

BOOK THE SECOND.

CHAPTER I- THE SANDWICH DANCE.

A FINE spring, after a winter of unusual severity, promised well for the prospects of the London season.

Among the social entertainments of the time, general curiosity was excited, in the little sphere which absurdly describes itself under the big name of Society, by the announcement of a party to be given by Lady Loring, bearing the quaint title of a Sandwich Dance. The invitations were issued at an unusually early hour; and it was understood that nothing so solid and so commonplace as the customary supper was to be offered to the guests. In a word, Lady Loring's ball was designed as a bold protest against late hours and heavy midnight meals. The younger people were all in favor of the proposed reform. Their elders declined to give an opinion beforehand.

In the small inner circle of Lady Loring's most intimate friends, it was whispered that an innovation in the matter of refreshments was contemplated, which would put the tolerant principles of the guests to a severe test. Miss Notman, the housekeeper, politely threatening retirement on a small annuity, since the memorable affair of the oyster-omelet, decided on carrying out her design when she heard that there was to be no supper. "My attachment to the family can bear a great deal," she said. "But when Lady Loring deliberately gives a ball, without a supper, I must hide my head somewhere--and it had better be out of the house!" Taking Miss Notman as representative of a class, the reception of the coming experiment looked, to say the least of it, doubtful.

On the appointed evening, the guests made one agreeable discovery when they entered the reception rooms. They were left perfectly free to amuse themselves as they liked.

The drawing-rooms were given up to dancing; the picture gallery was devoted to chamber music. Chess-players and card-players found remote and quiet rooms especially prepared for them. People who cared for nothing but talking were accommodated to perfection in a sphere of their own. And lovers (in earnest or not in earnest) discovered, in a dimly-lighted conservatory with many recesses, that ideal of discreet retirement which combines solitude and society under one roof.

But the ordering of the refreshments failed, as had been foreseen, to share in the approval conferred on the arrangement of the rooms. The first impression was unfavorable. Lady Loring, however, knew enough of human nature to leave results to two potent allies--experience and time.

Excepting the conservatory, the astonished guests could go nowhere without discovering tables prettily decorated with flowers, and bearing hundreds of little pure white china plates, loaded with nothing but sandwiches. All varieties of opinion were consulted. People of ordinary tastes, who liked to know what they were eating, could choose conventional beef or ham, encased in thin slices of bread of a delicate flavor quite new to them. Other persons, less easily pleased, were tempted by sandwiches of pate de fois gras and by exquisite combinations of chicken and truffles, reduced to a creamy pulp which clung to the bread like butter. Foreigners, making experiments, and not averse to garlic, discovered the finest sausages of Germany and Italy transformed into English sandwiches. Anchovies and sardines appealed, in the same unexpected way, to men who desired to create an artificial thirst--after having first ascertained that the champagne was something to be fondly remembered and regretted, at other parties, to the end of the season. The hospitable profusion of the refreshments was all-pervading and inexhaustible. Wherever the guests might be, or however they were amusing themselves, there were the pretty little white plates perpetually tempting them. People eat as they had never eat before, and even the inveterate English prejudice against anything new was conquered at last. Universal opinion declared the Sandwich Dance to be an admirable idea, perfectly carried out.

Many of the guests paid their hostess the compliment of arriving at the early hour mentioned in the invitations. One of them was Major Hynd. Lady Loring took her first opportunity of speaking to him apart.

"I hear you were a little angry," she said, "when you were told that Miss Eyrecourt had taken your inquiries out of your hands."

"I thought it rather a bold proceeding, Lady Loring," the Major replied. "But as the General's widow turned out to be a lady, in the best sense of the word, Miss Eyrecourt's romantic adventure has justified itself. I wouldn't recommend her to run the same risk a second time."

"I suppose you know what Romaine thinks of it?"

"Not yet. I have been too busy to call on him since I have been in town. Pardon me, Lady Loring, who is that beautiful creature in the pale yellow dress? Surely I have seen her somewhere before?"

"That beautiful creature, Major, is the bold young lady of whose conduct you don't approve."

"Miss Eyrecourt?"

"Yes."

"I retract everything I said!" cried the Major, quite shamelessly. "Such a woman as that may do anything. She is looking this way. Pray introduce me."

The Major was introduced, and Lady Loring returned to her guests.

"I think we have met before, Major Hynd," said Stella.

Her voice supplied the missing link in the Major's memory of events. Remembering how she had looked at Romaine on the deck of the steamboat, he began dimly to understand Miss Eyrecourt's otherwise incomprehensible anxiety to be of use to the General's family. "I remember perfectly," he answered. "It was on the passage from Boulogne to Folkestone--and my friend was with me. You and he have no doubt met since that time?" He put the question as a mere formality. The unexpressed thought in him was, "Another of them in love with Romaine! and nothing, as usual, likely to come of it."

"I hope you have forgiven me for going to Camp's Hill in your place," said Stella.

"I ought to be grateful to you," the Major rejoined. "No time has been lost in relieving these poor people--and your powers of persuasion have succeeded, where mine might have failed. Has Romaine been to see them himself since his return to London?"

"No. He desires to remain unknown; and he is kindly content, for the present, to be represented by me."

"For the present." Major Hynd repeated.

