

CHAPTER X - FATHER BENWELL'S CORRESPONDENCE.

I.

To Mr. Bitrake. Private and Confidential.

SIR--I understand that your connection with the law does not exclude your occasional superintendence of confidential inquiries, which are not of a nature to injure your professional position. The inclosed letter of introduction will satisfy you that I am incapable of employing your experience in a manner unbecoming to you, or to myself.

The inquiry that I propose to you relates to a gentleman named Winterfield. He is now staying in London, at Derwent's Hotel, and is expected to remain there for a week from the present date. His place of residence is on the North Devonshire coast, and is well known in that locality by the name of Beaupark House.

The range of my proposed inquiry dates back over the last four or five years--certainly not more. My object is to ascertain, as positively as may be, whether, within this limit of time, events in Mr. Winterfield's life have connected him with a young lady named Miss Stella Eyrecourt. If this proves to be the case it is essential that I should be made acquainted with the whole of the circumstances.

I have now informed you of all that I want to know. Whatever the information may be, it is most important that it shall be information which I can implicitly trust. Please address to me, when you write, under cover to the friend whose letter I inclose.

I beg your acceptance--as time is of importance--of a check for preliminary expenses, and remain, sir, your faithful servant,

AMBROSE BENWELL.

II.

To the Secretary, Society of Jesus, Rome.

I inclose a receipt for the remittance which your last letter confides to my care. Some of the money has been already used in prosecuting inquiries, the result of which will, as I hope and believe, enable me to effectually protect Romaine from the advances of the woman who is bent on marrying him.

You tell me that our Reverend Fathers, lately sitting in council on the Vange Abbey affair, are anxious to hear if any positive steps have yet been taken toward the conversion of Romaine. I am happily able to gratify their wishes, as you shall now see.

Yesterday, I called at Romaine's hotel to pay one of those occasional visits which help to keep up our acquaintance. He was out, and Penrose (for whom I asked next) was with him. Most fortunately, as the event proved, I had not seen Penrose, or heard from him, for some little time; and I thought it desirable to judge for myself of the progress that he was making in the confidence of his employer. I said I would wait. The hotel servant knows me by sight. I was shown into Romaine's waiting-room.

This room is so small as to be a mere cupboard. It is lighted by a glass fanlight over the door which opens from the passage, and is supplied with air (in the absence of a fireplace) by a ventilator in a second door, which communicates with Romaine's study. Looking about me, so far, I crossed to the other end of the study, and discovered a dining-room and two bedrooms beyond--the set of apartments being secluded, by means of a door at the end of the passage, from the other parts of the hotel. I trouble you with these details in order that you may understand the events that followed.

I returned to the waiting-room, not forgetting of course to close the door of communication.

Nearly an hour must have passed before I heard footsteps in the passage. The study door was opened, and the voices of persons entering the room reached me through the ventilator. I recognized Romaine, Penrose--and Lord Loring.

The first words exchanged among them informed me that Romaine and his secretary had overtaken Lord Loring in the street, as he was approaching the hotel door. The three had entered the house together--at a time, probably, when the servant who had admitted me was out of the way. However it may have happened, there I was, forgotten in the waiting-room!

Could I intrude myself (on a private conversation perhaps) as an unannounced and unwelcome visitor? And could I help it, if the talk found its way to me through the ventilator, along with the air that I breathed? If our Reverend Fathers think I was to blame, I bow to any reproof which their strict sense of propriety may inflict on me. In the meantime, I beg to repeat the interesting passages in the conversation, as nearly word for word as I can remember them.

His lordship, as the principal personage in social rank, shall be reported first. He said: "More than a week has passed, Romaine, and we have neither seen you nor heard from you. Why have you neglected us?"

Here, judging by certain sounds that followed, Penrose got up discreetly, and left the room. Lord Loring went on.

He said to Romaine: "Now we are alone, I may speak to you more freely. You and Stella seemed to get on together admirably that evening when

you dined with us. Have you forgotten what you told me of her influence over you? Or have you altered your opinion--and is that the reason why you keep away from us?"

Romayne answered: "My opinion remains unchanged. All that I said to you of Miss Eyrecourt, I believe as firmly as ever."

His lordship remonstrated, naturally enough. "Then why remain away from the good influence? Why--if it really can be controlled--risk another return of that dreadful nervous delusion?"

"I have had another return."

"Which, as you yourself believe, might have been prevented! Romayne, you astonish me."

There was a time of silence, before Romayne answered this. He was a little mysterious when he did reply. "You know the old saying, my good friend--of two evils, choose the least. I bear my sufferings as one of two evils, and the least of the two."

Lord Loring appeared to feel the necessity of touching a delicate subject with a light hand. He said, in his pleasant way: "Stella isn't the other evil, I suppose?"

"Most assuredly not."

"Then what is it?"

Romayne answered, almost passionately: "My own weakness and selfishness! Faults which I must resist, or become a mean and heartless man. For me, the worst of the two evils is there. I respect and admire Miss Eyrecourt--I believe her to be a woman in a thousand--don't ask me to see her again! Where is Penrose? Let us talk of something else."

Whether this wild way of speaking offended Lord Loring, or only discouraged him, I cannot say. I heard him take his leave in these words: "You have disappointed me, Romayne. We will talk of something else the next time we meet." The study door was opened and closed. Romayne was left by himself.

