

## **CHAPTER V - FATHER BENWELL'S CORRESPONDENCE.**

### **I.**

To the Secretary, S. J., Rome.

In my last few hasty lines I was only able to inform you of the unexpected arrival of Mrs. Romaine while Winterfield was visiting her husband. If you remember, I warned you not to attach any undue importance to my absence on that occasion. My present report will satisfy my reverend brethren that the interests committed to me are as safe as ever in my hands.

I have paid three visits, at certain intervals. The first to Winterfield (briefly mentioned in my last letter); the second to Romaine; the third to the invalid lady, Mrs. Eyrecourt. In every case I have been rewarded by important results.

We will revert to Winterfield first. I found him at his hotel, enveloped in clouds of tobacco smoke. Having led him, with some difficulty, into talking of his visit to Ten Acres Lodge, I asked how he liked Romaine's pictures.

"I envy him his pictures." That was the only answer.

"And how do you like Mrs. Romaine?" I inquired next.

He laid down his pipe, and looked at me attentively. My face (I flatter myself) defied discovery. He inhaled another mouthful of tobacco, and began to play with his dog. "If I must answer your question," he burst out suddenly, "I didn't get a very gracious reception from Mrs. Romaine." There he abruptly stopped. He is a thoroughly transparent man; you see straight into his mind, through his eyes. I perceived that he was only telling me a part (perhaps a very small part) of the truth.

"Can you account for such a reception as you describe?" I asked. He answered shortly, "No."

"Perhaps I can account for it," I went on. "Did Mr. Romaine tell his wife that I was the means of introducing you to him?"

He fixed another searching look on me. "Mr. Romaine might have said so when he left me to receive his wife at the door."

"In that case, Mr. Winterfield, the explanation is as plain as the sun at noonday. Mrs. Romaine is a strong Protestant, and I am a Catholic priest."

He accepted this method of accounting for his reception with an alacrity that would not have imposed on a child. You see I had relieved him from all further necessity of accounting for the conduct of Mrs. Romaine!

"A lady's religious prejudices," I proceeded in the friendliest way, "are never taken seriously by a sensible man. You have placed Mr. Romaine under obligations to your kindness--he is eager to improve his acquaintance with you. You will go again to Ten Acres Lodge?"

He gave me another short answer. "I think not."

I said I was sorry to hear it. "However," I added, "you can always see him here, when you are in London." He puffed out a big volume of smoke, and made no remark. I declined to be put down by silence and smoke. "Or perhaps," I persisted, "you will honor me by meeting him at a simple little dinner at my lodgings?" Being a gentleman, he was of course obliged to answer this. He said, "You are very kind; I would rather not. Shall we talk of something else, Father Benwell?"

We talked of something else. He was just as amiable as ever--but he was not in good spirits. "I think I shall run over to Paris before the end of the month," he said. "To make a long stay?" I asked. "Oh, no! Call in a week or ten days--and you will find me here again."

When I got up to go, he returned of his own accord to the forbidden subject. He said, "I must beg you to do me two favors. The first is, not to let Mr. Romaine know that I am still in London. The second is, not to ask me for any explanations."

The result of our interview may be stated in very few words. It has advanced me one step nearer to discovery. Winterfield's voice, look, and manner satisfied me of this--the true motive for his sudden change of feeling toward Romaine is jealousy of the man who has married Miss Eyrecourt. Those compromising circumstances which baffled the inquiries of my agent are associated, in plain English, with a love affair. Remember all that I have told you of Romaine's peculiar disposition--and imagine, if you can, what the consequences of such a disclosure will be when we are in a position to enlighten the master of Vange Abbey!

As to the present relations between the husband and wife, I have only to tell you next what passed, when I visited Romaine a day or two later. I did well to keep Penrose at our disposal. We shall want him again.

\*\*\*\*\*

On arriving at Ten Acres Lodge, I found Romaine in his study. His manuscript lay before him--but he was not at work. He looked worn and haggard. To this day I don't know from what precise nervous malady he suffers; I could only guess that it had been troubling him again since he and I last met.

My first conventional civilities were dedicated, of course, to his wife. She is still in attendance on her mother. Mrs. Eyrecourt is now considered to be out of danger. But the good lady (who is ready enough to recommend doctors to other people) persists in thinking that she is too robust a person to require medical help herself. The physician in attendance trusts entirely to her daughter to persuade her to persevere with the necessary course of medicine. Don't suppose that I trouble you by mentioning these trumpety circumstances without a reason. We shall have occasion to return to Mrs. Eyrecourt and her doctor.

