

## **CHAPTER II - EVENTS AT TEN ACRES.**

THERE was no obstacle to the speedy departure of Romaine and his wife from Vange Abbey. The villa at Highgate--called Ten Acres Lodge, in allusion to the measurement of the grounds surrounding the house--had been kept in perfect order by the servants of the late Lady Berrick, now in the employment of her nephew.

On the morning after their arrival at the villa, Stella sent a note to her mother. The same afternoon, Mrs. Eyrecourt arrived at Ten Acres--on her way to a garden-party. Finding the house, to her great relief, a modern building, supplied with all the newest comforts and luxuries, she at once began to plan a grand party, in celebration of the return of the bride and bridegroom.

"I don't wish to praise myself," Mrs. Eyrecourt said; "but if ever there was a forgiving woman, I am that person. We will say no more, Stella, about your truly contemptible wedding--five people altogether, including ourselves and the Lorings. A grand ball will set you right with society, and that is the one thing needful. Tea and coffee, my dear Romaine, in your study; Coote's quadrille band; the supper from Gunter's, the grounds illuminated with colored lamps; Tyrolese singers among the trees, relieved by military music--and, if there are any African or other savages now in London, there is room enough in these charming grounds for encampments, dances, squaws, scalps, and all the rest of it, to end in a blaze of fireworks."

A sudden fit of coughing seized her, and stopped the further enumeration of attractions at the contemplated ball. Stella had observed that her mother looked unusually worn and haggard, through the disguises of paint and powder. This was not an uncommon result of Mrs. Eyrecourt's devotion to the demands of society; but the cough was something new, as a symptom of exhaustion.

"I am afraid, mamma, you have been overexerting yourself," said Stella.  
"You go to too many parties."

"Nothing of the sort, my dear; I am as strong as a horse. The other night, I was waiting for the carriage in a draught (one of the most perfect private concerts of the season, ending with a delightfully naughty little French play)--and I caught a slight cold. A glass of water is all I want. Thank you. Romaine, you are looking shockingly serious and severe; our ball will cheer you. If you would only make a bonfire of all those horrid books, you don't know how it would improve your spirits. Dearest Stella, I will come and lunch here to-morrow--you are within such a nice easy drive from town--and I'll bring my visiting-book, and settle about the invitations and the day. Oh, dear me, how late it is. I have nearly an hour's drive before I get to my garden party. Good-by, my turtle doves good-by."

She was stopped, on the way to her carriage, by another fit of coughing. But she still persisted in making light of it. "I'm as strong as a horse," she repeated, as soon as she could speak--and skipped into the carriage like a young girl.

"Your mother is killing herself," said Romaine.

"If I could persuade her to stay with us a little while," Stella suggested, "the rest and quiet might do wonders for her. Would you object to it, Lewis?"

"My darling, I object to nothing--except giving a ball and burning my books. If your mother will yield on these two points, my house is entirely at her disposal."

He spoke playfully--he looked his best, since he had separated himself from the painful associations that were now connected with Vange Abbey. Had "the torment of the Voice" been left far away in Yorkshire? Stella shrank from approaching the subject in her husband's presence, knowing that it must remind him of the fatal duel. To her surprise, Romyne himself referred to the General's family.

"I have written to Hynd," he began. "Do you mind his dining with us to-day?"

"Of course not!"

"I want to hear if he has anything to tell me--about those French ladies. He undertook to see them, in your absence, and to ascertain--" He was unable to overcome his reluctance to pronounce the next words. Stella was quick to understand what he meant. She finished the sentence for him.

"Yes," he said, "I wanted to hear how the boy is getting on, and if there is any hope of curing him. Is it--" he trembled as he put the question--"Is it hereditary madness?"

Feeling the serious importance of concealing the truth, Stella only replied that she had hesitated to ask if there was a taint of madness in the family. "I suppose," she added, "you would not like to see the boy, and judge of his chances of recovery for yourself?"

"You suppose?" he burst out, with sudden anger. "You might be sure. The bare idea of seeing him turns me cold. Oh, when shall I forget! when shall I forget! Who spoke of him first?" he said, with renewed irritability, after a moment of silence. "You or I?"

"It was my fault, love--he is so harmless and so gentle, and he has such a sweet face--I thought it might soothe you to see him. Forgive me; we will never speak of him again. Have you any notes for me to copy? You know, Lewis, I am your secretary now."

So she led Romaine away to his study and his books. When Major Hynd arrived, she contrived to be the first to see him. "Say as little as possible about the General's widow and her son," she whispered.

The Major understood her. "Don't be uneasy, Mrs. Romaine," he answered. "I know your husband well enough to know what you mean. Besides, the news I bring is good news."

Romaine came in before he could speak more particularly. When the servants had left the room, after dinner, the Major made his report.

"I am going to agreeably surprise you," he began. "All responsibility toward the General's family is taken off our hands. The ladies are on their way back to France."

Stella was instantly reminded of one of the melancholy incidents associated with her visit to Camp's Hill. "Madame Marillac spoke of a brother of hers who disapproved of the marriage," she said. "Has he forgiven her?"

"That is exactly what he has done, Mrs. Romaine. Naturally enough, he felt the disgrace of his sister's marriage to such a man as the General. Only the other day he heard for the first time that she was a widow--and he at once traveled to England. I bade them good-by yesterday--most happily reunited--on their journey home again. Ah, I thought you would be glad, Mrs. Romaine, to hear that the poor widow's troubles are over.

Her brother is rich enough to place them all in easy circumstances--he is as good a fellow as ever lived."

"Have you seen him?" Stella asked, eagerly.

