

CHAPTER IV - IN THE SMALL HOURS.

WHEN Stella left the conservatory, the attraction of the ball for Romaine was at an end. He went back to his rooms at the hotel.

Penrose was waiting to speak to him. Romaine noticed signs of suppressed agitation in his secretary's face. "Has anything happened?" he inquired.

"Nothing of any importance," Penrose answered, in sad subdued tones. "I only wanted to ask you for leave of absence."

"Certainly. Is it for a long time?"

Penrose hesitated. "You have a new life opening before you," he said. "If your experience of that life is--as I hope and pray it may be--a happy one, you will need me no longer; we may not meet again." His voice began to tremble; he could say no more.

"Not meet again?" Romaine repeated. "My dear Penrose, if you forget how many happy days I owe to your companionship, my memory is to be trusted. Do you really know what my new life is to be? Shall I tell you what I have said to Stella to-night?"

Penrose lifted his hand with a gesture of entreaty.

"Not a word!" he said, eagerly. "Do me one more kindness--leave me to be prepared (as I am prepared) for the change that is to come, without any

confidence on your part to enlighten me further. Don't think me ungrateful. I have reasons for saying what I have just said--I cannot mention what they are--I can only tell you they are serious reasons. You have spoken of my devotion to you. If you wish to reward me a hundred-fold more than I deserve, bear in mind our conversations on religion, and keep the books I asked you to read as gifts from a friend who loves you with his whole heart. No new duties that you can undertake are incompatible with the higher interests of your soul. Think of me sometimes. When I leave you I go back to a lonely life. My poor heart is full of your brotherly kindness at this last moment when I may be saying good-by forever. And what is my one consolation? What helps me to bear my hard lot? The Faith that I hold! Remember that, Romaine. If there comes a time of sorrow in the future, remember that."

Romaine was more than surprised, he was shocked. "Why must you leave me?" he asked.

"It is best for you and for her," said Penrose, "that I should withdraw myself from your new life."

He held out his hand. Romaine refused to let him go. "Penrose!" he said, "I can't match your resignation. Give me something to look forward to. I must and will see you again."

Penrose smiled sadly. "You know that my career in life depends wholly on my superiors," he answered. "But if I am still in England--and if you have sorrows in the future that I can share and alleviate--only let me know it. There is nothing within the compass of my power which I will not do for your sake. God bless and prosper you! Good-by!"

In spite of his fortitude, the tears rose in his eyes. He hurried out of the room.

Romayne sat down at his writing-table, and hid his face in his hands. He had entered the room with the bright image of Stella in his mind. The image had faded from it now--the grief that was in him not even the beloved woman could share. His thoughts were wholly with the brave and patient Christian who had left him--the true man, whose spotless integrity no evil influence could corrupt. By what inscrutable fatality do some men find their way into spheres that are unworthy of them? Oh, Penrose, if the priests of your Order were all like you, how easily I should be converted! These were Romayne's thoughts, in the stillness of the first hours of the morning. The books of which his lost friend had spoken were close by him on the table. He opened one of them, and turned to a page marked by pencil lines. His sensitive nature was troubled to its inmost depths. The confession of that Faith which had upheld Penrose was before him in words. The impulse was strong in him to read those words, and think over them again.

He trimmed his lamp, and bent his mind on his book. While he was still reading, the ball at Lord Loring's house came to its end. Stella and Lady Loring were alone together, talking of him, before they retired to their rooms.

"Forgive me for owning it plainly," said Lady Loring--"I think you and your mother are a little too ready to suspect Father Benwell without any discoverable cause. Thousands of people go to Clovelly, and Beaupark House is one of the show-places in the neighborhood. Is there a little Protestant prejudice in this new idea of yours?"

Stella made no reply; she seemed to be lost in her own thoughts.

Lady Loring went on.

"I am open to conviction, my dear. If you will only tell me what interest Father Benwell can have in knowing about you and Winterfield--"

Stella suddenly looked up. "Let us speak of another person," she said; "I own I don't like Father Benwell. As you know, Romaine has concealed nothing from me. Ought I to have any concealments from him? Ought I not to tell him about Winterfield?"

Lady Loring started. "You astonish me," she said. "What right has Romaine to know it?"

"What right have I to keep it a secret from him?"

