

CHAPTER III - THE INTRODUCTION TO ROMAYNE.

"EXCEPTING my employment here in the library," Father Benwell began, "and some interesting conversation with Lord Loring, to which I shall presently allude, I am almost as great a stranger in this house, Arthur, as yourself. When the object which we now have in view was first taken seriously into consideration, I had the honor of being personally acquainted with Lord Loring. I was also aware that he was an intimate and trusted friend of Romayne. Under these circumstances, his lordship presented himself to our point of view as a means of approaching the owner of Vange Abbey without exciting distrust. I was charged accordingly with the duty of establishing myself on terms of intimacy in this house. By way of making room for me, the spiritual director of Lord and Lady Loring was removed to a cure of souls in Ireland. And here I am in his place! By-the-way, don't treat me (when we are in the presence of visitors) with any special marks of respect. I am not Provincial of our Order in Lord Loring's house--I am one of the inferior clergy."

Penrose looked at him with admiration. "It is a great sacrifice to make, Father, in your position and at your age."

"Not at all, Arthur. A position of authority involves certain temptations to pride. I feel this change as a lesson in humility which is good for me. For example, Lady Loring (as I can plainly see) dislikes and distrusts me. Then, again, a young lady has recently arrived here on a visit. She is a Protestant, with all the prejudices incident to that way of thinking--avoids me so carefully, poor soul, that I have never seen her yet. These rebuffs are wholesome reminders of his fallible human nature, to a man who has occupied a place of high trust and command. Besides, there have been obstacles in my way which have had an excellent effect in rousing my energies. How do you feel, Arthur, when you encounter obstacles?"

"I do my best to remove them, Father. But I am sometimes conscious of a sense of discouragement."

"Curious," said Father Benwell. "I am only conscious, myself, of a sense of impatience. What right has an obstacle to get in my way?--that is how I look at it. For example, the first thing I heard, when I came here, was that Romaine had left England. My introduction to him was indefinitely delayed; I had to look to Lord Loring for all the information I wanted relating to the man and his habits. There was another obstacle! Not living in the house, I was obliged to find an excuse for being constantly on the spot, ready to take advantage of his lordship's leisure moments for conversation. I sat down in this room, and I said to myself, 'Before I get up again, I mean to brush these impertinent obstacles out of my way!' The state of the books suggested the idea of which I was in search. Before I left the house, I was charged with the rearrangement of the library. From that moment I came and went as often as I liked. Whenever Lord Loring was disposed for a little talk, there I was, to lead the talk in the right direction. And what is the result? On the first occasion when Romaine presents himself I can place you in a position to become his daily companion. All due, Arthur, in the first instance, to my impatience of obstacles. Amusing, isn't it?"

Penrose was perhaps deficient in the sense of humor. Instead of being amused, he appeared to be anxious for more information.

"In what capacity am I to be Mr. Romaine's companion?" he asked.

Father Benwell poured himself out another cup of coffee.

"Suppose I tell you first," he suggested, "how circumstances present Romaine to us as a promising subject for conversion. He is young; still a single man; not compromised by any illicit connection; romantic, sensitive, highly cultivated. No near relations are alive to influence him;

and, to my certain knowledge, his estate is not entailed. He has devoted himself for years past to books, and is collecting materials for a work of immense research, on the Origin of Religions. Some great sorrow or remorse--Lord Loring did not mention what it was--has told seriously on his nervous system, already injured by night study. Add to this, that he is now within our reach. He has lately returned to London, and is living quite alone at a private hotel. For some reason which I am not acquainted with, he keeps away from Vange Abbey--the very place, as I should have thought, for a studious man."

Penrose began to be interested. "Have you been to the Abbey?" he said.

"I made a little excursion to that part of Yorkshire, Arthur, not long since. A very pleasant trip--apart from the painful associations connected with the ruin and profanation of a sacred place. There is no doubt about the revenues. I know the value of that productive part of the estate which stretches southward, away from the barren region round the house. Let us return for a moment to Romaine, and to your position as his future companion. He has had his books sent to him from Vange, and has persuaded himself that continued study is the one remedy for his troubles, whatever they may be. At Lord Loring's suggestion, a consultation of physicians was held on his case the other day."

"Is he so ill as that?" Penrose exclaimed.

"So it appears," Father Benwell replied. "Lord Loring is mysteriously silent about the illness. One result of the consultation I extracted from him, in which you are interested. The doctors protested against his employing himself on his proposed work. He was too obstinate to listen to them. There was but one concession that they could gain from him--he consented to spare himself, in some small degree, by employing an amanuensis. It was left to Lord Loring to find the man. I was consulted by his lordship; I was even invited to undertake the duty myself. Each one in his proper sphere, my son! The person who converts Romaine must be young enough and pliable enough to be his friend and

companion. Your part is there, Arthur--you are the future amanuensis. How does the prospect strike you now?"

"I beg your pardon, Father! I fear I am unworthy of the confidence which is placed in me."

"In what way?"

Penrose answered with unfeigned humility.

"I am afraid I may fail to justify your belief in me," he said, "unless I can really feel that I am converting Mr. Romaine for his own soul's sake. However righteous the cause may be, I cannot find, in the restitution of the Church property, a sufficient motive for persuading him to change his religious faith. There is something so serious in the responsibility which you lay on me, that I shall sink under the burden unless my whole heart is in the work. If I feel attracted toward Mr. Romaine when I first see him; if he wins upon me, little by little, until I love him like a brother--then, indeed, I can promise that his conversion shall be the dearest object of my life. But if there is not this intimate sympathy between us--forgive me if I say it plainly--I implore you to pass me over, and to commit the task to the hands of another man."

