

CHAPTER VI - THE ORDER OF THE DISHES.

WHEN Miss Notman assumed the post of housekeeper in Lady Loring's service, she was accurately described as "a competent and respectable person"; and was praised, with perfect truth, for her incorruptible devotion to the interests of her employers. On its weaker side, her character was represented by the wearing of a youthful wig, and the erroneous conviction that she still possessed a fine figure. The ruling idea in her narrow little mind was the idea of her own dignity. Any offense offered in this direction oppressed her memory for days together, and found its way outward in speech to any human being whose attention she could secure.

At five o'clock, on the day which followed his introduction to Romaine, Father Benwell sat drinking his coffee in the housekeeper's room--to all appearance as much at his ease as if he had known Miss Notman from the remote days of her childhood. A new contribution to the housekeeper's little library of devotional works lay on the table; and bore silent witness to the means by which he had made those first advances which had won him his present position. Miss Notman's sense of dignity was doubly flattered. She had a priest for her guest, and a new book with the reverend gentleman's autograph inscribed on the title-page.

"Is your coffee to your liking, Father?"

"A little more sugar, if you please."

Miss Notman was proud of her hand, viewed as one of the meritorious details of her figure. She took up the sugar-tongs with suavity and grace; she dropped the sugar into the cup with a youthful pleasure in ministering to the minor desires of her illustrious guest. "It is so good of

you, Father, to honor me in this way," she said--with the appearance of sixteen super-induced upon the reality of sixty.

Father Benwell was an adept at moral disguises of all kinds. On this occasion he wore the disguise of pastoral simplicity. "I am an idle old man at this hour of the afternoon," he said. "I hope I am not keeping you from any household duties?"

"I generally enjoy my duties," Miss Notman answered. "To-day, they have not been so agreeable as usual; it is a relief to me to have done with them. Even my humble position has its trials."

Persons acquainted with Miss Notman's character, hearing these last words, would have at once changed the subject. When she spoke of "her humble position," she invariably referred to some offense offered to her dignity, and she was invariably ready to state the grievance at full length. Ignorant of this peculiarity, Father Benwell committed a fatal error. He inquired, with courteous interest, what the housekeeper's "trials" might be.

"Oh, sir, they are beneath your notice!" said Miss Notman modestly. "At the same time, I should feel it an honor to have the benefit of your opinion--I should so like to know that you do not altogether disapprove of my conduct, under some provocation. You see, Father, the whole responsibility of ordering the dinners falls on me. And, when there is company, as there is this evening, the responsibility is particularly trying to a timid person like myself."

"A large dinner party, Miss Notman?"

"Oh, dear, no! Quite the reverse. Only one gentleman--Mr. Romaine."

Father Benwell set down his cup of coffee, half way to his lips. He at once drew the correct conclusion that the invitation to Romaine must have been given and accepted after he had left the picture gallery. That the object was to bring Romaine and Stella together, under circumstances which would rapidly improve their acquaintance, was as plain to him as if he had heard it confessed in so many words. If he had only remained in the gallery, he might have become acquainted with the form of persuasion used to induce a man so unsocial as Romaine to accept an invitation. "I have myself to blame," he thought bitterly, "for being left in the dark."

"Anything wrong with the coffee?" Miss Notman asked anxiously.

He rushed on his fate. He said, "Nothing whatever. Pray go on."

Miss Notman went on.

"You see, Father, Lady Loring was unusually particular about the dinner on this occasion. She said, 'Lord Loring reminds me that Mr. Romaine is a very little eater, and yet very difficult to please in what he does eat.' Of course I consulted my experience, and suggested exactly the sort of dinner that was wanted under the circumstances. I wish to do her ladyship the utmost justice. She made no objection to the dinner in itself. On the contrary, she complimented me on what she was pleased to call my ready invention. But when we came next to the order in which the dishes were to be served--" Miss Notman paused in the middle of the sentence, and shuddered over the private and poignant recollections which the order of the dishes called up.

By this time Father Benwell had discovered his mistake. He took a mean advantage of Miss Notman's susceptibilities to slip his own private inquiries into the interval of silence.

"Pardon my ignorance," he said; "my own poor dinner is a matter of ten minutes and one dish. I don't understand a difference of opinion on a dinner for three people only; Lord and Lady Loring, two; Mr. Romaine, three--oh! perhaps I am mistaken? Perhaps Miss Eyrecourt makes a fourth?"

"Certainly, Father!"

"A very charming person, Miss Notman. I only speak as a stranger. You, no doubt, are much better acquainted with Miss Eyrecourt?"

"Much better, indeed--if I may presume to say so," Miss Notman replied. "She is my lady's intimate friend; we have often talked of Miss Eyrecourt during the many years of my residence in this house. On such subjects, her ladyship treats me quite on the footing of a humble friend. A complete contrast to the tone she took, Father, when we came to the order of the dishes. We agreed, of course, about the soup and the fish; but we had a little, a very little, divergence of opinion, as I may call it, on the subject of the dishes to follow. Her ladyship said, 'First the sweetbreads, and then the cutlets.' I ventured to suggest that the sweetbreads, as white meat, had better not immediately follow the turbot, as white fish. 'The brown meat, my lady,' I said, 'as an agreeable variety presented to the eye, and then the white meat, recalling pleasant remembrances of the white fish.' You see the point, Father?"

"I see, Miss Notman, that you are a consummate mistress of an art which is quite beyond poor me. Was Miss Eyrecourt present at the little discussion?"

"Oh, no! Indeed, I should have objected to her presence; I should have said she was a young lady out of her proper place."

