

CHAPTER IV - THE END OF THE HONEYMOON.

ON the next morning, Winterfield arrived alone at Romaine's house.

Having been included, as a matter of course, in the invitation to see the pictures, Father Benwell had made an excuse, and had asked leave to defer the proposed visit. From his point of view, he had nothing further to gain by being present at a second meeting between the two men--in the absence of Stella. He had it on Romaine's own authority that she was in constant attendance on her mother, and that her husband was alone. "Either Mrs. Eyrecourt will get better, or she will die," Father Benwell reasoned. "I shall make constant inquiries after her health, and, in either case, I shall know when Mrs. Romaine returns to Ten Acres Lodge. After that domestic event, the next time Mr. Winterfield visits Mr. Romaine, I shall go and see the pictures."

It is one of the defects of a super-subtle intellect to trust too implicitly to calculation, and to leave nothing to chance. Once or twice already Father Benwell had been (in the popular phrase) a little too clever--and chance had thrown him out. As events happened, chance was destined to throw him out once more.

Of the most modest pretensions, in regard to numbers and size, the pictures collected by the late Lady Berrick were masterly works of modern art. With few exceptions, they had been produced by the matchless English landscape painters of half a century since. There was no formal gallery here. The pictures were so few that they could be hung in excellent lights in the different living-rooms of the villa. Turner, Constable, Collins, Danby, Callcott, Linnell--the master of Beaupark House passed from one to the other with the enjoyment of a man who thoroughly appreciated the truest and finest landscape art that the world has yet seen.

"You had better not have asked me here," he said to Romaine, in his quaintly good-humored way. "I can't part with those pictures when I say good-bye to-day. You will find me calling here again and again, till you are perfectly sick of me. Look at this sea piece. Who thinks of the brushes and palette of that painter? There, truth to Nature and poetical feeling go hand in hand together. It is absolutely lovely--I could kiss that picture."

They were in Romaine's study when this odd outburst of enthusiasm escaped Winterfield. He happened to look toward the writing-table next. Some pages of manuscript, blotted and interlined with corrections, at once attracted his attention.

"Is that the forthcoming history?" he asked. "You are not one of the authors who perform the process of correction mentally--you revise and improve with the pen in your hand."

Romaine looked at him in surprise. "I suspect, Mr. Winterfield, you have used your pen for other purposes than writing letters."

"No, indeed; you pay me an undeserved compliment. When you come to see me in Devonshire, I can show you some manuscripts, and corrected proofs, left by our great writers, collected by my father. My knowledge of the secrets of the craft has been gained by examining those literary treasures. If the public only knew that every writer worthy of the name is the severest critic of his own book before it ever gets into the hands of the reviewers, how surprised they would be! The man who has worked in the full fervor of composition yesterday is the same man who sits in severe and merciless judgment to-day on what he has himself produced. What a fascination there must be in the Art which exacts and receives such double labor as this?"

Romaine thought--not unkindly--of his wife. Stella had once asked him how long a time he was usually occupied in writing one page. The reply

had filled her with pity and wonder. "Why do you take all that trouble?" she had gently remonstrated. "It would be just the same to the people, darling, if you did it in half the time."

By way of changing the topic, Romaine led his visitor into another room. "I have a picture here," he said, "which belongs to a newer school of painting. You have been talking of hard work in one Art; there it is in another."

"Yes," said Winterfield, "there it is--the misdirected hard work, which has been guided by no critical faculty, and which doesn't know where to stop. I try to admire it; and I end in pitying the poor artist. Look at that leafless felled tree in the middle distance. Every little twig, on the smallest branch, is conscientiously painted--and the result is like a colored photograph. You don't look at a landscape as a series of separate parts; you don't discover every twig on a tree; you see the whole in Nature, and you want to see the whole in a picture. That canvas presents a triumph of patience and pains, produced exactly as a piece of embroidery is produced, all in little separate bits, worked with the same mechanically complete care. I turn away from it to your shrubbery there, with an ungrateful sense of relief."

He walked to the window as he spoke. It looked out on the grounds in front of the house. At the same moment the noise of rolling wheels became audible on the drive. An open carriage appeared at the turn in the road. Winterfield called Romaine to the window. "A visitor," he began--and suddenly drew back, without saying a word more.

Romaine looked out, and recognized his wife.

"Excuse me for one moment," he said, "it is Mrs. Romaine."

