

CHAPTER III - THE END OF THE BALL.

THE priest's long journey did not appear to have fatigued him. He was as cheerful and as polite as ever--and so paternally attentive to Stella that it was quite impossible for her to pass him with a formal bow.

"I have come all the way from Devonshire," he said. "The train has been behind time as usual, and I am one of the late arrivals in consequence. I miss some familiar faces at this delightful party. Mr. Romaine, for instance. Perhaps he is not one of the guests?"

"Oh, yes."

"Has he gone away?"

"Not that I know of."

The tone of her replies warned Father Benwell to let Romaine be. He tried another name.

"And Arthur Penrose?" he inquired next.

"I think Mr. Penrose has left us."

As she answered she looked toward Lady Loring. The hostess was the center of a circle of ladies and gentlemen. Before she was at liberty, Father Benwell might take his departure. Stella resolved to make the

attempt for herself which she had asked Lady Loring to make for her. It was better to try, and to be defeated, than not to try at all.

"I asked Mr. Penrose what part of Devonshire you were visiting," she resumed, assuming her more gracious manner. "I know something myself of the north coast, especially the neighborhood of Clovelly."

Not the faintest change passed over the priest's face; his fatherly smile had never been in a better state of preservation.

"Isn't it a charming place?" he said with enthusiasm. "Clovelly is the most remarkable and most beautiful village in England. I have so enjoyed my little holiday--excursions by sea and excursions by land--you know I feel quite young again?"

He lifted his eyebrows playfully, and rubbed his plump hands one over the other with such an intolerably innocent air of enjoyment that Stella positively hated him. She felt her capacity for self-restraint failing her. Under the influence of strong emotion her thoughts lost their customary discipline. In attempting to fathom Father Benwell, she was conscious of having undertaken a task which required more pliable moral qualities than she possessed. To her own unutterable annoyance, she was at a loss what to say next.

At that critical moment her mother appeared--eager for news of the conquest of Romyne.

"My dear child, how pale you look!" said Mrs. Eyrecourt. "Come with me directly--you must have a glass of wine."

This dexterous device for entrapping Stella into a private conversation failed. "Not now, mamma, thank you," she said.

Father Benwell, on the point of discreetly withdrawing, stopped, and looked at Mrs. Eyrecourt with an appearance of respectful interest. As things were, it might not have been worth his while to take the trouble of discovering her. But when she actually placed herself in his way, the chance of turning Mrs. Eyrecourt to useful account was not a chance to be neglected. "Your mother?" he said to Stella. "I should feel honored if you will introduce me."

Having (not very willingly) performed the ceremony of presentation, Stella drew back a little. She had no desire to take any part in the conversation that might follow--but she had her own reasons for waiting near enough to hear it.

In the meanwhile, Mrs. Eyrecourt turned on her inexhaustible flow of small-talk with her customary facility. No distinction of persons troubled her; no convictions of any sort stood in her way. She was equally ready (provided she met him in good society) to make herself agreeable to a Puritan or a Papist.

"Delighted to make your acquaintance, Father Benwell. Surely I met you at that delightful evening at the Duke's? I mean when we welcomed the Cardinal back from Rome. Dear old man--if one may speak so familiarly of a Prince of the Church. How charmingly he bears his new honors. Such patriarchal simplicity, as every one remarked. Have you seen him lately?"

The idea of the Order to which he belonged feeling any special interest in a Cardinal (except when they made him of some use to them) privately amused Father Benwell. "How wise the Church was," he thought, "in inventing a spiritual aristocracy. Even this fool of a woman is impressed

by it." His spoken reply was true to his assumed character as one of the inferior clergy. "Poor priests like me, madam, see but little of Princes of the Church in the houses of Dukes." Saying this with the most becoming humility, he turned the talk in a more productive direction, before Mrs. Eyrecourt could proceed with her recollections of "the evening at the Duke's."

"Your charming daughter and I have been talking about Clovelly," he continued. "I have just been spending a little holiday in that delightful place. It was a surprise to me, Mrs. Eyrecourt, to see so many really beautiful country seats in the neighborhood. I was particularly struck--you know it, of course?--by Beaupark House."

Mrs. Eyrecourt's little twinging eyes suddenly became still and steady. It was only for a moment. But that trifling change boded ill for the purpose which the priest had in view. Even the wits of a fool can be quickened by contact with the world. For many years Mrs. Eyrecourt had held her place in society, acting under an intensely selfish sense of her own interests, fortified by those cunning instincts which grow best in a barren intellect. Perfectly unworthy of being trusted with secrets which only concerned other people, this frivolous creature could be the unassailable guardian of secrets which concerned herself. The instant the priest referred indirectly to Winterfield, by speaking of Beaupark House, her instincts warned her, as if in words:--Be careful for Stella's sake!

"Oh, yes," said Mrs. Eyrecourt. "I know Beaupark House; but--may I make a confession?" she added, with her sweetest smile.

Father Benwell caught her tone, with his customary tact. "A confession at a ball is a novelty, even in my experience," he answered with his sweetest smile.

"How good of you to encourage me!" proceeded Mrs. Eyrecourt. "No, thank you, I don't want to sit down. My confession won't take long--and I really must give that poor pale daughter of mine a glass of wine. A student of human nature like you--they say all priests are students of human nature; accustomed of course to be consulted in difficulties, and to hear real confessions--must know that we poor women are sadly subject to whims and caprices. We can't resist them as men do; and the dear good men generally make allowances for us. Well, do you know that place of Mr. Winterfield's is one of my caprices? Oh, dear, I speak carelessly; I ought to have said the place represents one of my caprices. In short. Father Benwell, Beaupark House is perfectly odious to me, and I think Clovelly the most overrated place in the world. I haven't the least reason to give, but so it is. Excessively foolish of me. It's like hysterics, I can't help it; I'm sure you will forgive me. There isn't a place on the habitable globe that I am not ready to feel interested in, except detestable Devonshire. I am so sorry you went there. The next time you have a holiday, take my advice. Try the Continent."

"I should like it of all things," said Father Benwell. "Only I don't speak French. Allow me to get Miss Eyrecourt a glass of wine."

He spoke with the most perfect temper and tranquillity. Having paid his little attention to Stella, and having relieved her of the empty glass, he took his leave, with a parting request thoroughly characteristic of the man.

"Are you staying in town, Mrs. Eyrecourt?" he asked.

"Oh, of course, at the height of the season!"

"May I have the honor of calling on you--and talking a little more about the Continent?"

If he had said it in so many words he could hardly have informed Mrs. Eyrecourt more plainly that he thoroughly understood her, and that he meant to try again. Strong in the worldly training of half a lifetime, she at once informed him of her address, with the complimentary phrases proper to the occasion. "Five o'clock tea on Wednesdays, Father Benwell. Don't forget!"

The moment he was gone, she drew her daughter into a quiet corner. "Don't be frightened, Stella. That sly old person has some interest in trying to find out about Winterfield. Do you know why?"

"Indeed I don't, mamma. I hate him!"

"Oh, hush! hush! Hate him as much as you like; but always be civil to him. Tell me--have you been in the conservatory with Romayne?"

"Yes."

"All going on well?"

"Yes."

"My sweet child! Dear, dear me, the wine has done you no good; you're as pale as ever. Is it that priest? Oh, pooh, pooh, leave Father Benwell to me."