Before I had been five minutes in his company, Romaine asked me if I had seen Winterfield since his visit to Ten Acres Lodge.

I said I had seen him, and waited, anticipating the next question. Romaine fulfilled my expectations. He inquired if Winterfield had left London.

There are certain cases (as I am told by medical authorities) in which the dangerous system of bleeding a patient still has its advantages. There are other cases in which the dangerous system of telling the truth becomes equally judicious. I said to Romaine, "If I answer you honestly, will you consider it as strictly confidential? Mr. Winterfield, I regret to say, has no intention of improving his acquaintance with you. He asked me to conceal from you that he is still in London."

Romayne's face plainly betrayed that he was annoyed and irritated. "Nothing that you say to me, Father Benwell, shall pass the walls of this room," he replied. "Did Winterfield give any reason for not continuing his acquaintance with me?"

I told the truth once more, with courteous expressions of regret. "Mr. Winterfield spoke of an ungracious reception on the part of Mrs. Romayne."

He started to his feet, and walked irritably up and down the room. "It is beyond endurance!" he said to himself.

The truth had served its purpose by this time. I affected not to have heard him. "Did you speak to me?" I asked.

He used a milder form of expression. "It is most unfortunate," he said. "I must immediately send back the valuable book which Mr. Winterfield has lent to me. And that is not the worst of it. There are other volumes in his library which I have the greatest interest in consulting--and it is impossible for me to borrow them now. At this time, too, when I have lost Penrose, I had hoped to find in Winterfield another friend who sympathized with my pursuits. There is something so cheering and attractive in his manner--and he has just the boldness and novelty of view in his opinions that appeal to a man like me. It was a pleasant future to look forward to; and it must be sacrificed--and to what? To a woman's caprice."

From our point of view this was a frame of mind to be encouraged. I tried the experiment of modestly taking the blame on myself. I suggested that I might be (quite innocently) answerable for Romayne's disappointment.

He looked at me thoroughly puzzled. I repeated what I had said to Winterfield. "Did you mention to Mrs. Romaine that I was the means of introducing you--?"

He was too impatient to let me finish the sentence. "I did mention it to Mrs. Romaine," he said. "And what of it?"

"Pardon me for reminding you that Mrs. Romaine has Protestant prejudices," I rejoined. "Mr. Winterfield would, I fear, not be very welcome to her as the friend of a Catholic priest."

He was almost angry with me for suggesting the very explanation which had proved so acceptable to Winterfield.

"Nonsense!" he cried. "My wife is far too well-bred a woman to let her prejudices express themselves in that way. Winterfield's personal appearance must have inspired her with some unreasonable antipathy, or--"

He stopped, and turned away thoughtfully to the window. Some vague suspicion had probably entered his mind, which he had only become aware of at that moment, and which he was not quite able to realize as yet. I did my best to encourage the new train of thought.

"What other reason can there be?" I asked.

He turned on me sharply. "I don't know. Do you?"

I ventured on a courteous remonstrance. "My dear sir! if you can't find another reason, how can I? It must have been a sudden antipathy, as

you say. Such things do happen between strangers. I suppose I am right in assuming that Mrs. Romaine and Mr. Winterfield are strangers?"

His eyes flashed with a sudden sinister brightness--the new idea had caught light in his mind. "They met as strangers," he said.

There he stopped again, and returned to the window. I felt that I might lose the place I had gained in his confidence if I pressed the subject any further. Besides, I had my reasons for saying a word about Penrose next. As it happened, I had received a letter from him, relating to his present employment, and sending kindest regards to his dear friend and master in the postscript.

I gave the message. Romaine looked round, with an instant change in his face. The mere sound of Penrose's name seemed to act as a relief to the gloom and suspicion that had oppressed him the moment before. "You don't know how I miss the dear gentle little fellow," he said, sadly.

"Why not write to him?" I suggested. "He would be so glad to hear from you again."

"I don't know where to write."

"Did I not send you his address when I forwarded your letter to him?"

"No."

"Then let me atone for my forgetfulness at once."

I wrote down the address, and took my leave.

As I approached the door I noticed on a side table the Catholic volumes which Penrose left with Romaine. One of them was open, with a pencil lying beside it. I thought that a good sign--but I said nothing.

Romaine pressed my hand at parting. "You have been very kind and friendly, Father Benwell," he said. "I shall be glad to see you again."

Don't mention it in quarters where it might do me harm. Do you know, I really pitied him. He has sacrificed everything to his marriage--and his marriage has disappointed him. He was even reduced to be friendly with Me.

