

## **CHAPTER VIII - THE PRIEST OR THE WOMAN?**

LORD LORING hurried away to his dressing room. "I won't be more than ten minutes," he said--and left Romayne and Stella together.

She was attired with her customary love of simplicity. White lace was the only ornament on her dress of delicate silvery gray. Her magnificent hair was left to plead its own merits, without adornment of any sort. Even the brooch which fastened her lace pelerine was of plain gold only.

Conscious that she was showing her beauty to the greatest advantage in the eyes of a man of taste, she betrayed a little of the embarrassment which Romayne had already noticed at the moment when she gave him her hand. They were alone, and it was the first time she had seen him in evening dress.

It may be that women have no positive appreciation of what is beautiful in form and color--or it may be that they have no opinions of their own when the laws of fashion have spoken. This at least is certain, that not one of them in a thousand sees anything objectionable in the gloomy and hideous evening costume of a gentleman in the nineteenth century. A handsome man is, to their eyes, more seductive than ever in the contemptible black coat and the stiff white cravat which he wears in common with the servant who waits on him at table. After a stolen glance at Romayne, Stella lost all confidence in herself--she began turning over the photographs on the table.

The momentary silence which followed their first greeting became intolerable to her. Rather than let it continue, she impulsively confessed the uppermost idea in her mind when she entered the room.

"I thought I heard my name when I came in," she said. "Were you and Lord Loring speaking of me?"

Romayne owned without hesitation that they had been speaking of her.

She smiled and turned over another photograph. But when did sun-pictures ever act as a restraint on a woman's curiosity? The words passed her lips in spite of her. "I suppose I mustn't ask what you were saying?"

It was impossible to answer this plainly without entering into explanations from which Romayne shrank. He hesitated.

She turned over another photograph. "I understand," she said. "You were talking of my faults." She paused, and stole another look at him. "I will try to correct my faults, if you will tell me what they are."

Romayne felt that he had no alternative but to tell the truth--under certain reserves. "Indeed you are wrong," he said. "We were talking of the influence of a tone or a look on a sensitive person."

"The influence on Me?" she asked.

"No. The influence which You might exercise on another person."

She knew perfectly well that he was speaking of himself. But she was determined to feel the pleasure of making him own it.

"If I have any such influence as you describe," she began, "I hope it is for good?"

"Certainly for good."

"You speak positively, Mr. Romaine. Almost as positively--only that can hardly be--as if you were speaking from experience."

He might still have evaded a direct reply, if she had been content with merely saying this. But she looked at him while she spoke. He answered the look.

"Shall I own that you are right?" he said. "I was thinking of my own experience yesterday."

She returned to the photographs. "It sounds impossible," she rejoined, softly. There was a pause. "Was it anything I said?" she asked.

"No. It was only when you looked at me. But for that look, I don't think I should have been here to-day."

She shut up the photographs on a sudden, and drew her chair a little away from him.

"I hope," she said, "you have not so poor an opinion of me as to think I like to be flattered?"

Romaine answered with an earnestness that instantly satisfied her.

"I should think it an act of insolence to flatter you," he said. "If you knew the true reason why I hesitated to accept Lady Loring's invitation--if I could own to you the new hope for myself that has brought me here--you

would feel, as I feel, that I have been only speaking the truth. I daren't say yet that I owe you a debt of gratitude for such a little thing as a look. I must wait till time puts certain strange fancies of mine to the proof."

"Fancies about me, Mr. Romaine?"

Before he could answer, the dinner bell rang. Lord and Lady Loring entered the library together.

The dinner having pursued its appointed course (always excepting the case of the omelet), the head servant who had waited at table was graciously invited to rest, after his labors, in the housekeeper's room. Having additionally conciliated him by means of a glass of rare liqueur, Miss Notman, still feeling her grievance as acutely as ever, ventured to inquire, in the first place, if the gentlefolks upstairs had enjoyed their dinner. So far the report was, on the whole, favorable. But the conversation was described as occasionally flagging. The burden of the talk had been mainly borne by my lord and my lady, Mr. Romaine and Miss Eyrecourt contributing but little to the social enjoyment of the evening. Receiving this information without much appearance of interest, the housekeeper put another question, to which, judging by her manner, she attached a certain importance. She wished to know if the oyster-omelet (accompanying the cheese) had been received as a welcome dish, and treated with a just recognition of its merits. The answer to this was decidedly in the negative. Mr. Romaine and Miss Eyrecourt had declined to taste it. My lord had tried it, and had left it on his plate. My lady alone had really eaten her share of the misplaced dish. Having stated this apparently trivial circumstance, the head servant was surprised by the effect which it produced on the housekeeper. She leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes, with an appearance of unutterable enjoyment. That night there was one supremely happy woman in London. And her name was Miss Notman.

