow over it. The pure light brown of his hair was just warmed by a lovely reddish tinge. His beard was of the same color; short and curling, like the beards of the Roman heroes one sees in pictures. I shall never see him again--and it is best for me that I shall not. What can I hope from a man who never once noticed me? But I should like to hear that he had recovered his health and his tranquillity, and that his life was a happy one. It has been a comfort to me, Adelaide, to open my heart to you. I am getting bold enough to confess everything. Would you laugh at me, I wonder, if I--?"

She stopped. Her pale complexion softly glowed into color; her grand dark eyes brightened--she looked her loveliest at that moment.

"I am far more inclined, Stella, to cry over you than to laugh at you," said Lady Loring. "There is something, to my mind, very sad about this adventure of yours. I wish I could find out who the man is. Even the best description of a person falls so short of the reality!"

"I thought of showing you something," Stella continued, "which might help you to see him as I saw him. It's only making one more acknowledgment of my own folly."

"You don't mean a portrait of him!" Lady Loring exclaimed.

"The best that I could do from recollection," Stella answered sadly.

"Bring it here directly!"

Stella left the room and returned with a little drawing in pencil. The instant Lady Loring looked at it, she recognized Romyne and started excitedly to her feet.

"You know him!" cried Stella.

Lady Loring had placed herself in an awkward position. Her husband had described to her his interview with Major Hynd, and had mentioned his project for bringing Romyne and Stella together, after first exacting a promise of the strictest secrecy from his wife. She felt herself bound--doubly bound, after what she had now discovered--to respect the confidence placed in her; and this at the time when she had betrayed herself to Stella! With a woman's feline fineness of perception, in all cases of subterfuge and concealment, she picked a part of the truth out of the whole, and answered harmlessly without a moment's hesitation.

"I have certainly seen him," she said--"probably at some party. But I see so many people, and I go to so many places, that I must ask for time to

consult my memory. My husband might help me, if you don't object to my asking him," she added slyly.

Stella snatched the drawing away from her, in terror. "You don't mean that you will tell Lord Loring?" she said.

"My dear child! how can you be so foolish? Can't I show him the drawing without mentioning who it was done by? His memory is a much better one than mine. If I say to him, 'Where did we meet that man?'--he may tell me at once--he may even remember the name. Of course, if you like to be kept in suspense, you have only to say so. It rests with you to decide."

Poor Stella gave way directly. She returned the drawing, and affectionately kissed her artful friend. Having now secured the means of consulting her husband without exciting suspicion, Lady Loring left the room.

At that time in the morning, Lord Loring was generally to be found either in the library or the picture gallery. His wife tried the library first. On entering the room, she found but one person in it--not the person of whom she was in search. There, buttoned up in his long frock coat, and surrounded by books of all sorts and sizes, sat the plump elderly priest who had been the especial object of Major Hynd's aversion.

"I beg your pardon, Father Benwell," said Lady Loring; "I hope I don't interrupt your studies?"

Father Benwell rose and bowed with a pleasant paternal smile. "I am only trying to organize an improved arrangement of the library," he said, simply. "Books are companionable creatures--members, as it were, of his

family, to a lonely old priest like myself. Can I be of any service to your ladyship?"

"Thank you, Father. If you can kindly tell me where Lord Loring is--"

"To be sure! His lordship was here five minutes since--he is now in the picture gallery. Pray permit me!"

With a remarkably light and easy step for a man of his age and size, he advanced to the further end of the library, and opened a door which led into the gallery.

"Lord Loring is among the pictures," he announced. "And alone." He laid a certain emphasis on the last word, which might or might not (in the case of a spiritual director of the household) invite a word of explanation.

Lady Loring merely said, "Just what I wanted; thank you once more, Father Benwell"--and passed into the picture gallery.

Left by himself again in the library, the priest walked slowly to and fro, thinking. His latent power and resolution began to show themselves darkly in his face. A skilled observer would now have seen plainly revealed in him the habit of command, and the capacity for insisting on his right to be obeyed. From head to foot, Father Benwell was one of those valuable soldiers of the Church who acknowledge no defeat, and who improve every victory.

After a while, he returned to the table at which he had been writing when Lady Loring entered the room. An unfinished letter lay open on the desk. He took up his pen and completed it in these words: "I have therefore decided on trusting this serious matter in the hands of Arthur Penrose. I

know he is young--but we have to set against the drawback of his youth, the counter-merits of his incorruptible honesty and his true religious zeal. No better man is just now within my reach--and there is no time to lose. Romaine has recently inherited a large increase of fortune. He will be the object of the basest conspiracies--conspiracies of men to win his money, and (worse still) of women to marry him. Even these contemptible efforts may be obstacles in the way of our righteous purpose, unless we are first in the field. Penrose left Oxford last week. I expect him here this morning, by my invitation. When I have given him the necessary instructions, and have found the means of favorably introducing him to Romaine, I shall have the honor of forwarding a statement of our prospects so far."

Having signed these lines, he addressed the letter to "The Reverend the Secretary, Society of Jesus, Rome." As he closed and sealed the envelope, a servant opened the door communicating with the hall, and announced:

"Mr. Arthur Penrose."