"My dear Stella! if you had been in any way to blame in that miserable matter, I should be the last person in the world to advise you to keep it a secret. But you are innocent of all blame. No man--not even the man who is soon to be your husband--has a right to know what you have so unjustly suffered. Think of the humiliation of even speaking of it to Romaine!"

"I daren't think of it," cried Stella passionately. "But if it is my duty--"

"It is your duty to consider the consequences," Lady Loring interposed. "You don't know how such things sometimes rankle in a man's mind. He may be perfectly willing to do you justice--and yet, there may be moments when he would doubt if you had told him the whole truth. I speak with the experience of a married woman. Don't place yourself in that position toward your husband, if you wish for a happy married life."

Stella was not quite convinced yet. "Suppose Romaine finds it out?" she said.

"He can't possibly find it out. I detest Winterfield, but let us do him justice. He is no fool. He has his position in the world to keep up--and that is enough of itself to close his lips. And as for others, there are only three people now in England who could betray you. I suppose you can trust your mother, and Lord Loring, and me?"

It was needless to answer such a question as that. Before Stella could speak again, Lord Loring's voice was audible outside the door. "What! talking still," he exclaimed. "Not in bed yet?"

"Come in!" cried his wife. "Let us hear what my husband thinks," she said to Stella.

Lord Loring listened with the closest attention while the subject under discussion was communicated to him. When the time came to give his opinion, he sided unhesitatingly with his wife.

"If the fault was yours, even in the slightest degree," he said to Stella, "Romaine would have a right to be taken into your confidence. But, my dear child, we, who know the truth, know you to be a pure and innocent woman. You go to Romaine in every way worthy of him, and you know that he loves you. If you did tell him that miserable story, he could only pity you. Do you want to be pitied?"

Those last unanswerable words brought the debate to an end. From that moment the subject was dropped.

There was still one other person among the guests at the ball who was waking in the small hours of the morning. Father Benwell, wrapped comfortably in his dressing gown, was too hard at work on his correspondence to think of his bed. With one exception, all the letters that he had written thus far were closed, directed and stamped for the post. The letter that he kept open he was now engaged in reconsidering and correcting. It was addressed as usual to the Secretary of the Order at Rome; and, when it had undergone the final revision, it contained these lines:

My last letter informed you of Romaine's return to London and to Miss Eyrecourt. Let me entreat our reverend brethren to preserve perfect tranquillity of mind, in spite of this circumstance. The owner of Vange Abbey is not married yet. If patience and perseverance on my part win their fair reward, Miss Eyrecourt shall never be his wife.

But let me not conceal the truth. In the uncertain future that lies before us, I have no one to depend on but myself. Penrose is no longer to be trusted; and the exertions of the agent to whom I committed my inquiries are exertions that have failed.

I will dispose of the case of Penrose first.

The zeal with which this young man has undertaken the work of conversion intrusted to him has, I regret to say, not been fired by devotion to the interests of the Church, but by a dog-like affection for Romaine. Without waiting for my permission, Penrose has revealed himself in his true character as a priest. And, more than this, he has not only refused to observe the proceedings of Romaine and Miss Eyrecourt—he has deliberately closed his ears to the confidence which Romaine wished to repose in him, on the ground that I might have ordered him to repeat that confidence to me.

To what use can we put this poor fellow's ungovernable sense of honor and gratitude? Under present circumstances, he is clearly of little use to us. I have therefore given him time to think. That is to say, I have not opposed his leaving London, to assist in the spiritual care of a country district. It will be a question for the future, whether we may not turn his enthusiasm to good account in a foreign mission. However, as it is always possible that his influence may still be of use to us, I venture to suggest keeping him within our reach until Romayne's conversion has actually taken place. Don't suppose that the present separation between them is final; I will answer for their meeting again.

I may now proceed to the failure of my agent, and to the course of action that I have adopted in consequence.

The investigations appear to have definitely broken down at the seaside village of Clovelly, in the neighborhood of Mr. Winterfield's country seat. Knowing that I could depend upon the information which associated this gentleman with Miss Eyrecourt, under compromising circumstances of some sort, I decided on seeing Mr. Winterfield, and judging for myself.

The agent's report informed me that the person who had finally baffled his inquiries was an aged Catholic priest, long resident at Clovelly. His name is Newbliss, and he is much respected among the Catholic gentry in that part of Devonshire. After due consideration, I obtained a letter of introduction to my reverend colleague, and traveled to Clovelly--telling my friends here that I was taking a little holiday, in the interests of my health.

