

CHAPTER III - FATHER BENWELL AND THE BOOK.

ROMAYNE'S first errand in London was to see his wife, and to make inquiries at Mrs. Eyrecourt's house. The report was more favorable than usual. Stella whispered, as she kissed him, "I shall soon come back to you, I hope!"

Leaving the horses to rest for a while, he proceeded to Lord Loring's residence on foot. As he crossed a street in the neighborhood, he was nearly run over by a cab, carrying a gentleman and his luggage. The gentleman was Mr. Winterfield, on his way to Derwent's Hotel.

Lady Loring very kindly searched her card-basket, as the readiest means of assisting Romaine. Penrose had left his card, on his departure from London, but no address was written on it. Lord Loring, unable himself to give the required information, suggested the right person to consult.

"Father Benwell will be here later in the day," he said. "If you will write to Penrose at once, he will add the address. Are you sure, before the letter goes, that the book you want is not in my library?"

"I think not," Romaine answered; "but I will write down the title, and leave it here with my letter."

The same evening he received a polite note from Father Benwell, informing him that the letter was forwarded, and that the book he wanted was not in Lord Loring's library. "If there should be any delay or difficulty in obtaining this rare volume," the priest added, "I only wait the expression of your wishes, to borrow it from the library of a friend of mine, residing in the country."

By return of post the answer, affectionately and gratefully written, arrived from Penrose. He regretted that he was not able to assist Romaine personally. But it was out of his power (in plain words, he had been expressly forbidden by Father Benwell) to leave the service on which he was then engaged. In reference to the book that was wanted, it was quite likely that a search in the catalogues of the British Museum might discover it. He had only met with it himself in the National Library at Paris.

This information led Romaine to London again, immediately. For the first time he called at Father Benwell's lodgings. The priest was at home, expecting the visit. His welcome was the perfection of unassuming politeness. He asked for the last news of "poor Mrs. Eyrecourt's health," with the sympathy of a true friend.

"I had the honor of drinking tea with Mrs. Eyrecourt, some little time since," he said. "Her flow of conversation was never more delightful--it seemed impossible to associate the idea of illness with so bright a creature. And how well she kept the secret of your contemplated marriage! May I offer my humble congratulations and good wishes?"

Romaine thought it needless to say that Mrs. Eyrecourt had not been trusted with the secret until the wedding day was close at hand. "My wife and I agreed in wishing to be married as quietly as possible," he answered, after making the customary acknowledgments.

"And Mrs. Romaine?" pursued Father Benwell. "This is a sad trial for her. She is in attendance on her mother, I suppose?"

"In constant attendance; I am quite alone now. To change the subject, may I ask you to look at the reply which I have received from Penrose? It is my excuse for troubling you with this visit."

Father Benwell read the letter with the closest attention. In spite of his habitual self-control, his vigilant eyes brightened as he handed it back.

Thus far, the priest's well-planned scheme, (like Mr. Bitrake's clever inquiries) had failed. He had not even entrapped Mrs. Eyrecourt into revealing the marriage engagement. Her unconquerable small-talk had foiled him at every point. Even when he had deliberately kept his seat after the other guests at the tea-table had taken their departure, she rose with the most imperturbable coolness, and left him. "I have a dinner and two parties to-night, and this is just the time when I take my little restorative nap. Forgive me--and do come again!" When he sent the fatal announcement of the marriage to Rome, he had been obliged to confess that he was indebted for the discovery to the newspaper. He had accepted the humiliation; he had accepted the defeat--but he was not beaten yet. "I counted on Romaine's weakness; and Miss Eyrecourt counted on Romaine's weakness; and Miss Eyrecourt has won. So let it be. My turn will come." In that manner he had reconciled himself to his position. And now--he knew it when he handed back the letter to Romaine--his turn had come!

"You can hardly go to Paris to consult the book," he said, "in the present state of Mrs. Eyrecourt's health?"

"Certainly not!"

"Perhaps you will send somebody to search the catalogue at the British Museum?"

"I should have done that already, Father Benwell, but for the very kind allusion in your note to your friend in the country. Even if the book is in the Museum Library, I shall be obliged to go to the Reading Room to get

my information. It would be far more convenient to me to have the volume at home to consult, if you think your friend will trust me with it."

"I am certain he will trust you with it. My friend is Mr. Winterfield, of Beaupark House, North Devon. Perhaps you may have heard of him?"

"No; the name is quite new to me."

"Then come and see the man himself. He is now in London--and I am entirely at your service."

In half an hour more, Romaine was presented to a well-bred, amiable gentleman in the prime of life, smoking, and reading the newspaper. The bowl of his long pipe rested on the floor, on one side of him, and a handsome red and white spaniel reposed on the other. Before his visitors had been two minutes in the room, he understood the motive which had brought them to consult him, and sent for a telegraphic form.

"My steward will find the book and forward it to your address by passenger train this afternoon," he said. "I will tell him to put my printed catalogue of the library into the parcel, in case I have any other books which may be of use to you."

With those words, he dispatched the telegram to the office. Romaine attempted to make his acknowledgments. Mr. Winterfield would hear no acknowledgments.