His voice trembled; his eyes moistened. Father Benwell handled his young friend's rising emotion with the dexterity of a skilled angler humoring the struggles of a lively fish.

"Good Arthur!" he said. "I see much--too much, dear boy--of self-seeking people. It is as refreshing to me to hear you, as a draught of water to a thirsty man. At the same time, let me suggest that you are innocently raising difficulties, where no difficulties exist. I have already mentioned as one of the necessities of the case that you and Romaine should be

friends. How can that be, unless there is precisely that sympathy between you which you have so well described? I am a sanguine man, and I believe you will like each other. Wait till you see him."

As the words passed his lips, the door that led to the picture gallery was opened. Lord Loring entered the library.

He looked quickly round him--apparently in search of some person who might, perhaps, be found in the room. A shade of annoyance showed itself in his face, and disappeared again, as he bowed to the two Jesuits.

"Don't let me disturb you," he said, looking at Penrose. "Is this the gentleman who is to assist Mr. Romaine?"

Father Benwell presented his young friend. "Arthur Penrose, my lord. I ventured to suggest that he should call here to-day, in case you wished to put any questions to him."

"Quite needless, after your recommendation," Lord Loring answered, graciously. "Mr. Penrose could not have come here at a more appropriate time. As it happens, Mr. Romaine has paid us a visit today--he is now in the picture gallery."

The priests looked at each other. Lord Loring left them as he spoke. He walked to the opposite door of the library--opened it--glanced round the hall, and at the stairs--and returned again, with the passing expression of annoyance visible once more. "Come with me to the gallery, gentlemen," he said; "I shall be happy to introduce you to Mr. Romaine."

Penrose accepted the proposal. Father Benwell pointed with a smile to the books scattered about him. "With permission, I will follow your lordship," he said.

"Who was my lord looking for?" That was the question in Father Benwell's mind, while he put some of the books away on the shelves, and collected the scattered papers on the table, relating to his correspondence with Rome. It had become a habit of his life to be suspicious of any circumstances occurring within his range of observation, for which he was unable to account. He might have felt some stronger emotion on this occasion, if he had known that the conspiracy in the library to convert Romaine was matched by the conspiracy in the picture gallery to marry him.

Lady Loring's narrative of the conversation which had taken place between Stella and herself had encouraged her husband to try his proposed experiment without delay. "I shall send a letter at once to Romaine's hotel," he said.

"Inviting him to come here to-day?" her ladyship inquired.

"Yes. I shall say I particularly wish to consult him about a picture. Are we to prepare Stella to see him? or would it be better to let the meeting take her by surprise?"

"Certainly not!" said Lady Loring. "With her sensitive disposition, I am afraid of taking Stella by surprise. Let me only tell her that Romaine is the original of her portrait, and that he is likely to call on you to see the picture to-day--and leave the rest to me."

Lady Loring's suggestion was immediately carried out. In the first fervor of her agitation, Stella had declared that her courage was not equal to a

meeting with Romaine on that day. Becoming more composed, she yielded to Lady Loring's persuasion so far as to promise that she would at least make the attempt to follow her friend to the gallery. "If I go down with you," she said, "it will look as if we had arranged the thing between us. I can't bear even to think of that. Let me look in by myself, as if it was by accident." Consenting to this arrangement, Lady Loring had proceeded alone to the gallery, when Romaine's visit was announced. The minutes passed, and Stella did not appear. It was quite possible that she might shrink from openly presenting herself at the main entrance to the gallery, and might prefer--especially if she was not aware of the priest's presence in the room--to slip in quietly by the library door. Failing to find her, on putting this idea to the test, Lord Loring had discovered Penrose, and had so hastened the introduction of the younger of the two Jesuits to Romaine.

Having gathered his papers together, Father Benwell crossed the library to the deep bow-window which lighted the room, and opened his dispatch-box, standing on a small table in the recess. Placed in this position, he was invisible to any person entering the room by the hall door. He had secured his papers in the dispatch-box, and had just closed and locked it, when he heard the door cautiously opened.

The instant afterward the rustling of a woman's dress over the carpet caught his ear. Other men might have walked out of the recess and shown themselves. Father Benwell stayed where he was, and waited until the lady crossed his range of view.

The priest observed with cold attention her darkly-beautiful eyes and hair, her quickly-changing color, her modest grace of movement. Slowly, and in evident agitation, she advanced to the door of the picture gallery--and paused, as if she was afraid to open it. Father Benwell heard her sigh to herself softly, "Oh, how shall I meet him?" She turned aside to the looking-glass over the fire-place. The reflection of her charming face seemed to rouse her courage. She retraced her steps, and timidly opened the door. Lord Loring must have been close by at the moment. His voice immediately made itself heard in the library.

"Come in, Stella--come in! Here is a new picture for you to see; and a friend whom I want to present to you, who must be your friend too--Mr. Lewis Romaine."

The door was closed again. Father Benwell stood still as a statue in the recess, with his head down, deep in thought. After a while he roused himself, and rapidly returned to the writing table. With a roughness strangely unlike his customary deliberation of movement, he snatched a sheet of paper out of the case, and frowning heavily, wrote these lines on it:--"Since my letter was sealed, I have made a discovery which must be communicated without the loss of a post. I greatly fear there may be a woman in our way. Trust me to combat this obstacle as I have combated other obstacles. In the meantime, the work goes on. Penrose has received his first instructions, and has to-day been presented to Romaine."

He addressed this letter to Rome, as he had addressed the letter preceding it. "Now for the woman!" he said to himself--and opened the door of the picture gallery.