"Yes; I understand. Is Miss Eyrecourt an only child?"

"She had two sisters, Father Benwell. One of them is in a convent."

"Ah, indeed?"

"And the other is dead."

"Sad for the father and mother, Miss Notman!"

"Pardon me, sad for the mother, no doubt. The father died long since."

"Aye? aye? A sweet woman, the mother? At least, I think I have heard so."

Miss Notman shook her head. "I should wish to guard myself against speaking unjustly of any one," she said; "but when you talk of 'a sweet woman,' you imply (as it seems to me) the domestic virtues. Mrs. Eyrecourt is essentially a frivolous person."

A frivolous person is, in the vast majority of cases, a person easily persuaded to talk, and not disposed to be reticent in keeping secrets. Father Benwell began to see his way already to the necessary information. "Is Mrs. Eyrecourt living in London?" he inquired.

"Oh, dear, no! At this time of year she lives entirely in other people's houses--goes from one country seat to another, and only thinks of amusing herself. No domestic qualities, Father. She would know nothing of the order of the dishes! Lady Loring, I should have told you, gave way

in the matter of the sweetbread. It was only at quite the latter part of my 'Menoo' (as the French call it) that she showed a spirit of opposition--well! well! I won't dwell on that. I will only ask you, Father, at what part of a dinner an oyster-omelet ought to be served?"

Father Benwell seized his opportunity of discovering Mrs. Eyrecourt's present address. "My dear lady," he said, "I know no more when the omelet ought to be served than Mrs. Eyrecourt herself! It must be very pleasant, to a lady of her way of thinking, to enjoy the beauties of Nature inexpensively--as seen in other people's houses, from the point of view of a welcome guest. I wonder whether she is staying at any country seat which I happen to have seen?"

"She may be in England, Scotland, or Ireland, for all I know," Miss Notman answered, with an unaffected ignorance which placed her good faith beyond doubt. "Consult your own taste, Father. After eating jelly, cream, and ice-pudding, could you even look at an oyster-omelet without shuddering? Would you believe it? Her ladyship proposed to serve the omelet with the cheese. Oysters, after sweets! I am not (as yet) a married woman--"

Father Benwell made a last desperate effort to pave the way for one more question before he submitted to defeat. "That must be your fault, my dear lady!" he interposed, with his persuasive smile.

Miss Notman simpered. "You confuse me, Father!" she said softly.

"I speak from inward conviction, Miss Notman. To a looker-on, like myself, it is sad to see how many sweet women who might be angels in the households of worthy men prefer to lead a single life. The Church, I know, exalts the single life to the highest place. But even the Church allows exceptions to its rule. Under this roof, for example, I think I see two exceptions. One of them my unfeigned respect" (he bowed to Miss

Notman) "forbids me to indicate more particularly. The other seems, to my humble view, to be the young lady of whom we have been speaking. Is it not strange that Miss Eyrecourt has never been married?"

The trap had been elaborately set; Father Benwell had every reason to anticipate that Miss Notman would walk into it. The disconcerting housekeeper walked up to it--and then proved unable to advance a step further.

"I once made the same remark myself to Lady Loring," she said.

Father Benwell's pulse began to quicken its beat. "Yes?" he murmured, in tones of the gentlest encouragement.

"And her ladyship," Miss Notman proceeded, "did not encourage me to go on. 'There are reasons for not pursuing that subject,' she said; 'reasons into which, I am sure, you will not expect me to enter.' She spoke with a flattering confidence in my prudence, which I felt gratefully. Such a contrast to her tone when the omelet presented itself in the order of the dishes! As I said just now I am not a married woman. But if I proposed to my husband to give him an oyster-omelet after his puddings and his pies, I should not be surprised if he said to me, 'My dear, have you taken leave of your senses?' I reminded Lady Loring (most respectfully) that a cheese-omelette might be in its proper place if it followed the sweets. 'An oyster-omelet,' I suggested, 'surely comes after the birds?' I should be sorry to say that her ladyship lost her temper--I will only mention that I kept mine. Let me repeat what she said, and leave you, Father, to draw your own conclusions. She said, 'Which of us is mistress in this house, Miss Notman? I order the oyster-omelet to come in with the cheese.' There was not only irritability, there was contempt--oh, yes! contempt in her tone. Out of respect for myself, I made no reply. As a Christian, I can forgive; as a wounded gentlewoman, I may not find it so easy to forget."

Miss Notman laid herself back in her easy chair--she looked as if she had suffered martyrdom, and only regretted having been obliged to mention it. Father Benwell surprised the wounded gentlewoman by rising to his feet.

"You are not going away already, Father?"

"Time flies fast in your society, dear Miss Notman. I have an engagement--and I am late for it already."

The housekeeper smiled sadly. "At least let me hear that you don't disapprove of my conduct under trying circumstances," she said.

Father Benwell took her hand. "A true Christian only feels offenses to pardon them," he remarked, in his priestly and paternal character. "You have shown me, Miss Notman, that you are a true Christian. My evening has indeed been well spent. God bless you!"

He pressed her hand; he shed on her the light of his fatherly smile; he sighed, and took his leave. Miss Notman's eyes followed him out with devotional admiration.

Father Benwell still preserved his serenity of temper when he was out of the housekeeper's sight. One important discovery he had made, in spite of the difficulties placed in his way. A compromising circumstance had unquestionably occurred in Stella's past life; and, in all probability, a man was in some way connected with it. "My evening has not been entirely thrown away," he thought, as he ascended the stairs which led from the housekeeper's room to the hall.