

CHAPTER VII - THE INFLUENCE OF STELLA.

ENTERING the hall, Father Benwell heard a knock at the house door. The servants appeared to recognize the knock--the porter admitted Lord Loring.

Father Benwell advanced and made his bow. It was a perfect obeisance of its kind--respect for Lord Loring, unobtrusively accompanied by respect for himself. "Has your lordship been walking in the park?" he inquired.

"I have been out on business," Lord Loring answered; "and I should like to tell you about it. If you can spare me a few minutes, come into the library. Some time since," he resumed, when the door was closed, "I think I mentioned that my friends had been speaking to me on a subject of some importance--the subject of opening my picture gallery occasionally to the public."

"I remember," said Father Benwell. "Has your lordship decided what to do?"

"Yes. I have decided (as the phrase is) to 'go with the times,' and follow the example of other owners of picture galleries. Don't suppose I ever doubted that it is my duty to extend, to the best of my ability, the civilizing influences of Art. My only hesitation in the matter arose from a dread of some accident happening, or some injury being done, to the pictures. Even now, I can only persuade myself to try the experiment under certain restrictions."

"A wise decision, undoubtedly," said Father Benwell. "In such a city as this, you could hardly open your gallery to anybody who happens to pass the house-door."

"I am glad you agree with me, Father. The gallery will be open for the first time on Monday. Any respectably-dressed person, presenting a visiting card at the offices of the librarians in Bond Street and Regent Street, will receive a free ticket of admission; the number of tickets, it is needless to say, being limited, and the gallery being only open to the public two days in the week. You will be here, I suppose, on Monday?"

"Certainly. My work in the library, as your lordship can see, has only begun."

"I am very anxious about the success of this experiment," said Lord Loring. "Do look in at the gallery once or twice in the course of the day, and tell me what your own impression is."

Having expressed his readiness to assist "the experiment" in every possible way, Father Benwell still lingered in the library. He was secretly conscious of a hope that he might, at the eleventh hour, be invited to join Romaine at the dinner-table. Lord Loring only looked at the clock on the mantel-piece: it was nearly time to dress for dinner. The priest had no alternative but to take the hint, and leave the house.

Five minutes after he had withdrawn, a messenger delivered a letter for Lord Loring, in which Father Benwell's interests were directly involved. The letter was from Romaine; it contained his excuses for breaking his engagement, literally at an hour's notice.

"Only yesterday," he wrote, "I had a return of what you, my dear friend, call 'the delusion of the voice.' The nearer the hour of your dinner approaches, the more keenly I fear that the same thing may happen in your house. Pity me, and forgive me."

Even good-natured Lord Loring felt some difficulty in pitying and forgiving, when he read these lines. "This sort of caprice might be excusable in a woman," he thought. "A man ought really to be capable of exercising some self-control. Poor Stella! And what will my wife say?"

He walked up and down the library, with Stella's disappointment and Lady Loring's indignation prophetically present in his mind. There was, however, no help for it--he must accept his responsibility, and be the bearer of the bad news.

He was on the point of leaving the library, when a visitor appeared. The visitor was no less a person than Romaine himself. "Have I arrived before my letter?" he asked eagerly.

Lord Loring showed him the letter.

"Throw it into the fire," he said, "and let me try to excuse myself for having written it. You remember the happier days when you used to call me the creature of impulse? An impulse produced that letter. Another impulse brings me here to disown it. I can only explain my strange conduct by asking you to help me at the outset. Will you carry your memory back to the day of the medical consultation on my case? I want you to correct me, if I inadvertently misrepresent my advisers. Two of them were physicians. The third, and last, was a surgeon, a personal friend of yours; and he, as well as I recollect, told you how the consultation ended?"

"Quite right, Romaine--so far."

"The first of the two physicians," Romaine proceeded, "declared my case to be entirely attributable to nervous derangement, and to be curable by

purely medical means. I speak ignorantly; but, in plain English, that, I believe, was the substance of what he said?"

