

#### **CHAPTER IV - FATHER BENWELL HITS.**

ART has its trials as well as its triumphs. It is powerless to assert itself against the sordid interests of everyday life. The greatest book ever written, the finest picture ever painted, appeals in vain to minds preoccupied by selfish and secret cares. On entering Lord Loring's gallery, Father Benwell found but one person who was not looking at the pictures under false pretenses.

Innocent of all suspicion of the conflicting interests whose struggle now centered in himself, Romaine was carefully studying the picture which had been made the pretext for inviting him to the house. He had bowed to Stella, with a tranquil admiration of her beauty; he had shaken hands with Penrose, and had said some kind words to his future secretary--and then he had turned to the picture, as if Stella and Penrose had ceased from that moment to occupy his mind.

"In your place," he said quietly to Lord Loring, "I should not buy this work."

"Why not?"

"It seems to me to have the serious defect of the modern English school of painting. A total want of thought in the rendering of the subject, disguised under dexterous technical tricks of the brush. When you have seen one of that man's pictures, you have seen all. He manufactures--he doesn't paint."

Father Benwell came in while Romaine was speaking. He went through the ceremonies of introduction to the master of Vange Abbey with perfect politeness, but a little absently. His mind was bent on putting his

suspicion of Stella to the test of confirmation. Not waiting to be presented, he turned to her with the air of fatherly interest and chastened admiration which he well knew how to assume in his intercourse with women.

"May I ask if you agree with Mr. Romaine's estimate of the picture?" he said, in his gentlest tones.

She had heard of him, and of his position in the house. It was quite needless for Lady Loring to whisper to her, "Father Benwell, my dear!" Her antipathy identified him as readily as her sympathy might have identified a man who had produced a favorable impression on her. "I have no pretension to be a critic," she answered, with frigid politeness. "I only know what I personally like or dislike."

The reply exactly answered Father Benwell's purpose. It diverted Romaine's attention from the picture to Stella. The priest had secured his opportunity of reading their faces while they were looking at each other.

"I think you have just stated the true motive for all criticism," Romaine said to Stella. "Whether we only express our opinions of pictures or books in the course of conversation or whether we assert them at full length, with all the authority of print, we are really speaking, in either case, of what personally pleases or repels us. My poor opinion of that picture means that it says nothing to Me. Does it say anything to You?"

He smiled gently as he put the question to her, but there was no betrayal of emotion in his eyes or in his voice. Relieved of anxiety, so far as Romaine was concerned, Father Benwell looked at Stella.

Steadily as she controlled herself, the confession of her heart's secret found its way into her face. The coldly composed expression which had confronted the priest when she spoke to him, melted away softly under the influence of Romaine's voice and Romaine's look. Without any positive change of color, her delicate skin glowed faintly, as if it felt some animating inner warmth. Her eyes and lips brightened with a new vitality; her frail elegant figure seemed insensibly to strengthen and expand, like the leaf of a flower under a favoring sunny air. When she answered Romaine (agreeing with him, it is needless to say), there was a tender persuasiveness in her tones, shyly inviting him still to speak to her and still to look at her, which would in itself have told Father Benwell the truth, even if he had not been in a position to see her face. Confirmed in his doubts of her, he looked, with concealed suspicion, at Lady Loring next. Sympathy with Stella was undisguisedly expressed to him in the honest blue eyes of Stella's faithful friend.

The discussion on the subject of the unfortunate picture was resumed by Lord Loring, who thought the opinions of Romaine and Stella needlessly severe. Lady Loring, as usual, agreed with her husband. While the general attention was occupied in this way, Father Benwell said a word to Penrose--thus far, a silent listener to the discourse on Art.

"Have you seen the famous portrait of the first Lady Loring, by Gainsborough?" he asked. Without waiting for a reply, he took Penrose by the arm, and led him away to the picture--which had the additional merit, under present circumstances, of hanging at the other end of the gallery.

"How do you like Romaine?" Father Benwell put the question in low peremptory tones, evidently impatient for a reply.

"He interests me already," said Penrose. "He looks so ill and so sad, and he spoke to me so kindly--"

"In short," Father Benwell interposed, "Romaine has produced a favorable impression on you. Let us get on to the next thing. You must produce a favorable impression on Romaine."

Penrose sighed. "With the best will to make myself agreeable to people whom I like," he said, "I don't always succeed. They used to tell me at Oxford that I was shy--and I am afraid that is against me. I wish I possessed some of your social advantages, Father!"

"Leave it to me, son! Are they still talking about the picture?"

"Yes."

"I have something more to say to you. Have you noticed the young lady?"

"I thought her beautiful--but she looks a little cold."

Father Benwell smiled. "When you are as old as I am," he said, "you will not believe in appearances where women are concerned. Do you know what I think of her? Beautiful, if you like--and dangerous as well."

"Dangerous! In what way?"

"This is for your private ear, Arthur. She is in love with Romaine. Wait a minute! And Lady Loring--unless I am entirely mistaken in what I observed--knows it and favors it. The beautiful Stella may be the destruction of all our hopes, unless we keep Romaine out of her way."

These words were whispered with an earnestness and agitation which surprised Penrose. His superior's equanimity was not easily overthrown. "Are you sure, Father, of what you say?" he asked.

"I am quite sure--or I should not have spoken."

"Do you think Mr. Romaine returns the feeling?"

"Not yet, luckily. You must use your first friendly influence over him--what is her name? Her surname, I mean."

"Eyrecourt. Miss Stella Eyrecourt."

"Very well. You must use your influence (when you are quite sure that it is an influence) to keep Mr. Romaine away from Miss Eyrecourt."

Penrose looked embarrassed. "I am afraid I should hardly know how to do that," he said "But I should naturally, as his assistant, encourage him to keep to his studies."

Whatever Arthur's superior might privately think of Arthur's reply, he received it with outward indulgence. "That will come to the same thing," he said. "Besides, when I get the information I want--this is strictly between ourselves--I may be of some use in placing obstacles in the lady's way."

Penrose started. "Information!" he repeated. "What information?"

"Tell me something before I answer you," said Father Benwell. "How old do you take Miss Eyrecourt to be?"

"I am not a good judge in such matters. Between twenty and twenty-five, perhaps?"

"We will take her age at that estimate, Arthur. In former years, I have had opportunities of studying women's characters in the confessional. Can you guess what my experience tells me of Miss Eyrecourt?"

"No, indeed!"

"A lady is not in love for the first time when she is between twenty and twenty-five years old--that is my experience," said Father Benwell. "If I can find a person capable of informing me, I may make some valuable discoveries in the earlier history of Miss Eyrecourt's life. No more, now. We had better return to our friends."