Of course when the right time comes I shall give Penrose leave of absence. Do you foresee, as I do, the speedy return of "the dear gentle little fellow" to his old employment; the resumed work of conversion advancing more rapidly than ever; and the jealousy of the Protestant wife aggravating the false position in which she is already placed by her equivocal reception of Winterfield? You may answer this by reminding me of the darker side of the prospect. An heir may be born; and the heir's mother, backed by general opinion, may insist--if there is any hesitation in the matter--on asserting the boy's natural right to succeed his father.

Patience, my reverend colleague! There is no threatening of any such calamity yet. And, even if it happens, don't forget that Romaine has inherited a second fortune. The Vange estate has an estimated value. If the act of restitution represented that value in ready money, do you think the Church would discourage a good convert by refusing his check? You know better than that--and so do I.

\*\*\*\*\*



The next day I called to inquire how Mrs. Eyrecourt was getting on. The report was favorable. Three days later I called again. The report was still more encouraging. I was also informed that Mrs. Romaine had returned to Ten Acres Lodge.

Much of my success in life has been achieved by never being in a hurry. I was not in a hurry now. Time sometimes brings opportunities--and opportunities are worth waiting for.

Let me make this clear by an example.

A man of headlong disposition, in my place, would have probably spoken of Miss Eyrecourt's marriage to Romaine at his first meeting with Winterfield, and would have excited their distrust, and put them respectively on their guard, without obtaining any useful result. I can, at any time, make the disclosure to Romaine which informs him that his wife had been Winterfield's guest in Devonshire, when she affected to meet her former host on the footing of a stranger. In the meanwhile, I give Penrose ample opportunity for innocently widening the breach between husband and wife.

You see, I hope, that if I maintain a passive position, it is not from indolence or discouragement. Now we may get on.

After an interval of a few days more I decided on making further inquiries at Mrs. Eyrecourt's house. This time, when I left my card, I sent a message, asking if the lady could receive me. Shall I own my weakness? She possesses all the information that I want, and she has twice baffled my inquiries. Under these humiliating circumstances, it is part of the priestly pugnacity of my disposition to inquire again.

I was invited to go upstairs.

The front and back drawing-rooms of the house were thrown into one. Mrs. Eyrecourt was being gently moved backward and forward in a chair on wheels, propelled by her maid; two gentlemen being present, visitors like myself. In spite of rouge and loosely folded lace and flowing draperies, she presented a deplorable spectacle. The bodily part of her looked like a dead woman, painted and revived--while the moral part, in the strongest contrast, was just as lively as ever.

"So glad to see you again, Father Benwell, and so much obliged by your kind inquiries. I am quite well, though the doctor won't admit it. Isn't it funny to see me being wheeled about, like a child in a perambulator? Returning to first principles, I call it. You see it's a law of my nature that I must go about. The doctor won't let me go about outside the house, so I go about inside the house. Matilda is the nurse, and I am the baby who will learn to walk some of these days. Are you tired, Matilda? No? Then give me another turn, there's a good creature. Movement, perpetual movement, is a law of Nature. Oh, dear no, doctor; I didn't make that discovery for myself. Some eminent scientific person mentioned it in a lecture. The ugliest man I ever saw. Now back again, Matilda. Let me introduce you to my friends, Father Benwell. Introducing is out of fashion, I know. But I am one of the few women who can resist the tyranny of fashion. I like introducing people. Sir John Drone--Father Benwell. Father Benwell--Doctor Wybrow. Ah, yes, you know the doctor by reputation? Shall I give you his character? Personally charming; professionally detestable. Pardon my impudence, doctor, it is one of the consequences of the overflowing state of my health. Another turn, Matilda--and a little faster this time. Oh, how I wish I was traveling by railway!"

There, her breath failed her. She reclined in her chair, and fanned herself silently--for a while.

I was now able to turn my attention to the two visitors. Sir John Drone, it was easy to see, would be no obstacle to confidential conversation with Mrs. Eyrecourt. An excellent country gentleman, with the bald head, the ruddy complexion, and the inexhaustible capacity for silence, so familiar to us in English society--there you have the true description of Sir John. But the famous physician was quite another sort of man. I had only to look at him, and to feel myself condemned to small talk while he was in the room.

You have always heard of it in my correspondence, whenever I have been in the wrong. I was in the wrong again now--I had forgotten the law of chances. Capricious Fortune, after a long interval, was about to declare herself again in my favor, by means of the very woman who had twice already got the better of me. What a recompense for my kind inquiries after Mrs. Eyrecourt! She recovered breath enough to begin talking again.