I found Father Newbliss a venerable and reticent son of the Church--with one weak point, however, to work on, which was entirely beyond the reach of the otherwise astute person charged with my inquiries. My reverend friend is a scholar, and is inordinately proud of his learning. I am a scholar too. In that capacity I first found my way to his sympathies, and then gently encouraged his pride. The result will appear in certain discoveries, which I number as follows:

1. The events which connect Mr. Winterfield with Miss Eyrecourt happened about two years since, and had their beginning at Beaupark House.
2. At this period, Miss Eyrecourt and her mother were staying at Beaupark House. The general impression in the neighborhood was that Mr. Winterfield and Miss Eyrecourt were engaged to be married.
3. Not long afterward, Miss Eyrecourt and her mother surprised the neighborhood by suddenly leaving Beaupark House. Their destination was supposed to be London.
4. Mr. Winterfield himself next left his country seat for the Continent. His exact destination was not mentioned to any one. The steward, soon afterward, dismissed all the servants, and the house was left empty for more than a year.
5. At the end of that time Mr. Winterfield returned alone to Beaupark House, and told nobody how, or where, he had passed the long interval of his absence.
6. Mr. Winterfield remains, to the present day, an unmarried man.

Having arrived at these preliminary discoveries, it was time to try what I could make of Mr. Winterfield next.

Among the other good things which this gentleman has inherited is a magnificent library collected by his father. That one learned man should take another learned man to see the books was a perfectly natural

proceeding. My introduction to the master of the house followed my introduction to the library almost as a matter of course.

I am about to surprise you, as I was myself surprised. In all my long experience, Mr. Winterfield is, I think, the most fascinating person I ever met with. Genial, unassuming manners, a prepossessing personal appearance, a sweet temper, a quaint humor delightfully accompanied by natural refinement--such are the characteristic qualities of the man from whom I myself saw Miss Eyrecourt (accidentally meeting him in public) recoil with dismay and disgust! It is absolutely impossible to look at him, and to believe him to be capable of a cruel or dishonorable action. I never was so puzzled in my life.

You may be inclined to think that I am misled by a false impression, derived from the gratifying welcome that I received as a friend of Father Newbliss. I will not appeal to my knowledge of human nature--I will refer to the unanswerable evidence of Mr. Winterfield's poorer neighbors. Wherever I went, in the village or out of it, if I mentioned his name, I produced a universal outburst of admiration and gratitude. "There never was such a friend to poor people, and there never can be such another to the end of the world." Such was a fisherman's description of him; and the one cry of all the men and women near us answered, "That's the truth!"

And yet there is something wrong--for this plain reason, that there is something to be concealed in the past lives of Mr. Winterfield and Miss Eyrecourt.

Under these perplexing circumstances, what use have I made of my opportunities? I am going to surprise you again--I have mentioned Romaine's name to Mr. Winterfield; and I have ascertained that they are, so far, perfect strangers to one another--and that is all.

The little incident of mentioning Romaine arose out of my examination of the library. I discovered certain old volumes, which may one day be of use to him, if he continues his contemplated work on the Origin of Religions. Hearing me express myself to this effect, Mr. Winterfield replied with the readiest kindness:

"I can't compare myself to my excellent father," he said; "but I have at least inherited his respect for the writers of books. My library is a treasure which I hold in trust for the interests of literature. Pray say so, from me, to your friend Mr. Romaine."

And what does this amount to?--you will ask. My reverend friend, it offers me an opportunity, in the future, of bringing Romaine and Winterfield together. Do you see the complications which may ensue? If I can put no other difficulty in Miss Eyrecourt's way, I think there is fruitful promise of a scandal of some kind arising out of the introduction to each other of those two men. You will agree with me that a scandal may prove a valuable obstacle in the way of a marriage.

Mr. Winterfield has kindly invited me to call on him when he is next in London. I may then have opportunities of putting questions which I could not venture to ask on a short acquaintance.

In the meantime, I have obtained another introduction since my return to town. I have been presented to Miss Eyrecourt's mother, and I am invited to drink tea with her on Wednesday. My next letter may tell you--what Penrose ought to have discovered--whether Romaine has been already entrapped into a marriage engagement or not.

Farewell for the present. Remind the Reverend Fathers, with my respects, that I possess one of the valuable qualities of an Englishman--I never know when I am beaten.