"I have been with him to the asylum."

"Does the boy go back to France?"

"No. We took the place by surprise, and saw for ourselves how well conducted it was. The boy has taken a strong liking to the proprietor--a bright, cheerful old man, who is teaching him some of our English games, and has given him a pony to ride on. He burst out crying, poor creature, at the idea of going away--and his mother burst out crying at the idea of leaving him. It was a melancholy scene You know what a good mother is--no sacrifice is too great for her. The boy stays at the asylum, on the chance that his healthier and happier life there may help to cure him. By-the-way, Romaine, his uncle desires me to thank you--"

"Hynd! you didn't tell the uncle my name?"

"Don't alarm yourself. He is a gentleman, and when I told him I was pledged to secrecy, he made but one inquiry--he asked if you were a rich man. I told him you had eighteen thousand a year."

"Well?"

"Well, he set that matter right between us with perfect taste. He said: 'I cannot presume to offer repayment to a person so wealthy. We gratefully accept our obligation to our kind unknown friend. For the future,

however, my nephew's expenses must be paid from my purse.' Of course I could only agree to that. From time to time the mother is to hear, and I am to hear, how the boy goes on. Or, if you like, Romaine--now that the General's family has left England--I don't see why the proprietor might not make his report directly to yourself."

"No!" Romaine rejoined, positively. "Let things remain as they are."

"Very well. I can send you any letters that I may receive from the asylum. Will you give us some music, Mrs. Romaine? Not to-night? Then let us go to the billiard-room; and as I am the worst of bad players, I will ask you to help me to beat your accomplished husband."

On the afternoon of the next day, Mrs. Eyrecourt's maid arrived at Ten Acres with a note from her mistress.

"Dearest Stella--Matilda must bring you my excuses for to-day. I don't in the least understand it, but I seem to have turned lazy. It is most ridiculous--I really cannot get out of bed. Perhaps I did do just a little too much yesterday. The opera after the garden party, and a ball after the opera, and this tiresome cough all night after the ball. Quite a series, isn't it? Make my apologies to our dear dismal Romaine--and if you drive out this afternoon, come and have a chat with me. Your affectionate mother, Emily Eyrecourt. P. S.--You know what a fidget Matilda is. If she talks about me, don't believe a word she says to you."

Stella turned to the maid with a sinking heart.

"Is my mother very ill?" she asked.

"So ill, ma'am, that I begged and prayed her to let me send for a doctor. You know what my mistress is. If you would please to use your influence--"

"I will order the carriage instantly, and take you back with me."

Before she dressed to go out, Stella showed the letter to her husband. He spoke with perfect kindness and sympathy, but he did not conceal that he shared his wife's apprehensions. "Go at once," were his last words to her; "and, if I can be of any use, send for me."

It was late in the evening before Stella returned. She brought sad news.

The physician consulted told her plainly that the neglected cough, and the constant fatigue, had together made the case a serious one. He declined to say that there was any absolute danger as yet, or any necessity for her remaining with her mother at night. The experience of the next twenty-four hours, at most, would enable him to speak positively. In the meantime, the patient insisted that Stella should return to her husband. Even under the influence of opiates, Mrs. Eyrecourt was still drowsily equal to herself. "You are a fidget, my dear, and Matilda is a fidget--I can't have two of you at my bedside. Good-night." Stella stooped over her and kissed her. She whispered: "Three weeks notice, remember, for the party!"

By the next evening the malady had assumed so formidable an aspect that the doctor had his doubts of the patient's chance of recovery. With her husband's full approval, Stella remained night and day at her mother's bedside.

Thus, in a little more than a month from the day of his marriage, Romyne was, for the time, a lonely man again.

The illness of Mrs. Eyrecourt was unexpectedly prolonged. There were intervals during which her vigorous constitution rallied and resisted the progress of the disease. On these occasions, Stella was able to return to her husband for a few hours--subject always to a message which recalled her to her mother when the chances of life or death appeared to be equally balanced. Romaine's one resource was in his books and his pen. For the first time since his union with Stella he opened the portfolios in which Penrose had collected the first introductory chapters of his historical work. Almost at every page the familiar handwriting of his secretary and friend met his view. It was a new trial to his resolution to be working alone; never had he felt the absence of Penrose as he felt it now. He missed the familiar face, the quiet pleasant voice, and, more than both, the ever-welcome sympathy with his work. Stella had done all that a wife could do to fill the vacant place; and her husband's fondness had accepted the effort as adding another charm to the lovely creature who had opened a new life to him. But where is the woman who can intimately associate herself with the hard brain-work of a man devoted to an absorbing intellectual pursuit? She can love him, admire him, serve him, believe in him beyond all other men--but (in spite of exceptions which only prove the rule) she is out of her place when she enters the study while the pen is in his hand. More than once, when he was at work, Romaine closed the page bitterly; the sad thought came to him, "Oh, if I only had Penrose here!" Even other friends were not available as a resource in the solitary evening hours. Lord Loring was absorbed in social and political engagements. And Major Hynd--true to the principle of getting away as often as possible from his disagreeable wife and his ugly children--had once more left London.

One day, while Mrs. Eyrecourt still lay between life and death, Romaine found his historical labors suspended by the want of a certain volume which it was absolutely necessary to consult. He had mislaid the references written for him by Penrose, and he was at a loss to remember whether the book was in the British Museum, in the Bodleian Library, or in the Bibliotheque at Paris. In this emergency a letter to his former secretary would furnish him with the information that he required. But he was ignorant of Penrose's present address. The Loring might possibly know it--so to the Loring he resolved to apply.