"Dear me, how dull you are!" she said to us. "Why don't you amuse a poor prisoner confined to the house? Rest a little, Matilda, or you will be falling ill next. Doctor! is this your last professional visit?"

"Promise to take care of yourself, Mrs. Eyrecourt, and I will confess that the professional visits are over. I come here to-day only as a friend."

"You best of men! Do me another favor. Enliven our dullness. Tell us some interesting story about a patient. These great doctors, Sir John, pass their lives in a perfect atmosphere of romance. Dr. Wybrow's consulting-room is like your confessional, Father Benwell. The most fascinating sins and sorrows are poured into his ears. What is the last romance in real life, doctor, that has asked you to treat it medically? We don't want names and places--we are good children; we only want a story."

Dr. Wybrow looked at me with a smile.

"It is impossible to persuade ladies," he said, "that we, too, are father-confessors in our way. The first duty of a doctor, Mrs. Eyrecourt--"

"Is to cure people, of course," she interposed in her smartest manner.

The doctor answered seriously. "No, indeed. That is only the second duty. Our first duty is invariably to respect the confidence of our patients. However," he resumed in his easier tone, "I happen to have seen a patient to-day, under circumstances which the rules of professional honor do not forbid me to mention. I don't know, Mrs. Eyrecourt, whether you will quite like to be introduced to the scene of the story. The scene is in a madhouse."

Mrs. Eyrecourt burst out with a coquettish little scream, and shook her fan at the doctor. "No horrors!" she cried. "The bare idea of a madhouse distracts me with terror. Oh, fie, fie! I won't listen to you--I won't look at you--I positively refuse to be frightened out of my wits. Matilda! wheel me away to the furthest end of the room. My vivid imagination, Father Benwell, is my rock ahead in life. I declare I can smell the odious madhouse. Go straight to the window, Matilda; I want to bury my nose among the flowers."

Sir John, upon this, spoke for the first time. His language consisted entirely of beginnings of sentences, mutely completed by a smile. "Upon my word, you know. Eh, Doctor Wybrow? A man of your experience. Horrors in madhouses. A lady in delicate health. No, really. Upon my honor, now, I cannot. Something funny, oh yes. But such a subject, oh no."

He rose to leave us. Dr. Wybrow gently stopped him. "I had a motive, Sir John," he said, "but I won't trouble you with needless explanations. There is a person, unknown to me, whom I want to discover. You are a

great deal in society when you are in London. May I ask if you have ever met with a gentleman named Winterfield?"

I have always considered the power of self-control as one of the strongest points in my character. For the future I shall be more humble. When I heard that name, my surprise so completely mastered me that I sat self-betrayed to Dr. Wybrow as the man who could answer his question.

In the meanwhile, Sir John took his time to consider, and discovered that he had never heard of a person named Winterfield. Having acknowledged his ignorance, in his own eloquent language, he drifted away to the window-box in the next room, and gravely contemplated Mrs. Eyrecourt, with her nose buried in flowers.

The doctor turned to me. "Am I wrong, Father Benwell, in supposing that I had better have addressed myself to you?"

I admitted that I knew a gentleman named Winterfield.

Dr. Wybrow got up directly. "Have you a few minutes to spare?" he asked. It is needless to say that I was at the doctor's disposal. "My house is close by, and my carriage is at the door," he resumed. "When you feel inclined to say good-by to our friend Mrs. Eyrecourt, I have something to say to you which I think you ought to know."

We took our departure at once. Mrs. Eyrecourt (leaving some of the color of her nose among the flowers) patted me encouragingly with her fan, and told the doctor that he was forgiven, on the understanding that he would "never do it again." In five minutes more we were in Dr. Wybrow's study.

My watch tells me that I cannot hope to finish this letter by post time.  
Accept what I have written thus far--and be assured that the conclusion  
of my report shall follow a day later.

## II.

The doctor began cautiously. "Winterfield is not a very common name," he said. "But it may not be amiss, Father Benwell, to discover, if we can, whether your Winterfield is the man of whom I am in search. Do you only know him by name? or are you a friend of his?"

I answered, of course, that I was a friend.

Dr. Wybrow went on. "Will you pardon me if I venture on an indiscreet question? When you are acquainted with the circumstances, I am sure you will understand and excuse me. Are you aware of any--what shall I call it?--any romantic incident in Mr. Winterfield's past life?"

This time--feeling myself, in all probability, on the brink of discovery--I was careful to preserve my composure. I said, quietly: "Some such incident as you describe has occurred in Mr. Winterfield's past life." There I stopped discreetly, and looked as if I knew all about it.

