

CHAPTER XI - STELLA ASSERTS HERSELF.

Two days after Father Benwell had posted his letter to Rome, Lady Loring entered her husband's study, and asked eagerly if he had heard any news of Romaine.

Lord Loring shook his head. "As I told you yesterday," he said, "the proprietor of the hotel can give me no information. I went myself this morning to the bankers, and saw the head partner. He offered to forward letters, but he could do no more. Until further notice, he was positively enjoined not to disclose Romaine's address to anybody. How does Stella bear it?"

"In the worst possible way," Lady Loring answered. "In silence."

"Not a word even to you?"

"Not a word."

At that reply, the servant interrupted them by announcing the arrival of a visitor, and presenting his card. Lord Loring started, and handed it to his wife. The card bore the name of "Major Hynd," and this line was added in pencil: "On business connected with Mr. Romaine."

"Show him in directly!" cried Lady Loring.

Lord Loring remonstrated. "My dear! perhaps I had better see this gentleman alone?"

"Certainly not--unless you wish to drive me into committing an act of the most revolting meanness! If you send me away I shall listen at the door."

Major Hynd was shown in, and was duly presented to Lady Loring. After making the customary apologies, he said: "I returned to London last night, expressly to see Romaine on a matter of importance. Failing to discover his present address at the hotel, I had the hope that your lordship might be able to direct me to our friend."

"I am sorry to say I know no more than you do," Lord Loring replied. "Romaine's present address is a secret confided to his bankers, and to no one else. I will give you their names, if you wish to write to him."

Major Hynd hesitated. "I am not quite sure that it would be discreet to write to him, under the circumstances."

Lady Loring could no longer keep silence. "Is it possible, Major Hynd, to tell us what the circumstances are?" she asked. "I am almost as old a friend of Romaine as my husband--and I am very anxious about him."

The Major looked embarrassed. "I can hardly answer your ladyship," he said, "without reviving painful recollections--"

Lady Loring's impatience interrupted the Major's apologies. "Do you mean the duel?" she inquired.

Lord Loring interposed. "I should tell you, Major Hynd, that Lady Loring is as well informed as I am of what happened at Boulogne, and of the deplorable result, so far as Romaine is concerned. If you still wish to

speak to me privately, I will ask you to accompany me into the next room."

Major Hynd's embarrassment vanished. "After what you tell me," he said, "I hope to be favored with Lady Loring's advice. You both know that Romaine fought the fatal duel with a son of the French General who had challenged him. When we returned to England, we heard that the General and his family had been driven away from Boulogne by pecuniary difficulties. Romaine, against my advice, wrote to the surgeon who had been present at the duel, desiring that the General's place of retreat might be discovered, and expressing his wish to assist the family anonymously, as their Unknown Friend. The motive, of course, was, in his own words, 'to make some little atonement to the poor people whom he had wronged.' I thought it a rash proceeding at the time; and I am confirmed in my opinion by a letter from the surgeon, received yesterday. Will you kindly read it to Lady Loring?"

He handed the letter to Lord Loring. Translated from the French, it ran as follows:

"SIR--I am at last able to answer Mr. Romaine's letter definitely, with the courteous assistance of the French Consul in London, to whom I applied when other means of investigation had produced no result.

"A week since the General died, circumstances connected with the burial expenses informed the Consul that he had taken refuge from his creditors, not in Paris as we supposed, but in London. The address is, Number 10, Camp's Hill, Islington. I should also add that the General, for obvious reasons, lived in London under the assumed name of Marillac. It will be necessary, therefore, to inquire for his widow by the name of Madame Marillac.

"You will perhaps be surprised to find that I address these lines to you, instead of to Mr. Romaine. The reason is soon told.

"I was acquainted with the late General--as you know--at a time when I was not aware of the company that he kept, or of the deplorable errors into which his love of gambling had betrayed him. Of his widow and his children I know absolutely nothing. Whether they have resisted the contaminating influence of the head of the household--or whether poverty and bad example combined have hopelessly degraded them--I cannot say. There is at least a doubt whether they are worthy of Mr. Romaine's benevolent intentions toward them. As an honest man, I cannot feel this doubt, and reconcile it to my conscience to be the means, however indirectly, of introducing them to Mr. Romaine. To your discretion I leave it to act for the best, after this warning."

