

BOOK THE FOURTH.

CHAPTER I - THE BREACH IS WIDENED.

A FORTNIGHT after Father Benwell's discovery, Stella followed her husband one morning into his study. "Have you heard from Mr. Penrose?" she inquired.

"Yes. He will be here to-morrow."

"To make a long visit?"

"I hope so. The longer the better."

She looked at him with a mingled expression of surprise and reproach. "Why do you say that?" she asked. "Why do you want him so much-- when you have got Me?"

Thus far, he had been sitting at his desk, resting his head on his hand, with his downcast eyes fixed on an open book. When she put her last question to him he suddenly looked up. Through the large window at his side the morning light fell on his face. The haggard look of suffering, which Stella remembered on the day when they met on the deck of the steamboat, was again visible--not softened and chastened now by the touching resignation of the bygone time, but intensified by the dogged

and despairing endurance of a man weary of himself and his life. Her heart ached for him. She said, softly: "I don't mean to reproach you."

"Are you jealous of Penrose?" he asked, with a bitter smile.

She desperately told him the truth. "I am afraid of Penrose," she answered.

He eyed her with a strange expression of suspicious surprise. "Why are you afraid of Penrose?"

It was no time to run the risk of irritating him. The torment of the Voice had returned in the past night. The old gnawing remorse of the fatal day of the duel had betrayed itself in the wild words that had escaped him, when he sank into a broken slumber as the morning dawned. Feeling the truest pity for him, she was still resolute to assert herself against the coming interference of Penrose. She tried her ground by a dangerous means--the means of an indirect reply.

"I think you might have told me," she said, "that Mr. Penrose was a Catholic priest."

He looked down again at his book. "How did you know Penrose was a Catholic priest?"

"I had only to look at the direction on your letters to him."

"Well, and what is there to frighten you in his being a priest? You told me at the Loring's ball that you took an interest in Penrose because I liked him."

"I didn't know then, Lewis, that he had concealed his profession from us. I can't help distrusting a man who does that."

He laughed--not very kindly. "You might as well say you distrust a man who conceals that he is an author, by writing an anonymous book. What Penrose did, he did under orders from his superior--and, moreover, he frankly owned to me that he was a priest. If you blame anybody, you had better blame me for respecting his confidence."

She drew back from him, hurt by the tone in which he spoke to her. "I remember the time, Lewis," she said, "when you would have been more indulgent toward my errors--even if I am wrong."

That simple appeal touched his better nature. "I don't mean to be hard on you, Stella," he answered. "It is a little irritating to hear you say that you distrust the most devoted and most affectionate friend that man ever had. Why can't I love my wife, and love my friend, too? You don't know, when I am trying to get on with my book, how I miss the help and sympathy of Penrose. The very sound of his voice used to encourage me. Come, Stella, give me a kiss--and let us, as the children say, make it up!"

He rose from his writing-table. She met him more than half way, and pressed all her love--and perhaps a little of her fear--on his lips. He returned the kiss as warmly as it was given; and then, unhappily for both of them, he went back to the subject.

"My own love," he said, "try to like my friend for my sake; and be tolerant of other forms of Christianity besides the form which happens to be yours."

Her smiling lips closed; she turned from him. With the sensitive selfishness of a woman's love, she looked on Penrose as a robber who had stolen the sympathies which should have been wholly hers. As she moved away, her quick observation noticed the open book on the desk, with notes and lines in pencil on the margin of the page. What had Romaine been reading which interested him in that way? If he had remained silent, she would have addressed the inquiry to him openly. But he was hurt on his side by the sudden manner of her withdrawal from him. He spoke--and his tone was colder than ever.

"I won't attempt to combat your prejudices," he said. "But one thing I must seriously ask of you. When my friend Penrose comes here tomorrow, don't treat him as you treated Mr. Winterfield."

There was a momentary paleness in her face which looked like fear, but it passed away again. She confronted him firmly with steady eyes.

"Why do you refer again to that?" she asked. "Is--" (she hesitated and recovered herself)--"Is Mr. Winterfield another devoted friend of yours?"

He walked to the door, as if he could hardly trust his temper if he answered her--stopped--and, thinking better of it, turned toward her again.

"We won't quarrel, Stella," he rejoined; "I will only say I am sorry you don't appreciate my forbearance. Your reception of Mr. Winterfield has lost me the friendship of a man whom I sincerely liked, and who might have assisted my literary labors. You were ill at the time, and anxious about Mrs. Eyrecourt. I respected your devotion to your mother. I remembered your telling me, when you first went away to nurse her, that your conscience accused you of having sometimes thoughtlessly neglected your mother in her days of health and good spirits, and I admired the motive of atonement which took you to her bedside. For

those reasons I shrank from saying a word that might wound you. But, because I was silent, it is not the less true that you surprised and disappointed me. Don't do it again! Whatever you may privately think of Catholic priests, I once more seriously request you not to let Penrose see it."

He left the room.

She stood, looking after him as he closed the door, like a woman thunderstruck. Never yet had he looked at her as he looked when he spoke his last warning words. With a heavy sigh she roused herself. The vague dread with which his tone rather than his words had inspired her, strangely associated itself with the momentary curiosity which she had felt on noticing the annotated book that lay on his desk.

She snatched up the volume and looked at the open page. It contained the closing paragraphs of an eloquent attack on Protestantism, from the Roman Catholic point of view. With trembling hands she turned back to the title-page. It presented this written inscription: "To Lewis Romaine from his attached friend and servant, Arthur Penrose."

"God help me!" she said to herself; "the priest has got between us already!"