The doctor showed no curiosity to hear more. "My object," he went on, "was merely to be reasonably sure that I was speaking to the right person, in speaking to you. I may now tell you that I have no personal interest in trying to discover Mr. Winterfield; I only act as the representative of an old friend of mine. He is the proprietor of a private asylum at Sandsworth--a man whose integrity is beyond dispute, or he would not be my friend. You understand my motive in saying this?"

Proprietors of private asylums are, in these days, the objects of very general distrust in England. I understood the doctor's motive perfectly.

He proceeded. "Yesterday evening, my friend called upon me, and said that he had a remarkable case in his house, which he believed would interest me. The person to whom he alluded was a French boy, whose mental powers had been imperfectly developed from his childhood. The mischief had been aggravated, when he was about thirteen years old, by a serious fright. When he was placed in my asylum, he was not idiotic, and not dangerously mad--it was a case (not to use technical language) of deficient intelligence, tending sometimes toward acts of unreasoning mischief and petty theft, but never approaching to acts of downright violence. My friend was especially interested in the lad--won his confidence and affection by acts of kindness--and so improved his bodily health as to justify some hope of also improving the state of his mind, when a misfortune occurred which has altered the whole prospect. The poor creature has fallen ill of a fever, and the fever has developed to typhus. So far, there has been little to interest you--I am coming to a remarkable event at last. At the stage of the fever when delirium usually occurs in patients of sound mind, this crazy French boy has become perfectly sane and reasonable!"

I looked at him, when he made this amazing assertion, with a momentary doubt of his being in earnest. Doctor Wybrow understood me.

"Just what I thought, too, when I first heard it!" he said. "My friend was neither offended nor surprised. After inviting me to go to his house, and judge for myself, he referred me to a similar case, publicly cited in the 'Cornhill Magazine,' for the month of April, 1879, in an article entitled 'Bodily Illness as a Mental Stimulant.' The article is published anonymously; but the character of the periodical in which it appears is a sufficient guarantee of the trustworthiness of the statement. I was so far influenced by the testimony thus cited, that I drove to Sandsworth and examined the case myself."

"Did the examination satisfy you?"



"Thoroughly. When I saw him last night, the poor boy was as sane as I am. There is, however, a complication in this instance, which is not mentioned in the case related in print. The boy appears to have entirely forgotten every event in his past life, reckoning from the time when the bodily illness brought with it the strange mental recovery which I have mentioned to you."

This was a disappointment. I had begun to hope for some coming result, obtained by the lad's confession.

"Is it quite correct to call him sane, when his memory is gone?" I ventured to ask.

"In this case there is no necessity to enter into the question," the doctor answered. "The boy's lapse of memory refers, as I told you, to his past life--that is to say, his life when his intellect was deranged. During the extraordinary interval of sanity that has now declared itself, he is putting his mental powers to their first free use; and none of them fail him, so far as I can see. His new memory (if I may call it so) preserves the knowledge of what has happened since his illness. You may imagine how this problem in brain disease interests me; and you will not wonder that I am going back to Sandsworth tomorrow afternoon, when I have done with my professional visits. But you may be reasonably surprised at my troubling you with details which are mainly interesting to a medical man."

Was he about to ask me to go with him to the asylum? I replied very briefly, merely saying that the details were interesting to every student of human nature. If he could have felt my pulse at that moment, I am afraid he might have thought I was in a fair way of catching the fever too.

"Prepare yourself," he resumed, "for another surprising circumstance. Mr. Winterfield is, by some incomprehensible accident, associated with

one of the mischievous tricks played by the French boy, before he was placed under my friend's care. There, at any rate, is the only explanation by which we can account for the discovery of an envelope (with inclosures) found sewn up in the lining of the lad's waistcoat, and directed to Mr. Winterfield--without any place of address."

I leave you to imagine the effect which those words produced on me.

"Now," said the doctor, "you will understand why I put such strange questions to you. My friend and I are both hard-working men. We go very little into society, as the phrase is; and neither he nor I had ever heard the name of Winterfield. As a certain proportion of my patients happen to be people with a large experience of society, I undertook to make inquiries, so that the packet might be delivered, if possible, to the right person. You heard how Mrs. Eyrecourt (surely a likely lady to assist me?) received my unlucky reference to the madhouse; and you saw how I puzzled Sir John. I consider myself most fortunate, Father Benwell, in having had the honor of meeting you. Will you accompany me to the asylum to-morrow? And can you add to the favor by bringing Mr. Winterfield with you?"

