CHAPTER II - THE QUESTION OF MARRIAGE.

As Stella answered Lady Loring, she was smartly tapped on the shoulder by an eager guest with a fan.

The guest was a very little woman, with twinkling eyes and a perpetual smile. Nature, corrected by powder and paint, was liberally displayed in her arms, her bosom, and the upper part of her back. Such clothes as she wore, defective perhaps in quantity, were in quality absolutely perfect. More adorable color, shape, and workmanship never appeared, even in a milliner's picture-book. Her light hair was dressed with a fringe and ringlets, on the pattern which the portraits of the time of Charles the Second have made familiar to us. There was nothing exactly young or exactly old about her except her voice, which betrayed a faint hoarseness, attributable possibly to exhaustion produced by untold years of incessant talking. It might be added that she was as active as a squirrel and as playful as a kitten. But the lady must be treated with a certain forbearance of tone, for this good reason--she was Stella's mother.

Stella turned quickly at the tap of the fan. "Mamma!" she exclaimed, "how you startle me!"

"My dear child," said Mrs. Eyrecourt, "you are constitutionally indolent, and you want startling. Go into the next room directly. Mr. Romayne is looking for you."

Stella drew back a step, and eyed her mother in blank surprise. "Is it possible that you know him?" she asked.

"Mr. Romayne doesn't go into Society, or we should have met long since," Mrs. Eyrecourt replied. "He is a striking person--and I noticed him when he shook hands with you. That was quite enough for me. I have just introduced myself to him as your mother. He was a little stately and stiff, but most charming when he knew who I was. I volunteered to find you. He was quite astonished. I think he took me for your elder sister. Not the least like each other--are we, Lady Loring? She takes after her poor dear father. He was constitutionally indolent. My sweet child, rouse yourself. You have drawn a prize in the great lottery at last. If ever a man was in love, Mr. Romayne is that man. I am a physiognomist, Lady Loring, and I see the passions in the face. Oh, Stella, what a property! Vange Abbey. I once drove that way when I was visiting in the neighborhood. Superb! And another fortune (twelve thousand a year and a villa at Highgate) since the death of his aunt. And my daughter may be mistress of this if she only plays her cards properly. What a compensation after all that we suffered through that monster, Winterfield!"

"Mamma! Pray don't--!"

"Stella, I will not be interrupted, when I am speaking to you for your own good. I don't know a more provoking person, Lady Loring, than my daughter--on certain occasions. And yet I love her. I would go through fire and water for my beautiful child. Only last week I was at a wedding, and I thought of Stella. The church was crammed to the doors! A hundred at the wedding breakfast! The bride's lace--there; no language can describe it. Ten bridesmaids, in blue and silver. Reminded me of the ten virgins. Only the proportion of foolish ones, this time, was certainly more than five. However, they looked well. The Archbishop proposed the health of the bride and bridegroom; so sweetly pathetic. Some of us cried. I thought of my daughter. Oh, if I could live to see Stella the central attraction, so to speak, of such a wedding as that. Only I would have twelve bridesmaids at least, and beat the blue and silver with green and gold. Trying to the complexion, you will say. But there are artificial improvements. At least, I am told so. What a house this would be--a broad hint, isn't it, dear Lady Loring?--what a house for a wedding, with the drawing-room to assemble in and the picture gallery for the breakfast. I know the Archbishop. My darling, he shall marry you. Why

don't you go into the next room? Ah, that constitutional indolence. If you only had my energy, as I used to say to your poor father. Will you go? Yes, dear Lady Loring, I should like a glass of champagne, and another of those delicious chicken sandwiches. If you don't go, Stella, I shall forget every consideration of propriety, and, big as you are, I shall push you out."

Stella yielded to necessity. "Keep her quiet, if you can," she whispered to Lady Loring, in the moment of silence that followed. Even Mrs. Eyrecourt was not able to talk while she was drinking champagne.

In the next room Stella found Romayne. He looked careworn and irritable, but brightened directly when she approached him.