Lord Loring returned the letter to Major Hynd. "I agree with you," he said. "It is more than doubtful whether you ought to communicate this information to Romaine."

Lady Loring was not quite of her husband's opinion. "While there is a doubt about these people," she said, "it seems only just to find out what sort of character they bear in the neighborhood. In your place, Major Hynd, I should apply to the person in whose house they live, or to the tradespeople whom they have employed."

"I am obliged to leave London again to-day," the Major replied; "but on my return I will certainly follow your ladyship's advice."

"And you will let us know the result?"

"With the greatest pleasure."

Major Hynd took his leave. "I think you will be responsible for wasting the Major's time," said Lord Loring, when the visitor had retired.

"I think not," said Lady Loring.

She rose to leave the room. "Are you going out?" her husband asked.

"No. I am going upstairs to Stella."

Lady Loring found Miss Eyrecourt in her own room. The little portrait of Romaine which she had drawn from recollection lay on the table before her. She was examining it with the closest attention.

"Well, Stella, and what does the portrait tell you?"

"What I knew before, Adelaide. There is nothing false and nothing cruel in that face."

"And does the discovery satisfy you? For my part, I despise Romaine for hiding himself from us. Can you excuse him?"

Stella locked up the portrait in her writing-case. "I can wait," she said quietly.

This assertion of patience seemed to irritate Lady Loring "What is the matter with you this morning?" she asked. "You are more reserved than ever."

"No; I am only out of spirits, Adelaide. I can't help thinking of that meeting with Winterfield. I feel as if some misfortune was hanging over my head."

"Don't speak of that hateful man!" her ladyship exclaimed. "I have something to tell you about Romayne. Are you completely absorbed in your presentiments of evil? or do you think you can listen to me?"

Stella's face answered for her. Lady Loring described the interview with Major Hynd in the minutest detail--including, by way of illustration, the Major's manners and personal appearance. "He and Lord Loring," she added, "both think that Romayne will never hear the last of it if he allows these foreigners to look to him for money. Until something more is known about them, the letter is not to be forwarded."

"I wish I had the letter," cried Stella.

"Would you forward it to Romayne?"

"Instantly! Does it matter whether these poor French people are worthy of his generosity? If it restores his tranquillity to help them, who cares whether they deserve the help? They are not even to know who it is that assists them--Romayne is to be their unknown friend. It is he, not they, whom we have to think of--his peace of mind is everything; their merit is nothing. I say it's cruel to him to keep him in ignorance of what has happened. Why didn't you take the letter away from Major Hynd?"

"Gently, Stella! The Major is going to make inquiries about the widow and children when he returns to London."

"When he returns!" Stella repeated indignantly. "Who knows what the poor wretches may be suffering in the interval, and what Romaine may feel if he ever hears of it? Tell me the address again--it was somewhere in Islington, you said."

"Why do you want to know it?" Lady Loring asked. "You are not going to write to Romaine yourself?"

"I am going to think, before I do anything. If you can't trust my discretion, Adelaide, you have only to say so!"

It was spoken sharply. Lady Loring's reply betrayed a certain loss of temper on her side. "Manage your own affairs, Stella--I have done meddling with them." Her unlucky visit to Romaine at the hotel had been a subject of dispute between the two friends--and this referred to it. "You shall have the address," my lady added in her grandest manner. She wrote it on a piece of paper, and left the room.

Easily irritated, Lady Loring had the merit of being easily appeased. That meanest of all vices, the vice of sulkiness, had no existence in her nature. In five minutes she regretted her little outburst of irritability. For five minutes more she waited, on the chance that Stella might be the first to seek a reconciliation. The interval passed, and nothing happened. "Have I really offended her?" Lady Loring asked herself. The next moment she was on her way back to Stella. The room was empty. She rang the bell for the maid.

"Where is Miss Eyrecourt?"

"Gone out, my lady."

"Did she leave no message?"

"No, my lady. She went away in a great hurry."

Lady Loring at once drew the conclusion that Stella had rashly taken the affair of the General's family into her own hands. Was it possible to say how this most imprudent proceeding might end? After hesitating and reflecting, and hesitating again, Lady Loring's anxiety got beyond her control. She not only decided on following Stella, but, in the excess of her nervous apprehension, she took one of the men-servants with her, in case of emergency!