This last request it was out of my power--really out of my power--to grant. Winterfield had left London that morning on his visit to Paris. His address there was, thus far, not known to me.

"Well, you must represent your friend," the doctor said. "Time is every way of importance in this case. Will you kindly call here at five to-morrow afternoon?"

I was punctual to my appointment. We drove together to the asylum.

There is no need for me to trouble you with a narrative of what I saw-- favored by Doctor Wybrow's introduction--at the French boy's bedside. It was simply a repetition of what I had already heard. There he lay, at the height of the fever, asking, in the intervals of relief, intelligent questions relating to the medicines administered to him; and perfectly understanding the answers. He was only irritable when we asked him to take his memory back to the time before his illness; and then he answered in French, "I haven't got a memory."

But I have something else to tell you, which is deserving of your best attention. The envelope and its inclosures (addressed to "Bernard Winterfield, Esqre.") are in my possession. The Christian name sufficiently identifies the inscription with the Winterfield whom I know.

The circumstances under which the discovery was made were related to me by the proprietor of the asylum.

When the boy was brought to the house, two French ladies (his mother and sister) accompanied him and mentioned what had been their own domestic experience of the case. They described the wandering propensities which took the lad away from home, and the odd concealment of his waistcoat, on the last occasion when he had returned from one of his vagrant outbreaks.

On his first night at the asylum, he became excited by finding himself in a strange place. It was necessary to give him a composing draught. On going to bed, he was purposely not prevented from hiding his waistcoat under the pillow, as usual.

When the sedative had produced its effect, the attendant easily possessed himself of the hidden garment. It was the plain duty of the master of the house to make sure that nothing likely to be turned to evil

uses was concealed by a patient. The seal which had secured the envelope was found, on examination, to have been broken.

"I would not have broken the seal myself," our host added. "But, as things were, I thought it my duty to look at the inclosures. They refer to private affairs of Mr. Winterfield, in which he is deeply interested, and they ought to have been long since placed in his possession. I need hardly say that I consider myself bound to preserve the strictest silence as to what I have read. An envelope, containing some blank sheets of paper, was put back in the boy's waistcoat, so that he might feel it in its place under the lining, when he woke. The original envelope and inclosures (with a statement of circumstances signed by my assistant and myself) have been secured under another cover, sealed with my own seal. I have done my best to discover Mr. Bernard Winterfield. He appears not to live in London. At least I failed to find his name in the Directory. I wrote next, mentioning what had happened, to the English gentleman to whom I send reports of the lad's health. He couldn't help me. A second letter to the French ladies only produced the same result. I own I should be glad to get rid of my responsibility on honorable terms."

All this was said in the boy's presence. He lay listening to it as if it had been a story told of some one else. I could not resist the useless desire to question him. Not speaking French myself (although I can read the language), I asked Doctor Wybrow and his friend to interpret for me.

My questions led to nothing. The French boy knew no more about the stolen envelope than I did.

There was no discoverable motive, mind, for suspecting him of imposing on us. When I said, "Perhaps you stole it?" he answered quite composedly, "Very likely; they tell me I have been mad; I don't remember it myself; but mad people do strange things." I tried him again. "Or, perhaps, you took it away out of mischief?" "Yes." "And you broke the seal, and looked at the papers?" "I dare say." "And then you kept them hidden, thinking they might be of some use to you? Or perhaps feeling

ashamed of what you had done, and meaning to restore them if you got the opportunity?" "You know best, sir." The same result followed when we tried to find out where he had been, and what people had taken care of him, during his last vagrant escape from home. It was a new revelation to him that he had been anywhere. With evident interest, he applied to us to tell him where he had wandered to, and what people he had seen!

So our last attempts at enlightenment ended. We came to the final question of how to place the papers, with the least possible loss of time, in Mr. Winterfield's hands.

His absence in Paris having been mentioned, I stated plainly my own position toward him at the present time.

"Mr. Winterfield has made an appointment with me to call at his hotel, on his return to London," I said. "I shall probably be the first friend who sees him. If you will trust me with your sealed packet, in consideration of these circumstances, I will give you a formal receipt for it in Doctor Wybrow's presence--and I will add any written pledge that you may require on my part, acting as Mr. Winterfield's representative and friend. Perhaps you would like a reference as well?"

He made a courteous reply. "A friend of Dr. Wybrow's," he said, "requires no other reference."

"Excuse me," I persisted. "I had the honor of meeting Doctor Wybrow, for the first time, yesterday. Permit me to refer you to Lord Loring, who has long known me as his spiritual director and friend."

This account of myself settled the matter. I drew out the necessary securities--and I have all the papers lying before me on my desk at this moment.