"The substance of what he said," Lord Loring replied, "and the substance of his prescriptions--which, I think, you afterward tore up?"

"If you have no faith in a prescription," said Romaine, "that is, in my opinion, the best use to which you can put it. When it came to the turn of the second physician, he differed with the first, as absolutely as one man can differ with another. The third medical authority, your friend the surgeon, took a middle course, and brought the consultation to an end by combining the first physician's view and the second physician's view, and mingling the two opposite forms of treatment in one harmonious result?"

Lord Loring remarked that this was not a very respectful way of describing the conclusion of the medical proceedings. That it was the conclusion, however, he could not honestly deny.

"As long as I am right," said Romaine, "nothing else appears to be of much importance. As I told you at the time, the second physician appeared to me to be the only one of the three authorities who really understood my case. Do you mind giving me, in few words, your own impression of what he said?"

"Are you sure that I shall not distress you?"

"On the contrary, you may help me to hope."

"As I remember it," said Lord Loring, "the doctor did not deny the influence of the body over the mind. He was quite willing to admit that

the state of your nervous system might be one, among other predisposing causes, which led you--I really hardly like to go on."

"Which led me," Romaine continued, finishing the sentence for his friend, "to feel that I never shall forgive myself--accident or no accident--for having taken that man's life. Now go on."

"The delusion that you still hear the voice," Lord Loring proceeded, "is, in the doctor's opinion, the moral result of the morbid state of your mind at the time when you really heard the voice on the scene of the duel. The influence acts physically, of course, by means of certain nerves. But it is essentially a moral influence; and its power over you is greatly maintained by the self-accusing view of the circumstances which you persist in taking. That, in substance, is my recollection of what the doctor said."

"And when he was asked what remedies he proposed to try," Romaine inquired, "do you remember his answer? 'The mischief which moral influences have caused, moral influences alone can remedy.'"

"I remember," said Lord Loring. "And he mentioned, as examples of what he meant, the occurrence of some new and absorbing interest in your life, or the working of some complete change in your habits of thought--or perhaps some influence exercised over you by a person previously unknown, appearing under unforeseen circumstances, or in scenes quite new to you."

Romaine's eyes sparkled.

"Now you are coming to it!" he cried. "Now I feel sure that I recall correctly the last words the doctor said: 'If my view is the right one, I should not be surprised to hear that the recovery which we all wish to

see had found its beginning in such apparently trifling circumstances as the tone of some other person's voice or the influence of some other person's look.' That plain expression of his opinion only occurred to my memory after I had written my foolish letter of excuse. I spare you the course of other recollections that followed, to come at once to the result. For the first time I have the hope, the faint hope, that the voice which haunts me has been once already controlled by one of the influences of which the doctor spoke--the influence of a look."

If he had said this to Lady Loring, instead of to her husband, she would have understood him at once. Lord Loring asked for a word more of explanation.

"I told you yesterday," Romaine answered, "that a dread of the return of the voice had been present to me all the morning, and that I had come to see the picture with an idea of trying if change would relieve me. While I was in the gallery I was free from the dread, and free from the voice. When I returned to the hotel it tortured me--and Mr. Penrose, I grieve to say, saw what I suffered. You and I attributed the remission to the change of scene. I now believe we were both wrong. Where was the change? In seeing you and Lady Loring, I saw the two oldest friends I have. In visiting your gallery, I only revived the familiar associations of hundreds of other visits. To what influence was I really indebted for my respite? Don't try to dismiss the question by laughing at my morbid fancies. Morbid fancies are realities to a man like me. Remember the doctor's words, Loring. Think of a new face, seen in your house! Think of a look that searched my heart for the first time!"

Lord Loring glanced once more at the clock on the mantel-piece. The hands pointed to the dinner hour.

"Miss Eyrecourt?" he whispered.

"Yes; Miss Eyrecourt."

The library door was thrown open by a servant. Stella herself entered the room.