Solitude was apparently not to his taste just then. I heard him call to Penrose. I heard Penrose ask: "Do you want me?"

Romayne answered: "God knows I want a friend--and I have no friend near me but you! Major Hynd is away, and Lord Loring is offended with me."

Penrose asked why.

Romayne, thereupon, entered on the necessary explanation. As a priest writing to priests, I pass over details utterly uninteresting to us. The substance of what he said amounted to this: Miss Eyrecourt had produced an impression on him which was new to him in his experience of women. If he saw more of her, it might end--I ask your pardon for repeating the ridiculous expression--in his "falling in love with her." In this condition of mind or body, whichever it may be, he would probably be incapable of the self-control which he had hitherto practiced. If she consented to devote her life to him, he might accept the cruel sacrifice. Rather than do this, he would keep away from her, for her dear sake--no matter what he might suffer, or whom he might offend.

Imagine any human being, out of a lunatic asylum, talking in this way. Shall I own to you, my reverend colleague, how this curious self-exposure struck me? As I listened to Romaine, I felt grateful to the famous Council which definitely forbade the priests of the Catholic Church to marry. We might otherwise have been morally enervated by the weakness which degrades Romaine--and priests might have become instruments in the hands of women.

But you will be anxious to hear what Penrose did under the circumstances. For the moment, I can tell you this, he startled me.

Instead of seizing the opportunity, and directing Romaine's mind to the consolations of religion, Penrose actually encouraged him to reconsider his decision. All the weakness of my poor little Arthur's character showed itself in his next words.

He said to Romaine: "It may be wrong in me to speak to you as freely as I wish to speak. But you have so generously admitted me to your confidence--you have been so considerate and so kind toward me--that I feel an interest in your happiness, which perhaps makes me over bold. Are you very sure that some such entire change in your life as your marriage might not end in delivering you from your burden? If such a thing could be, is it wrong to suppose that your wife's good influence over you might be the means of making your marriage a happy one? I must not presume to offer an opinion on such a subject. It is only my gratitude, my true attachment to you that ventures to put the question. Are you conscious of having given this matter--so serious a matter for you--sufficient thought?"

Make your mind easy, reverend sir! Romaine's answer set everything right.

He said: "I have thought of it till I could think no longer. I still believe that sweet woman might control the torment of the voice. But could she deliver me from the remorse perpetually gnawing at my heart? I feel as murderers feel. In taking another man's life--a man who had not even injured me!--I have committed the one unattonable and unpardonable sin. Can any human creature's influence make me forget that? No more of it--no more. Come! Let us take refuge in our books."

Those words touched Penrose in the right place. Now, as I understand his scruples, he felt that he might honorably speak out. His zeal more than balanced his weakness, as you will presently see.

He was loud, he was positive, when I heard him next. "No!" he burst out, "your refuge is not in books, and not in the barren religious forms which call themselves Protestant. Dear master, the peace of mind, which you believe you have lost forever, you will find again in the divine wisdom and compassion of the holy Catholic Church. There is the remedy for all that you suffer! There is the new life that will yet make you a happy man!"

I repeat what he said, so far, merely to satisfy you that we can trust his enthusiasm, when it is once roused. Nothing will discourage, nothing will defeat him now. He spoke with all the eloquence of conviction--using the necessary arguments with a force and feeling which I have rarely heard equaled. Romaine's silence vouched for the effect on him. He is not the man to listen patiently to reasoning which he thinks he can overthrow.

Having heard enough to satisfy me that Penrose had really begun the good work, I quietly slipped out of the waiting-room and left the hotel.

To-day being Sunday, I shall not lose a post if I keep my letter open until to-morrow. I have already sent a note to Penrose, asking him to call on me at his earliest convenience. There may be more news for you before post time.

Monday, 10 A.M..

There is more news. Penrose has just left me.

His first proceeding, of course, was to tell me what I had already discovered for myself. He is modest, as usual, about the prospect of success which awaits him. But he has induced Romaine to suspend his historical studies for a few days, and to devote his attention to the books which we are accustomed to recommend for perusal in such cases as his. This is unquestionably a great gain at starting.

But my news is not at an end yet. Romaine is actually playing our game--he has resolved definitely to withdraw himself from the influence of Miss Eyrecourt! In another hour he and Penrose will have left London. Their destination is kept a profound secret. All letters addressed to Romaine are to be sent to his bankers.

The motive for this sudden resolution is directly traceable to Lady Loring.

Her ladyship called at the hotel yesterday evening, and had a private interview with Romaine. Her object, no doubt, was to shake his resolution, and to make him submit himself again to Miss Eyrecourt's fascinations. What means of persuasion she used to effect this purpose is of course unknown to us. Penrose saw Romaine after her ladyship's departure, and describes him as violently agitated. I can quite understand it. His resolution to take refuge in secret flight (it is really nothing less) speaks for itself as to the impression produced on him, and the danger from which, for the time at least, we have escaped.

Yes! I say "for the time at least." Don't let our reverend fathers suppose that the money expended on my private inquiries has been money

thrown away. Where these miserable love affairs are concerned, women are daunted by no adverse circumstances and warned by no defeat. Romaine has left London, in dread of his own weakness--we must not forget that. The day may yet come when nothing will interpose between us and failure but my knowledge of events in Miss Eyrecourt's life.

For the present, there is no more to be said.