You remember how seals were broken, and impressed again, at the Roman post-office, in the revolutionary days when we were both young men? Thanks to the knowledge then obtained, the extraordinary events which once associated Mr. Winterfield and Miss Eyrecourt are at last plainly revealed to me. Copies of the papers are in my possession, and the originals are sealed again, with the crest of the proprietor of the asylum, as if nothing had happened. I make no attempt to excuse myself. You know our motto:--THE END JUSTIFIES THE MEANS.

I don't propose to make any premature use of the information which I have obtained. The first and foremost necessity, as I have already reminded you, is to give Penrose the undisturbed opportunity of completing the conversion of Romayne. During this interval, my copies of the papers are at the disposal of my reverend brethren at headquarters.

\*\*\*\*\*

THE STOLEN PAPERS.--(COPIES.)

Number One.--From Emma Winterfield to Bernard Winterfield.

4 Maidwell Buildings, Belhaven.

How shall I address you? Dear Bernard, or Sir? It doesn't matter. I am going to do one of the few good actions of my life: and familiarities or formalities matter nothing to a woman who lies on her deathbed.

Yes--I have met with another accident. Shortly after the date of our separation, you heard, I think, of the fall in the circus that fractured my

skull? On that occasion, a surgical operation, and a bit of silver plate in place of the bone, put me right again. This time it has been the kick of a horse, in the stables. Some internal injury is the consequence. I may die to-morrow, or live till next week. Anyway--the doctor has confessed it--my time has come.

Mind one thing. The drink--that vile habit which lost me your love and banished me from your house--the drink is not to blame for this last misfortune. Only the day before it happened I had taken the pledge, under persuasion of the good rector here, the Reverend Mr. Fennick. It is he who has brought me to make this confession, and who takes it down in writing at my bedside. Do you remember how I once hated the very name of a parson--and when you proposed, in joke, to marry me before the registrar, how I took it in downright earnest, and kept you to your word? We poor horse-riders and acrobats only knew clergymen as the worst enemies we had--always using their influence to keep the people out of our show, and the bread out of our mouths. If I had met with Mr. Fennick in my younger days, what a different woman I might have been!

Well, regrets of that kind are useless now. I am truly sorry, Bernard, for the evil that I have done to you; and I ask your pardon with a contrite heart.

You will at least allow it in my favor that your drunken wife knew she was unworthy of you. I refused to accept the allowance that you offered to me. I respected your name. For seven years from the time of our separation I returned to my profession under an assumed name and never troubled you. The one thing I could not do was to forget you. If you were infatuated by my unlucky beauty, I loved devotedly on my side. The well-born gentleman who had sacrificed everything for my sake, was something more than mortal in my estimation; he was--no! I won't shock the good man who writes this by saying what he was. Besides, what do you care for my thoughts of you now?

If you had only been content to remain as I left you--or if I had not found out that you were in love with Miss Eyrecourt, and were likely to marry her, in the belief that death had released you from me--I should have lived and died, doing you no other injury than the first great injury of consenting to be your wife.

But I made the discovery--it doesn't matter how. Our circus was in Devonshire at the time. My jealous rage maddened me, and I had a wicked admirer in a man who was old enough to be my father. I let him suppose that the way to my favor lay through helping my revenge on the woman who was about to take my place. He found the money to have you watched at home and abroad; he put the false announcement of my death in the daily newspapers, to complete your delusion; he baffled the inquiries made through your lawyers to obtain positive proof of my death. And last, and (in those wicked days) best service of all he took me to Brussels and posted me at the door of the English church, so that your lawful wife (with her marriage certificate in her hand) was the first person who met you and the mock Mrs. Winterfield on your way from the altar to the wedding breakfast.

I own it, to my shame. I triumphed in the mischief I had done.

But I had deserved to suffer; and I did suffer, when I heard that Miss Eyrecourt's mother and her two friends took her away from you--with her own entire approval--at the church door, and restored her to society, without a stain on her reputation. How the Brussels marriage was kept a secret, I could not find out. And when I threatened them with exposure, I got a lawyer's letter, and was advised in my own interests to hold my tongue. The rector has since told me that your marriage to Miss Eyrecourt could be lawfully declared null and void, and that the circumstances would excuse you, before any judge in England. I can now well understand that people, with rank and money to help them, can avoid exposure to which the poor, in their places, must submit.

One more duty (the last) still remains to be done.



I declare solemnly, on my deathbed, that you acted in perfect good faith when you married Miss Eyrecourt. You have not only been a man cruelly injured by me, but vilely insulted and misjudged by the two Eyrecourts, and by the lord and lady who encouraged them to set you down as a villain guilty of heartless and shameless deceit.

