

CHAPTER V - FATHER BENWELL MISSES.

THE group before the picture which had been the subject of dispute was broken up. In one part of the gallery, Lady Loring and Stella were whispering together on a sofa. In another part, Lord Loring was speaking privately to Romyne.

"Do you think you will like Mr. Penrose?" his lordship asked.

"Yes--so far as I can tell at present. He seems to be modest and intelligent."

"You are looking ill, my dear Romyne. Have you again heard the voice that haunts you?"

Romyne answered with evident reluctance. "I don't know why," he said--"but the dread of hearing it again has oppressed me all this morning. To tell you the truth, I came here in the hope that the change might relieve me."

"Has it done so?"

"Yes--thus far."

"Doesn't that suggest, my friend, that a greater change might be of use to you?"

"Don't ask me about it, Loring! I can go through my ordeal--but I hate speaking of it."

"Let us speak of something else then," said Lord Loring. "What do you think of Miss Eyrecourt?"

"A very striking face; full of expression and character. Leonardo would have painted a noble portrait of her. But there is something in her manner--" He stopped, unwilling or unable to finish the sentence.

"Something you don't like?" Lord Loring suggested.

"No; something I don't quite understand. One doesn't expect to find any embarrassment in the manner of a well-bred woman. And yet she seemed to be embarrassed when she spoke to me. Perhaps I produced an unfortunate impression on her."

Lord Loring laughed. "In any man but you, Romaine, I should call that affectation."

"Why?" Romaine asked, sharply.

Lord Loring looked unfeignedly surprised. "My dear fellow, do you really think you are the sort of man who impresses a woman unfavorably at first sight? For once in your life, indulge in the amiable weakness of doing yourself justice--and find a better reason for Miss Eyrecourt's embarrassment."

For the first time since he and his friend had been talking together, Romaine turned toward Stella. He innocently caught her in the act of

looking at him. A younger woman, or a woman of weaker character, would have looked away again. Stella's noble head drooped; her eyes sank slowly, until they rested on her long white hands crossed upon her lap. For a moment more Romaine looked at her with steady attention.

He roused himself, and spoke to Lord Loring in lowered tones.

"Have you known Miss Eyrecourt for a long time?"

"She is my wife's oldest and dearest friend. I think, Romaine, you would feel interested in Stella, if you saw more of her."

Romaine bowed in silent submission to Lord Loring's prophetic remark. "Let us look at the pictures," he said, quietly.

As he moved down the gallery, the two priests met him. Father Benwell saw his opportunity of helping Penrose to produce a favorable impression.

"Forgive the curiosity of an old student, Mr. Romaine," he said in his pleasant, cheerful way. "Lord Loring tells me you have sent to the country for your books. Do you find a London hotel favorable to study?"

"It is a very quiet hotel," Romaine answered, "and the people know my ways." He turned to Arthur. "I have my own set of rooms, Mr. Penrose," he continued--"with a room at your disposal. I used to enjoy the solitude of my house in the country. My tastes have lately changed--there are times now when I want to see the life in the streets, as a relief. Though we are in a hotel, I can promise that you will not be troubled by interruptions, when you kindly lend me the use of your pen."

Father Benwell answered before Penrose could speak. "You may perhaps find my young friend's memory of some use to you, Mr. Romaine, as well as his pen. Penrose has studied in the Vatican Library. If your reading leads you that way, he knows more than most men of the rare old manuscripts which treat of the early history of Christianity."

This delicately managed reference to the projected work on "The Origin of Religions" produced its effect.

"I should like very much, Mr. Penrose, to speak to you about those manuscripts," Romaine said. "Copies of some of them may perhaps be in the British Museum. Is it asking too much to inquire if you are disengaged this morning?"

"I am entirely at your service, Mr. Romaine."

"If you will kindly call at my hotel in an hour's time, I shall have looked over my notes, and shall be ready for you with a list of titles and dates. There is the address."

With those words, he advanced to take his leave of Lady Loring and Stella.

Father Benwell was a man possessed of extraordinary power of foresight—but he was not infallible. Seeing that Romaine was on the point of leaving the house, and feeling that he had paved the way successfully for Romaine's amanuensis, he too readily assumed that there was nothing further to be gained by remaining in the gallery. Moreover, the interval before Penrose called at the hotel might be usefully filled up by some wise words of advice, relating to the religious uses to which he might turn his intercourse with his employer. Making one of his ready and

plausible excuses, he accordingly returned with Penrose to the library--and so committed (as he himself discovered at a later time) one of the few mistakes in the long record of his life.

In the meanwhile, Romaine was not permitted to bring his visit to a conclusion without hospitable remonstrance on the part of Lady Loring. She felt for Stella, with a woman's enthusiastic devotion to the interests of true love; and she had firmly resolved that a matter so trifling as the cultivation of Romaine's mind should not be allowed to stand in the way of the far more important enterprise of opening his heart to the influence of the sex.

"Stay and lunch with us," she said, when he held out his hand to bid her good-by.

"Thank you, Lady Loring, I never take lunch."

"Well, then, come and dine with us--no party; only ourselves. Tomorrow, and next day, we are disengaged. Which day shall it be?"

Romaine still resisted. "You are very kind. In my state of health, I am unwilling to make engagements which I may not be able to keep."

Lady Loring was just as resolute on her side. She appealed to Stella. "Mr. Romaine persists, my dear, in putting me off with excuses. Try if you can persuade him."