On that morning an improvement in the fluctuating state of Mrs. Eyrecourt's health had given Stella another of those opportunities of passing an hour or two with her husband, which she so highly prized. Romaine withdrew, to meet her at the door--too hurriedly to notice Winterfield standing, in the corner to which he had retreated, like a man petrified.

Stella had got out of the carriage when her husband reached the porch. She ascended the few steps that led to the hall as slowly and painfully as if she had been an infirm old woman. The delicately tinted color in her face had faded to an ashy white. She had seen Winterfield at the window.

For the moment, Romaine looked at her in speechless consternation. He led her into the nearest room that opened out of the hall, and took her in his arms. "My love, this nursing of your mother has completely broken you down!" he said, with the tenderest pity for her. "If you won't think of yourself, you must think of me. For my sake remain here, and take the rest that you need. I will be a tyrant, Stella, for the first time; I won't let you go back."

She roused herself, and tried to smile--and hid the sad result from him in a kiss. "I do feel the anxiety and fatigue," she said. "But my mother is really improving; and, if it only continues, the blessed sense of relief will make me strong again." She paused, and roused all her courage, in anticipation of the next words--so trivial and so terrible--that must, sooner or later, be pronounced. "You have a visitor?" she said.

"Did you see him at the window? A really delightful man--I know you will like him. Under any other circumstances, I should have introduced him. You are not well enough to see strangers today."

She was too determined to prevent Winterfield from ever entering the house again to shrink from the meeting. "I am not so ill as you think,

Lewis," she said, bravely. "When you go to your new friend, I will go with you. I am a little tired--that's all."

Romayne looked at her anxiously. "Let me get you a glass of wine," he said.

She consented--she really felt the need of it. As he turned away to ring the bell, she put the question which had been in her mind from the moment when she had seen Winterfield.

"How did you become acquainted with this gentleman?"

"Through Father Benwell."

She was not surprised by the answer--her suspicion of the priest had remained in her mind from the night of Lady Loring's ball. The future of her married life depended on her capacity to check the growing intimacy between the two men. In that conviction she found the courage to face Winterfield.

How should she meet him? The impulse of the moment pointed to the shortest way out of the dreadful position in which she was placed--it was to treat him like a stranger. She drank her glass of wine, and took Romayne's arm. "We mustn't keep your friend waiting any longer," she resumed. "Come!"

As they crossed the hall, she looked suspiciously toward the house door. Had he taken the opportunity of leaving the villa? At any other time she would have remembered that the plainest laws of good breeding compelled him to wait for Romayne's return. His own knowledge of the world would tell him that an act of gross rudeness, committed by a well-

bred man, would inevitably excite suspicion of some unworthy motive--and might, perhaps, connect that motive with her unexpected appearance at the house. Romaine opened the door, and they entered the room together.

"Mr. Winterfield, let me introduce you to Mrs. Romaine." They bowed to each other; they spoke the conventional words proper to the occasion--but the effort that it cost them showed itself. Romaine perceived an unusual formality in his wife's manner, and a strange disappearance of Winterfield's easy grace of address. Was he one of the few men, in these days, who are shy in the presence of women? And was the change in Stella attributable, perhaps, to the state of her health? The explanation might, in either case, be the right one. He tried to set them at their ease.

"Mr. Winterfield is so pleased with the pictures, that he means to come and see them again," he said to his wife. "And one of his favorites happens to be your favorite, too."

She tried to look at Winterfield, but her eyes sank. She could turn toward him, and that was all. "Is it the sea-piece in the study?" she said to him faintly.

"Yes," he answered, with formal politeness; "it seems to me to be one of the painter's finest works."

Romaine looked at him in unconcealed wonder. To what flat commonplace Winterfield's lively enthusiasm had sunk in Stella's presence! She perceived that some unfavorable impression had been produced on her husband, and interposed with a timely suggestion. Her motive was not only to divert Romaine's attention from Winterfield, but to give him a reason for leaving the room.

"The little water-color drawing in my bedroom is by the same artist," she said. "Mr. Winterfield might like to see it. If you will ring the bell, Lewis, I will send my maid for it."

Romayne had never allowed the servants to touch his works of art, since the day when a zealous housemaid had tried to wash one of his plaster casts. He made the reply which his wife had anticipated.

"No! no!" he said. "I will fetch the drawing myself." He turned gayly to Winterfield. "Prepare yourself for another work that you would like to kiss." He smiled, and left the room.