"My mother has been speaking to you," she said. "I am afraid--"

He stopped her there. "She is your mother," he interposed, kindly. "Don't think that I am ungrateful enough to forget that."

She took his arm, and looked at him with all her heart in her eyes. "Come into a quieter room," she whispered.

Romayne led her away. Neither of them noticed Penrose as they left the room.

He had not moved since Stella had spoken to him. There he remained in his corner, absorbed in thought--and not in happy thought, as his face would have plainly betrayed to any one who had cared to look at him. His eyes sadly followed the retiring figures of Stella and Romayne. The color rose on his haggard cheeks. Like most men who are accustomed to live alone, he had the habit, when he was strongly excited, of speaking to

himself. "No," he said, as the unacknowledged lovers disappeared through the door, "it is an insult to ask me to do it!" He turned the other way, escaped Lady Loring's notice in the reception-room, and left the house.

Romayne and Stella passed through the card-room and the chess-room, turned into a corridor, and entered the conservatory.

For the first time the place was a solitude. The air of a newly-invented dance, faintly audible through the open windows of the ballroom above, had proved an irresistible temptation. Those who knew the dance were eager to exhibit themselves. Those who had only heard of it were equally anxious to look on and learn. Even toward the latter end of the nineteenth century the youths and maidens of Society can still be in earnest--when the object in view is a new dance.

What would Major Hynd have said if he had seen Romayne turn into one of the recesses of the conservatory, in which there was a seat which just held two? But the Major had forgotten his years and his family, and he too was one of the spectators in the ballroom.

"I wonder," said Stella, "whether you know how I feel those kind words of yours when you spoke of my mother. Shall I tell you?"

She put her arm round his neck and kissed him. He was a man new to love, in the nobler sense of the word. The exquisite softness in the touch of her lips, the delicious fragrance of her breath, intoxicated him. Again and again he returned the kiss. She drew back; she recovered her self-possession with a suddenness and a certainty incomprehensible to a man. From the depths of tenderness she passed to the shallows of frivolity. In her own defense she was almost as superficial as her mother, in less than a moment.

"What would Mr. Penrose say if he saw you?" she whispered.

"Why do you speak of Penrose? Have you seen him to-night?"

"Yes--looking sadly out of his element, poor man. I did my best to set him at his ease--because I know you like him."

"Dear Stella!"

"No, not again! I am speaking seriously now. Mr. Penrose looked at me with a strange kind of interest--I can't describe it. Have you taken him into our confidence?"

"He is so devoted--he has such a true interest in me," said Romayne--"I really felt ashamed to treat him like a stranger. On our journey to London I did own that it was your charming letter which had decided me on returning. I did say, 'I must tell her myself how well she has understood me, and how deeply I feel her kindness.' Penrose took my hand, in his gentle, considerate way. 'I understand you, too,' he said--and that was all that passed between us."

"Nothing more, since that time?"

"Nothing."

"Not a word of what we said to each other when we were alone last week in the picture gallery?"

"Not a word. I am self-tormentor enough to distrust myself, even now. God knows I have concealed nothing from you; and yet--Am I not selfishly thinking of my own happiness, Stella, when I ought to be thinking only of you? You know, my angel, with what a life you must associate yourself if you marry me. Are you really sure that you have love enough and courage enough to be my wife?"

She rested her head caressingly on his shoulder, and looked up at him with her charming smile.

"How many times must I say it," she asked, "before you will believe me? Once more--I have love enough and courage enough to be your wife; and I knew it, Lewis, the first time I saw you! Will that confession satisfy your scruples? And will you promise never again to doubt yourself or me?"

Romayne promised, and sealed the promise--unresisted this time--with a kiss. "When are we to be married?" he whispered.

She lifted her head from his shoulder with a sigh. "If I am to answer you honestly," she replied, "I must speak of my mother, before I speak of myself."

Romayne submitted to the duties of his new position, as well as he understood them. "Do you mean that you have told your mother of our engagement?" he said. "In that case, is it my duty or yours--I am very ignorant in these matters--to consult her wishes? My own idea is, that I ought to ask her if she approves of me as her son-in-law, and that you might then speak to her of the marriage."

