

CHAPTER IX - THE PUBLIC AND THE PICTURES.

ON the memorable Monday, when the picture gallery was opened to the public for the first time, Lord Loring and Father Benwell met in the library.

"Judging by the number of carriages already at the door," said Father Benwell, "your lordship's kindness is largely appreciated by the lovers of Art."

"All the tickets were disposed of in three hours," Lord Loring answered. "Everybody (the librarians tell me) is eager to see the pictures. Have you looked in yet?"

"Not yet. I thought I would get on first with my work among the books."

"I have just come from the gallery," Lord Loring continued. "And here I am, driven out of it again by the remarks of some of the visitors. You know my beautiful copies of Raphael's Cupid and Psyche designs? The general impression, especially among the ladies, is that they are disgusting and indecent. That was enough for me. If you happen to meet Lady Loring and Stella, kindly tell them that I have gone to the club."

"Do the ladies propose paying a visit to the gallery?"

"Of course--to see the people! I have recommended them to wait until they are ready to go out for their drive. In their indoor costume they might become the objects of general observation as the ladies of the house. I shall be anxious to hear, Father, if you can discover the

civilizing influences of Art among my guests in the gallery. Good-morning."

Father Benwell rang the bell when Lord Loring had left him.

"Do the ladies drive out to-day at their usual hour?" he inquired, when the servant appeared. The man answered in the affirmative. The carriage was ordered at three o'clock.

At half-past two Father Benwell slipped quietly into the gallery. He posted himself midway between the library door and the grand entrance; on the watch, not for the civilizing influences of Art, but for the appearance of Lady Loring and Stella. He was still of opinion that Stella's "frivolous" mother might be turned into a source of valuable information on the subject of her daughter's earlier life. The first step toward attaining this object was to discover Mrs. Eyrecourt's present address. Stella would certainly know it--and Father Benwell felt a just confidence in his capacity to make the young lady serviceable, in this respect, to the pecuniary interests of the Church.

After an interval of a quarter of an hour, Lady Loring and Stella entered the gallery by the library door. Father Benwell at once advanced to pay his respects.

For some little time he discreetly refrained from making any attempt to lead the conversation to the topic that he had in view. He was too well acquainted with the insatiable interest of women in looking at other women to force himself into notice. The ladies made their remarks on the pretensions to beauty and to taste in dress among the throng of visitors--and Father Benwell waited by them, and listened with the resignation of a modest young man. Patience, being a virtue, is sometimes its own reward. Two gentlemen, evidently interested in the pictures, approached

the priest. He drew back, with his ready politeness, to let them see the picture before which he happened to be standing.

The movement disturbed Stella. She turned sharply--noticed one of the gentlemen, the taller of the two--became deadly pale--and instantly quitted the gallery. Lady Loring, looking where Stella had looked, frowned angrily and followed Miss Eyrecourt into the library. Wise Father Benwell let them go, and concentrated his attention on the person who had been the object of this startling recognition.

Unquestionably a gentleman--with light hair and complexion--with a bright benevolent face and keen intelligent blue eyes--apparently still in the prime of life. Such was Father Benwell's first impression of the stranger. He had evidently seen Miss Eyrecourt at the moment when she first noticed him; and he too showed signs of serious agitation. His face flushed deeply, and his eyes expressed, not merely surprise, but distress. He turned to his friend. "This place is hot," he said; "let us get out of it!"

"My dear Winterfield!" the friend remonstrated, "we haven't seen half the pictures yet."

"Excuse me if I leave you," the other replied. "I am used to the free air of the country. Let us meet again this evening. Come and dine with me. The same address as usual--Derwent's Hotel."

With those words he hurried out, making his way, without ceremony, through the crowd in the picture gallery.

Father Benwell returned to the library. It was quite needless to trouble himself further about Mrs. Eyrecourt or her address. "Thanks to Lord Loring's picture gallery," he thought, "I have found the man!"

He took up his pen and made a little memorandum--"Winterfield.
Derwent's Hotel."