The instant the door was closed, Stella approached Winterfield. Her beautiful face became distorted by a mingled expression of rage and contempt. She spoke to him in a fierce peremptory whisper.

"Have you any consideration for me left?" His look at her, as she put that question, revealed the most complete contrast between his face and hers. Compassionate sorrow was in his eyes, tender forbearance and respect spoke in his tones, as he answered her.

"I have more than consideration for you, Stella--"

She angrily interrupted him. "How dare you call me by my Christian name?"

He remonstrated, with a gentleness that might have touched the heart of any woman. "Do you still refuse to believe that I never deceived you? Has time not softened your heart to me yet?"

She was more contemptuous toward him than ever. "Spare me your protestations," she said; "I heard enough of them two years since. Will you do what I ask of you?"

"You know that I will."

"Put an end to your acquaintance with my husband. Put an end to it," she repeated vehemently, "from this day, at once and forever! Can I trust you to do it?"

"Do you think I would have entered this house if I had known he was your husband?" He made that reply with a sudden change in him--with a rising color and in firm tones of indignation. In a moment more, his voice softened again, and his kind blue eyes rested on her sadly and devotedly. "You may trust me to do more than you ask," he resumed. "You have made a mistake."

"What mistake?"

"When Mr. Romaine introduced us, you met me like a stranger--and you left me no choice but to do as you did."

"I wish you to be a stranger."

Her sharpest replies made no change in his manner. He spoke as kindly and as patiently as ever.

"You forget that you and your mother were my guests at Beaupark, two years ago--"

Stella understood what he meant--and more. In an instant she remembered that Father Benwell had been at Beaupark House. Had he heard of the visit? She clasped her hands in speechless terror.

Winterfield gently reassured her. "You must not be frightened," he said. "It is in the last degree unlikely that Mr. Romaine will ever find out that you were at my house. If he does--and if you deny it--I will do for you what I would do for no other human creature; I will deny it too. You are safe from discovery. Be happy--and forget me."

For the first time she showed signs of relenting--she turned her head away, and sighed. Although her mind was full of the serious necessity of warning him against Father Benwell, she had not even command enough over her own voice to ask how he had become acquainted with the priest. His manly devotion, the perfect and pathetic sincerity of his respect, pleaded with her, in spite of herself. For a moment she paused to recover her composure. In that moment Romaine returned to them with the drawing in his hand.

"There!" he said. "It's nothing, this time, but some children gathering flowers on the outskirts of a wood. What do you think of it?"

"What I thought of the larger work," Winterfield answered. "I could look at it by the hour together." He consulted his watch. "But time is a hard master, and tells me that my visit must come to an end. Thank you, most sincerely."

He bowed to Stella. Romaine thought his guest might have taken the English freedom of shaking hands. "When will you come and look at the pictures again?" he asked. "Will you dine with us, and see how they bear the lamplight?"

"I am sorry to say I must beg you to excuse me. My plans are altered since we met yesterday. I am obliged to leave London."

Romayne was unwilling to part with him on these terms. "You will let me know when you are next in town?" he said.

"Certainly!"

With that short answer he hurried away.

Romayne waited a little in the hall before he went back to his wife. Stella's reception of Winterfield, though not positively ungracious, was, nevertheless, the reverse of encouraging. What extraordinary caprice had made her insensible to the social attractions of a man so unaffectedly agreeable? It was not wonderful that Winterfield's cordiality should have been chilled by the cold welcome that he had received from the mistress of the house. At the same time, some allowance was to be made for the influence of Stella's domestic anxieties, and some sympathy was claimed by the state of her health. Although her husband shrank from distressing her by any immediate reference to her reception of his friend, he could not disguise from himself that she had disappointed him. When he went back to the room, Stella was lying on the sofa with her face turned toward the wall. She was in tears, and she was afraid to let him see it. "I won't disturb you," he said, and withdrew to his study. The precious volume which Winterfield had so kindly placed at his disposal was on the table, waiting for him.

Father Benwell had lost little by not being present at the introduction of Winterfield to Stella. He had witnessed a plainer betrayal of emotion when they met unexpectedly in Lord Loring's picture gallery. But if he had seen Romayne reading in his study, and Stella crying secretly on the sofa, he might have written to Rome by that day's post, and might have

announced that he had sown the first seeds of disunion between husband and wife.