A faint flush passed over her delicate complexion. "I have succeeded," she resumed, "in inducing Madame Marillac to accept the help offered

through me to her son. The poor creature is safe, under kind superintendence, in a private asylum. So far, I can do no more."

"Will the mother accept nothing?"

"Nothing, either for herself or her daughter, so long as they can work. I cannot tell you how patiently and beautifully she speaks of her hard lot. But her health may give way--and it is possible, before long, that I may leave London." She paused; the flush deepened on her face. "The failure of the mother's health may happen in my absence," she continued; "and Mr. Romaine will ask you to look after the family, from time to time, while I am away."

"I will do it with pleasure, Miss Eyrecourt. Is Romaine likely to be here to-night?"

She smiled brightly, and looked away. The Major's curiosity was excited--he looked in the same direction. There was Romaine, entering the room, to answer for himself.

What was the attraction which drew the unsocial student to an evening party? Major Hynd's eyes were on the watch. When Romaine and Stella shook hands, the attraction stood self-revealed to him, in Miss Eyrecourt. Recalling the momentary confusion which she had betrayed, when she spoke of possibly leaving London, and of Romaine's plans for supplying her place as his almoner, the Major, with military impatience of delays, jumped to a conclusion. "I was wrong," he thought; "my impenetrable friend is touched in the right place at last. When the splendid creature in yellow leaves London, the name on her luggage will be Mrs. Romaine."

"You are looking quite another man, Romaine!" he said mischievously, "since we met last."

Stella gently moved away, leaving them to talk freely. Romaine took no advantage of the circumstance to admit his old friend to his confidence. Whatever relations might really exist between Miss Eyrecourt and himself were evidently kept secret thus far. "My health has been a little better lately," was the only reply he made.

The Major dropped his voice to a whisper.

"Have you not had any return--?" he began.

Romaine stopped him there. "I don't want my infirmities made public," he whispered back irritably. "Look at the people all round us! When I tell you I have been better lately, you ought to know what it means."

"Any discoverable reason for the improvement?" persisted the Major, still bent on getting evidence in support of his own private conclusions.

"None!" Romaine answered sharply.

But Major Hynd was not to be discouraged by sharp replies. "Miss Eyrecourt and I have been recalling our first meeting on board the steamboat," he went on. "Do you remember how indifferent you were to that beautiful person when I asked you if you knew her? I'm glad to see that you show better taste to-night. I wish I knew her well enough to shake hands as you did."

"Hynd! When a young man talks nonsense, his youth is his excuse. At your time of life, you have passed the excusable age--even in the estimation of your friends."

With those words Romaine turned away. The incorrigible Major instantly met the reproof inflicted on him with a smart answer. "Remember," he said, "that I was the first of your friends to wish you happiness!" He, too, turned away--in the direction of the champagne and the sandwiches.

Meanwhile, Stella had discovered Penrose, lost in the brilliant assemblage of guests, standing alone in a corner. It was enough for her that Romaine's secretary was also Romaine's friend. Passing by titled and celebrated personages, all anxious to speak to her, she joined the shy, nervous, sad-looking little man, and did all she could to set him at his ease.

"I am afraid, Mr. Penrose, this is not a very attractive scene to you." Having said those kind words, she paused. Penrose was looking at her confusedly, but with an expression of interest which was new to her experience of him. "Has Romaine told him?" she wondered inwardly.

"It is a very beautiful scene, Miss Eyrecourt," he said, in his low quiet tones.

"Did you come here with Mr. Romaine?" she asked.

"Yes. It was by his advice that I accepted the invitation with which Lady Loring has honored me. I am sadly out of place in such an assembly as this--but I would make far greater sacrifices to please Mr. Romaine."

She smiled kindly. Attachment so artlessly devoted to the man she loved, pleased and touched her. In her anxiety to discover a subject which might interest him, she overcame her antipathy to the spiritual director of the household. "Is Father Benwell coming to us to-night?" she inquired.

"He will certainly be here, Miss Eyrecourt, if he can get back to London in time."

"Has he been long away?"

"Nearly a week."

Not knowing what else to say, she still paid Penrose the compliment of feigning an interest in Father Benwell.

"Has he a long journey to make in returning to London?" she asked.

"Yes--all the way from Devonshire."

"From South Devonshire?"

"No. North Devonshire--Clovelly."

The smile suddenly left her face. She put another question--without quite concealing the effort that it cost her, or the anxiety with which she waited for the reply.

"I know something of the neighborhood of Clovelly," she said. "I wonder whether Father Benwell is visiting any friends of mine there?"

"I am not able to say, Miss Eyrecourt. The reverend Father's letters are forwarded to the hotel--I know no more than that."

With a gentle inclination of her head, she turned toward other guests--looked back--and with a last little courteous attention offered to him, said, "If you like music, Mr. Penrose, I advise you to go to the picture gallery. They are going to play a Quartet by Mozart."

Penrose thanked her, noticing that her voice and manner had become strangely subdued. She made her way back to the room in which the hostess received her guests. Lady Loring was, for the moment, alone, resting on a sofa. Stella stooped over her, and spoke in cautiously lowered tones.

"If Father Benwell comes here to-night," she said, "try to find out what he has been doing at Clovelly."

"Clovelly?" Lady Loring repeated. "Is that the village near Winterfield's house?"

"Yes."