Ascending from the housekeeper's room to the drawing-room, it is to be further reported that music was tried, as a means of getting through the

time, in the absence of general conversation. Lady Loring sat down at the piano, and played as admirably as usual. At the other end of the room Romaine and Stella were together, listening to the music. Lord Loring, walking backward and forward, with a restlessness which was far from being characteristic of him in his after-dinner hours, was stopped when he reached the neighborhood of the piano by a private signal from his wife.

"What are you walking about for?" Lady Loring asked in a whisper, without interrupting her musical performance.

"I'm not quite easy, my dear."

"Turn over the music. Indigestion?"

"Good heavens, Adelaide, what a question!"

"Well, what is it, then?"

Lord Loring looked toward Stella and her companion. "They don't seem to get on together as well as I had hoped," he said.

"I should think not--when you are walking about and disturbing them! Sit down there behind me."

"What am I to do?"

"Am I not playing? Listen to me."

"My dear, I don't understand modern German music."

"Then read the evening paper."

The evening paper had its attractions. Lord Loring took his wife's advice.

Left entirely by themselves, at the other end of the room, Romaine and Stella justified Lady Loring's belief in the result of reducing her husband to a state of repose. Stella ventured to speak first, in a discreet undertone.

"Do you pass most of your evenings alone, Mr. Romaine?"

"Not quite alone. I have the company of my books."

"Are your books the companions that you like best?"

"I have been true to those companions, Miss Eyrecourt, for many years. If the doctors are to be believed, my books have not treated me very well in return. They have broken down my health, and have made me, I am afraid, a very unsocial man." He seemed about to say more, and suddenly checked the impulse. "Why am I talking of myself?" he resumed with a smile. "I never do it at other times. Is this another result of your influence over me?"

He put the question with an assumed gayety. Stella made no effort, on her side, to answer him in the same tone.

"I almost wish I really had some influence over you," she said, gravely and sadly.

"Why?"

"I should try to induce you to shut up your books, and choose some living companion who might restore you to your happier self."

"It is already done," said Romaine; "I have a new companion in Mr. Penrose."

"Penrose?" she repeated. "He is the friend--is he not--of the priest here, whom they call Father Benwell?"

"Yes."

"I don't like Father Benwell."

"Is that a reason for disliking Mr. Penrose?"

"Yes," she said, boldly, "because he is Father Benwell's friend."

"Indeed, you are mistaken, Miss Eyrecourt. Mr. Penrose only entered yesterday on his duties as my secretary, and I have already had reason to think highly of him. Many men, after that experience of me," he added, speaking more to himself than to her, "might have asked me to find another secretary."

Stella heard those last words, and looked at him in astonishment. "Were you angry with Mr. Penrose?" she asked innocently. "Is it possible that you could speak harshly to any person in your employment?"

Romayne smiled. "It was not what I said," he answered. "I am subject to attacks--to sudden attacks of illness. I am sorry I alarmed Mr. Penrose by letting him see me under those circumstances."

She looked at him; hesitated; and looked away again. "Would you be angry with me if I confessed something?" she said timidly.

"It is impossible I can be angry with you!"

"Mr. Romayne, I think I have seen what your secretary saw. I know how you suffer, and how patiently you bear it."

"You!" he exclaimed.

"I saw you with your friend, when you came on board the steamboat at Boulogne. Oh, no, you never noticed me! You never knew how I pitied you. And afterward, when you moved away by yourself, and stood by the place in which the engines work--you are sure you won't think the worse of me, if I tell it?"

"No! no!"

"Your face frightened me--I can't describe it--I went to your friend and took it on myself to say that you wanted him. It was an impulse--I meant well."



"I am sure you meant well." As he spoke, his face darkened a little, betraying a momentary feeling of distrust. Had she put indiscreet questions to his traveling companion; and had the Major, under the persuasive influence of her beauty, been weak enough to answer them? "Did you speak to my friend?" he asked.

"Only when I told him that he had better go to you. And I think I said afterward I was afraid you were very ill. We were in the confusion of arriving at Folkestone--and, even if I had thought it right to say more, there was no opportunity."