It is my conviction that these people might have done more than misinterpret your honorable submission to the circumstances in which you were placed. They might have prosecuted you for bigamy--if they could have got me to appear against you. I am comforted when I remember that I did make some small amends. I kept out of their way and yours, from that day to this.

I am told that I owe it to you to leave proof of my death behind me.

When the doctor writes my certificate, he will mention the mark by which I may be identified, if this reaches you (as I hope and believe it will) between the time of my death and my burial. The rector, who will close and seal these lines, as soon as the breath is out of my body, will add what he can to identify me; and the landlady of this house is ready to answer any questions that may be put to her. This time you may be really assured that you are free. When I am buried, and they show you my nameless grave in the churchyard, I know your kind heart--I die, Bernard, in the firm belief that you will forgive me.

There was one thing more that I had to ask of you, relating to a poor lost creature who is in the room with us at this moment. But, oh, I am so weary! Mr. Fennick will tell you what it is. Say to yourself sometimes--perhaps when you have married some lady who is worthy of you--There was good as well as bad in poor Emma. Farewell.

Number Two--From The Rev. Charles Fennick to Bernard Winterfield.

The Rectory, Belhaven.

Sir--It is my sad duty to inform you that Mrs. Emma Winterfield died this morning, a little before five o'clock. I will add no comment of mine to the touching language in which she has addressed you. God has, I most sincerely believe, accepted the poor sinner's repentance. Her contrite spirit is at peace, among the forgiven ones in the world beyond the grave.

In consideration of her wish that you should see her in death, the coffin will be kept open until the last moment. The medical man in attendance has kindly given me a copy of his certificate, which I inclose. You will see that the remains are identified by the description of a small silver plate on the right parietal bone of the skull.

I need hardly add that all the information I can give you is willingly at your service.

She mentions, poor soul, something which she had to ask of you. I prefer the request which, in her exhausted state, she was unable to address to you in her own words.

While the performances of the circus were taking place in the next county to ours, a wandering lad, evidently of deficient intelligence, was discovered, trying to creep under the tent to see what was going on. He could give no intelligible account of himself. The late Mrs. Winterfield (who was born and brought up, as I understand, in France) discovered that the boy was French, and felt interested in the unfortunate creature, from former happy association with kind friends of his nation. She took care of him from that time to the day of her death--and he appeared to be gratefully attached to her.

I say "appeared," because an inveterate reserve marks one of the peculiarities of the mental affliction from which he suffers. Even his benefactress never could persuade him to take her into his confidence. In other respects, her influence (so far as I can learn) had been successfully exerted in restraining certain mischievous propensities in him, which occasionally showed themselves. The effect of her death has been to intensify that reserve to which I have already alluded. He is sullen and irritable--and the good landlady at the lodgings does not disguise that she shrinks from taking care of him, even for a few days. Until I hear from you, he will remain under the charge of my housekeeper at the rectory.

You have, no doubt, anticipated the request which the poor sufferer wished to address to you but a few hours before her death. She hoped that you might be willing to place this friendless and helpless creature under competent protection. Failing your assistance, I shall have no alternative, however I may regret it, but to send him to the workhouse of this town, on his way, probably, to the public asylum.

Believe me, sir, your faithful servant,

CHARLES FENNICK.

P.S.--I fear my letter and its inclosures may be delayed in reaching you.

Yesterday evening, I had returned to my house, before it occurred to me that Mrs. Winterfield had not mentioned your address. My only excuse for this forgetfulness is, that I was very much distressed while I was writing by her bedside. I at once went back to the lodgings, but she had fallen asleep, and I dared not disturb her. This morning, when I returned to the house, she was dead. There is an allusion to Devonshire in her letter, which suggests that your residence may be in that county; and I think she once spoke of you as a person of rank and fortune. Having

failed to find your name in a London Directory, I am now about to search our free library here for a county history of Devon, on the chance that it may assist me. Let me add, for your own satisfaction, that no eyes but mine will see these papers. For security's sake, I shall seal them at once, and write your name on the envelope.

Added by Father Benwell.

How the boy contrived to possess himself of the sealed packet we shall probably never discover. Anyhow, we know that he must have escaped from the rectory, with the papers in his possession, and that he did certainly get back to his mother and sister in London.

With such complete information as I now have at my disposal, the prospect is as clear again as we can desire. The separation of Romayne from his wife, and the alteration of his will in favor of the Church, seem to be now merely questions of time.