"I am not likely to have any influence, Adelaide."

The tone in which she replied struck Romaine. He looked at her. Her eyes, gravely meeting his eyes, held him with a strange fascination. She was not herself conscious how openly all that was noble and true in her nature, all that was most deeply and sensitively felt in her aspirations, spoke at that moment in her look. Romaine's face changed: he turned pale under the new emotion that she had roused in him. Lady Loring observed him attentively.

"Perhaps you underrate your influence, Stella?" she suggested.

Stella remained impenetrable to persuasion. "I have only been introduced to Mr. Romaine half an hour since," she said. "I am not vain enough to suppose that I can produce a favorable impression on any one in so short a time."

She had expressed, in other words, Romaine's own idea of himself, in speaking of her to Lord Loring. He was struck by the coincidence.

"Perhaps we have begun, Miss Eyrecourt, by misinterpreting one another," he said. "We may arrive at a better understanding when I have the honor of meeting you again."

He hesitated and looked at Lady Loring. She was not the woman to let a fair opportunity escape her. "We will say to-morrow evening," she resumed, "at seven o'clock."

"To-morrow," said Romaine. He shook hands with Stella, and left the picture gallery.

Thus far, the conspiracy to marry him promised even more hopefully than the conspiracy to convert him. And Father Benwell, carefully instructing Penrose in the next room, was not aware of it!

But the hours, in their progress, mark the march of events as surely as they mark the march of time. The day passed, the evening came--and, with its coming, the prospects of the conversion brightened in their turn.

Let Father Benwell himself relate how it happened--in an extract from his report to Rome, written the same evening.

"... I had arranged with Penrose that he should call at my lodgings, and tell me how he had prospered at the first performance of his duties as secretary to Romaine.

"The moment he entered the room the signs of disturbance in his face told me that something serious had happened. I asked directly if there had been any disagreement between Romaine and himself.

"He repeated the word with every appearance of surprise. 'Disagreement?' he said. 'No words can tell how sincerely I feel for Mr. Romaine. I cannot express to you, Father, how eager I am to be of service to him!'

"Relieved, so far, I naturally asked what had happened. Penrose betrayed a marked embarrassment in answering my question.

"'I have innocently surprised a secret,' he said, 'on which I had no right to intrude. All that I can honorably tell you, shall be told. Add one more to your many kindnesses--don't command me to speak, when it is my duty toward a sorely-tried man to be silent, even to you.'

"It is needless to say that I abstained from directly answering this strange appeal. 'Let me hear what you can tell,' I replied, 'and then we shall see.'

"Upon this, he spoke. I need hardly recall to your memory how careful we were, in first planning the attempt to recover the Vange property, to assure ourselves of the promise of success which the peculiar character of the present owner held out to us. In reporting what Penrose said, I communicate a discovery, which I venture to think will be as welcome to you, as it was to me.

"He began by reminding me of what I had myself told him in speaking of Romaine. 'You mentioned having heard from Lord Loring of a great sorrow or remorse from which he was suffering,' Penrose said. 'I know what he suffers and why he suffers, and with what noble resignation he submits to his affliction. We were sitting together at the table, looking over his notes and memoranda, when he suddenly dropped the manuscript from which he was reading to me. A ghastly paleness overspread his face. He started up, and put both his hands to his ears as if he heard something dreadful, and was trying to deafen himself to it. I ran to the door to call for help. He stopped me; he spoke in faint, gasping tones, forbidding me to call any one in to witness what he suffered. It was not the first time, he said; it would soon be over. If I had not courage to remain with him I could go, and return when he was himself again. I so pitied him that I found the courage to remain. When it was over he took me by the hand, and thanked me. I had stayed by him like a friend, he said, and like a friend he would treat me. Sooner or later (those were his exact words) I must be taken into his confidence--and it should be now. He told me his melancholy story. I implore you, Father, don't ask me to repeat it! Be content if I tell you the effect of it on myself. The one hope, the one consolation for him, is in our holy religion. With all my heart I devote myself to his conversion--and, in my inmost soul, I feel the conviction that I shall succeed!'

"To this effect, and in this tone, Penrose spoke. I abstained from pressing him to reveal Romaine's confession. The confession is of no consequence to us. You know how the moral force of Arthur's earnestness and enthusiasm fortifies his otherwise weak character. I, too, believe he will succeed.

"To turn for a moment to another subject. You are already informed that there is a woman in our way. I have my own idea of the right method of dealing with this obstacle when it shows itself more plainly. For the present, I need only assure you that neither this woman nor any woman shall succeed in her designs on Romaine, if I can prevent it."

Having completed his report in these terms, Father Benwell reverted to the consideration of his proposed inquiries into the past history of Stella's life.

Reflection convinced him that it would be unwise to attempt, no matter how guardedly, to obtain the necessary information from Lord Loring or his wife. If he assumed, at his age, to take a strong interest in a Protestant young lady, who had notoriously avoided him, they would certainly feel surprise--and surprise might, in due course of development, turn to suspicion.

There was but one other person under Lord Loring's roof to whom he could address himself--and that person was the housekeeper. As an old servant, possessing Lady Loring's confidence, she might prove a source of information on the subject of Lady Loring's fair friend; and, as a good Catholic, she would feel flattered by the notice of the spiritual director of the household.

"It may not be amiss," thought Father Benwell, "if I try the housekeeper."