Stella thought of Romayne's tastes, all in favor of modest retirement, and of her mother's tastes, all in favor of ostentation and display. She frankly

owned the result produced in her own mind. "I am afraid to consult my mother about our marriage," she said.

Romayne looked astonished. "Do you think Mrs. Eyrecourt will disapprove of it?" he asked.

Stella was equally astonished on her side. "Disapprove of it?" she repeated. "I know for certain that my mother will be delighted."

"Then where is the difficulty?"

There was but one way of definitely answering that question. Stella boldly described her mother's idea of a wedding--including the Archbishop, the twelve bridesmaids in green and gold, and the hundred guests at breakfast in Lord Loring's picture gallery. Romayne's consternation literally deprived him, for the moment, of the power of speech. To say that he looked at Stella, as a prisoner in "the condemned cell" might have looked at the sheriff, announcing the morning of his execution, would be to do injustice to the prisoner. He receives his shock without flinching; and, in proof of his composure, celebrates his wedding with the gallows by a breakfast which he will not live to digest.

"If you think as your mother does," Romayne began, as soon as he had recovered his self-possession, "no opinion of mine shall stand in the way--" He could get no further. His vivid imagination saw the Archbishop and the bridesmaids, heard the hundred guests and their dreadful speeches: his voice faltered, in spite of himself.

Stella eagerly relieved him. "My darling, I don't think as my mother does," she interposed, tenderly. "I am sorry to say we have very few sympathies in common. Marriages, as I think, ought to be celebrated as privately as possible--the near and dear relations present, and no one else. If there

must be rejoicings and banquets, and hundreds of invitations, let them come when the wedded pair are at home after the honeymoon, beginning life in earnest. These are odd ideas for a woman to have--but they are my ideas, for all that."

Romayne's face brightened. "How few women possess your fine sense and your delicacy of feeling!" he exclaimed "Surely your mother must give way, when she hears we are both of one mind about our marriage."

Stella knew her mother too well to share the opinion thus expressed. Mrs. Eyrecourt's capacity for holding to her own little ideas, and for persisting (where her social interests were concerned) in trying to insinuate those ideas into the minds of other persons, was a capacity which no resistance, short of absolute brutality, could overcome. She was perfectly capable of worrying Romayne (as well as her daughter) to the utmost limits of human endurance, in the firm conviction that she was bound to convert all heretics, of their way of thinking, to the orthodox faith in the matter of weddings. Putting this view of the case with all possible delicacy, in speaking of her mother, Stella expressed herself plainly enough, nevertheless, to enlighten Romayne.

He made another suggestion. "Can we marry privately," he said, "and tell Mrs. Eyrecourt of it afterward?"

This essentially masculine solution of the difficulty was at once rejected. Stella was too good a daughter to suffer her mother to be treated with even the appearance of disrespect. "Oh," she said, "think how mortified and distressed my mother would be! She must be present at my marriage."

An idea of a compromise occurred to Romayne. "What do you say," he proposed, "to arranging for the marriage privately--and then telling Mrs.

Eyrecourt only a day or two beforehand, when it would be too late to send out invitations? If your mother would be disappointed--"

"She would be angry," Stella interposed.

"Very well--lay all the blame on me. Besides, there might be two other persons present, whom I am sure Mrs. Eyrecourt is always glad to meet. You don't object to Lord and Lady Loring?"

"Object? They are my dearest friends, as well as yours!"

"Any one else, Stella?"

"Any one, Lewis, whom you like.

"Then I say--no one else. My own love, when may it be? My lawyers can get the settlements ready in a fortnight, or less. Will you say in a fortnight?"

His arm was round her waist; his lips were touching her lovely neck. She was not a woman to take refuge in the commonplace coquetries of the sex. "Yes," she said, softly, "if you wish it." She rose and withdrew herself from him. "For my sake, we must not be here together any longer, Lewis." As she spoke, the music in the ballroom ceased. Stella ran out of the conservatory.

The first person she encountered, on returning to the reception-room, was Father Benwell.