Romayne felt ashamed of the suspicion by which he had wronged her. "You have a generous nature," he said earnestly. "Among the few people whom I know, how many would feel the interest in me that you felt?"

"Don't say that, Mr. Romayne! You could have had no kinder friend than the gentleman who took care of you on your journey. Is he with you now in London?"

"No."

"I am sorry to hear it. You ought to have some devoted friend always near you."

She spoke very earnestly. Romayne shrank, with a strange shyness, from letting her see how her sympathy affected him. He answered lightly. "You go almost as far as my good friend there reading the newspaper," he said. "Lord Loring doesn't scruple to tell me that I ought to marry. I know he speaks with a sincere interest in my welfare. He little thinks how he distresses me."

"Why should he distress you?"

"He reminds me--live as long as I may--that I must live alone. Can I ask a woman to share such a dreary life as mine? It would be selfish, it would be cruel; I should deservedly pay the penalty of allowing my wife to sacrifice herself. The time would come when she would repent having married me."

Stella rose. Her eyes rested on him with a look of gentle remonstrance. "I think you hardly do women justice," she said softly. "Perhaps some day a woman may induce you to change your opinion." She crossed the room to the piano. "You must be tired of playing, Adelaide," she said, putting her hand caressingly on Lady Loring's shoulder.

"Will you sing, Stella?"

She sighed, and turned away. "Not to-night," she answered.

Romayne took his leave rather hurriedly. He seemed to be out of spirits and eager to get away. Lord Loring accompanied his guest to the door. "You look sad and careworn," he said. "Do you regret having left your books to pass an evening with us?"

Romayne looked up absently, and answered, "I don't know yet."

Returning to report this extraordinary reply to his wife and Stella, Lord Loring found the drawing-room empty. Eager for a little private conversation, the two ladies had gone upstairs.

"Well?" said Lady Loring, as they sat together over the fire. "What did he say?"

Stella only repeated what he had said before she rose and left him. "What is there in Mr. Romaine's life," she asked, "which made him say that he would be selfish and cruel if he expected a woman to marry him? It must be something more than mere illness. If he had committed a crime he could not have spoken more strongly. Do you know what it is?"

Lady Loring looked uneasy. "I promised my husband to keep it a secret from everybody," she said.

"It is nothing degrading, Adelaide--I am sure of that."

"And you are right, my dear. I can understand that he has surprised and disappointed you; but, if you knew his motives--" she stopped and looked earnestly at Stella. "They say," she went on, "the love that lasts longest is the love of slowest growth. This feeling of yours for Romaine is of sudden growth. Are you very sure that your whole heart is given to a man of whom you know little?"

"I know that I love him," said Stella simply.

"Even though he doesn't seem as yet to love you?" Lady Loring asked.

"All the more because he doesn't. I should be ashamed to make the confession to any one but you. It is useless to say any more. Good-night."

Lady Loring allowed her to get as far as the door, and then suddenly called her back. Stella returned unwillingly and wearily. "My head aches and my heart aches," she said. "Let me go away to my bed."

"I don't like you to go away, wronging Romaine perhaps in your thoughts," said Lady Loring. "And, more than that, for the sake of your own happiness, you ought to judge for yourself if this devoted love of yours may ever hope to win its reward. It is time, and more than time, that you should decide whether it is good for you to see Romaine again. Have you courage enough to do that?"

"Yes--if I am convinced that it ought to be done."

"Nothing would make me so happy," Lady Loring resumed, "as to know that you were one day, my dear, to be his wife. But I am not a prudent person--I can never look, as you can, to consequences. You won't betray me, Stella? If I am doing wrong in telling a secret which has been trusted to me, it is my fondness for you that misleads me. Sit down again. You shall know what the misery of Romaine's life really is."

With those words, she told the terrible story of the duel, and of all that had followed it.

"It is for you to say," she concluded, "whether Romaine is right. Can any woman hope to release him from the torment that he suffers, with nothing to help her but love? Determine for yourself."

Stella answered instantly.

"I determine to be his wife!"

With the same pure enthusiasm, Penrose had declared that he too devoted himself to the deliverance of Romaine. The loving woman was not more resolved to give her whole life to him, than the fanatical man was resolved to convert him. On the same common battle-ground the two were now to meet in unconscious antagonism. Would the priest or the woman win the day?