"My dear sir," he said, with a smile that brightened his whole face, "you are engaged in writing a great historical work; and I am an obscure country gentleman, who is lucky enough to associate himself with the production of a new book. How do you know that I am not looking

forward to a complimentary line in the preface? I am the obliged person, not you. Pray consider me as a handy little boy who runs on errands for the Muse of History. Do you smoke?"

Not even tobacco would soothe Romaine's wasted and irritable nerves. Father Benwell--"all things to all men"--cheerfully accepted a cigar from the box on the table.

"Father Benwell possesses all the social virtues," Mr. Winterfield ran on. "He shall have his coffee, and the largest sugar-basin that the hotel can produce. I can quite understand that your literary labors have tried your nerves," he said to Romaine, when he had ordered the coffee. "The mere title of your work overwhelms an idle man like me. 'The Origin of Religions'--what an immense subject! How far must we look back to find out the first worshipers of the human family?--Where are the hieroglyphics, Mr. Romaine, that will give you the earliest information? In the unknown center of Africa, or among the ruined cities of Yucatan? My own idea, as an ignorant man, is that the first of all forms of worship must have been the worship of the sun. Don't be shocked, Father Benwell--I confess I have a certain sympathy with sun-worship. In the East especially, the rising of the sun is surely the grandest of all objects--the visible symbol of a beneficent Deity, who gives life, warmth and light to the world of his creation."

"Very grand, no doubt," remarked Father Benwell, sweetening his coffee. "But not to be compared with the noble sight at Rome, when the Pope blesses the Christian world from the balcony of St. Peter's."

"So much for professional feeling!" said Mr. Winterfield. "But, surely, something depends on what sort of man the Pope is. If we had lived in the time of Alexander the Sixth, would you have called him a part of that noble sight?"

"Certainly--at a proper distance," Father Benwell briskly replied. "Ah, you heretics only know the worst side of that most unhappy pontiff! Mr. Winterfield, we have every reason to believe that he felt (privately) the truest remorse."

"I should require very good evidence to persuade me of it."

This touched Romaine on a sad side of his own personal experience. "Perhaps," he said, "you don't believe in remorse?"

"Pardon me," Mr. Winterfield rejoined, "I only distinguish between false remorse and true remorse. We will say no more of Alexander the Sixth, Father Benwell. If we want an illustration, I will supply it, and give no offense. True remorse depends, to my mind, on a man's accurate knowledge of his own motives--far from a common knowledge, in my experience. Say, for instance, that I have committed some serious offense--"

Romaine could not resist interrupting him. "Say you have killed one of your fellow-creatures," he suggested.

"Very well. If I know that I really meant to kill him, for some vile purpose of my own; and if (which by no means always follows) I am really capable of feeling the enormity of my own crime--that is, as I think, true remorse. Murderer as I am, I have, in that case, some moral worth still left in me. But if I did not mean to kill the man--if his death was my misfortune as well as his--and if (as frequently happens) I am nevertheless troubled by remorse, the true cause lies in my own inability fairly to realize my own motives--before I look to results. I am the ignorant victim of false remorse; and if I will only ask myself boldly what has blinded me to the true state of the case, I shall find the mischief due to that misdirected appreciation of my own importance which is nothing but egotism in disguise."

"I entirely agree with you," said Father Benwell; "I have had occasion to say the same thing in the confessional."

Mr. Winterfield looked at his dog, and changed the subject. "Do you like dogs, Mr. Romaine?" he asked. "I see my spaniel's eyes saying that he likes you, and his tail begging you to take some notice of him."

Romaine caressed the dog rather absently.

His new friend had unconsciously presented to him a new view of the darker aspect of his own life. Winterfield's refined, pleasant manners, his generous readiness in placing the treasures of his library at a stranger's disposal, had already appealed irresistibly to Romaine's sensitive nature. The favorable impression was now greatly strengthened by the briefly bold treatment which he had just heard of a subject in which he was seriously interested. "I must see more of this man," was his thought, as he patted the companionable spaniel.

Father Benwell's trained observation followed the vivid changes of expression on Romaine's face, and marked the eager look in his eyes as he lifted his head from the dog to the dog's master. The priest saw his opportunity and took it.

"Do you remain long at Ten Acres Lodge?" he said to Romaine.

"I hardly know as yet. We have no other plans at present."

"You inherit the place, I think, from your late aunt, Lady Berrick?"

"Yes."

The tone of the reply was not encouraging; Romaine felt no interest in talking of Ten Acres Lodge. Father Benwell persisted.

"I was told by Mrs. Eyrecourt," he went on "that Lady Berrick had some fine pictures. Are they still at the Lodge?"

"Certainly. I couldn't live in a house without pictures."

Father Benwell looked at Winterfield. "Another taste in common between you and Mr. Romaine," he said, "besides your liking for dogs."

This at once produced the desired result. Romaine eagerly invited Winterfield to see his pictures. "There are not many of them," he said. "But they are really worth looking at. When will you come?"

"The sooner the better," Winterfield answered, cordially. "Will to-morrow do--by the noonday light?"

"Whenever you please. Your time is mine."

Among his other accomplishments, Father Benwell was a chess-player. If his thoughts at that moment had been expressed in language, they would have said, "Check to the queen."