

CHAPTER II - A CHRISTIAN JESUIT.

ON the next day Penrose arrived on his visit to Romaine.

The affectionate meeting between the two men tested Stella's self-control as it had never been tried yet. She submitted to the ordeal with the courage of a woman whose happiness depended on her outward graciousness of manner toward her husband's friend. Her reception of Penrose, viewed as an act of refined courtesy, was beyond reproach. When she found her opportunity of leaving the room, Romaine gratefully opened the door for her. "Thank you!" he whispered, with a look which was intended to reward her.

She only bowed to him, and took refuge in her own room.

Even in trifles, a woman's nature is degraded by the falsities of language and manner which the artificial condition of modern society exacts from her. When she yields herself to more serious deceptions, intended to protect her dearest domestic interests, the mischief is increased in proportion. Deceit, which is the natural weapon of defense used by the weak creature against the strong, then ceases to be confined within the limits assigned by the sense of self-respect and by the restraints of education. A woman in this position will descend, self-blinded, to acts of meanness which would be revolting to her if they were related of another person.

Stella had already begun the process of self-degradation by writing secretly to Winterfield. It was only to warn him of the danger of trusting Father Benwell--but it was a letter, claiming him as her accomplice in an act of deception. That morning she had received Penrose with the outward cordialities of welcome which are offered to an old and dear friend. And now, in the safe solitude of her room, she had fallen to a

lower depth still. She was deliberately considering the safest means of acquainting herself with the confidential conversation which Romaine and Penrose would certainly hold when she left them together. "He will try to set my husband against me; and I have a right to know what means he uses, in my own defense." With that thought she reconciled herself to an action which she would have despised if she had heard of it as the action of another woman.

It was a beautiful autumn day, brightened by clear sunshine, enlivened by crisp air. Stella put on her hat and went out for a stroll in the grounds.

While she was within view from the windows of the servants' offices she walked away from the house. Turning the corner of a shrubbery, she entered a winding path, on the other side, which led back to the lawn under Romaine's study window. Garden chairs were placed here and there. She took one of them, and seated herself--after a last moment of honorable hesitation--where she could hear the men's voices through the open window above her.

Penrose was speaking at the time.

"Yes. Father Benwell has granted me a holiday," he said; "but I don't come here to be an idle man. You must allow me to employ my term of leave in the pleasantest of all ways. I mean to be your secretary again."

Romaine sighed. "Ah, if you knew how I have missed you!"

(Stella waited, in breathless expectation, for what Penrose would say to this. Would he speak of her? No. There was a natural tact and delicacy in him which waited for the husband to introduce the subject.)

Penrose only said, "How is the great work getting on?"

The answer was sternly spoken in one word--"Badly!"

"I am surprised to hear that, Romaine."

"Why? Were you as innocently hopeful as I was? Did you expect my experience of married life to help me in writing my book?"

Penrose replied after a pause, speaking a little sadly. "I expected your married life to encourage you in all your highest aspirations," he said.

(Stella turned pale with suppressed anger. He had spoken with perfect sincerity. The unhappy woman believed that he lied, for the express purpose of rousing irritation against her, in her husband's irritable mind. She listened anxiously for Romaine's answer.)

He made no answer. Penrose changed the subject. "You are not looking very well," he gently resumed. "I am afraid your health has interfered with your work. Have you had any return--?"

It was still one of the characteristics of Romaine's nervous irritability that he disliked to hear the terrible delusion of the Voice referred to in words. "Yes," he interposed bitterly, "I have heard it again and again. My right hand is as red as ever, Penrose, with the blood of a fellow-creature. Another destruction of my illusions when I married!"

"Romaine! I don't like to hear you speak of your marriage in that way."

"Oh, very well. Let us go back to my book. Perhaps I shall get on better with it now you are here to help me. My ambition to make a name in the world has never taken so strong a hold on me (I don't know why, unless other disappointments have had something to do with it) as at this time, when I find I can't give my mind to my work. We will make a last effort together, my friend! If it fails, we will put my manuscripts into the fire, and I will try some other career. Politics are open to me. Through politics, I might make my mark in diplomacy. There is something in directing the destinies of nations wonderfully attractive to me in my present state of feeling. I hate the idea of being indebted for my position in the world, like the veriest fool living, to the accidents of birth and fortune. Are you content with the obscure life that you lead? Did you not envy that priest (he is no older than I am) who was sent the other day as the Pope's ambassador to Portugal?"

Penrose spoke out at last without hesitation. "You are in a thoroughly unwholesome state of mind," he said.

Romayne laughed recklessly. "When was I ever in a healthy state of mind?" he asked.

Penrose passed the interruption over without notice. "If I am to do you any good," he resumed, "I must know what is really the matter with you. The very last question that I ought to put, and that I wish to put, is the question which you force me to ask."

"What is it?"

"When you speak of your married life," said Penrose, "your tone is the tone of a disappointed man. Have you any serious reason to complain of Mrs. Romayne?"

(Stella rose to her feet, in her eagerness to hear what her husband's answer would be.)

"Serious reason?" Romaine repeated. "How can such an idea have entered your head? I only complain of irritating trifles now and then. Even the best of women is not perfect. It's hard to expect it from any of them."

(The interpretation of this reply depended entirely on the tone in which it was spoken. What was the animating spirit in this case? Irony or Indulgence? Stella was ignorant of the indirect methods of irritation, by means of which Father Benwell had encouraged Romaine's doubts of his wife's motive for the reception of Winterfield. Her husband's tone, expressing this state of mind, was new to her. She sat down again, divided between hope and fear, waiting to hear more. The next words, spoken by Penrose, astounded her. The priest, the Jesuit, the wily spiritual intruder between man and wife, actually took the wife's side!)

"Romaine," he proceeded quietly, "I want you to be happy."

"How am I to be happy?"

"I will try and tell you. I believe your wife to be a good woman. I believe she loves you. There is something in her face that speaks for her--even to an inexperienced person like myself. Don't be impatient with her! Put away from you that besetting temptation to speak in irony--it is so easy to take that tone, and sometimes so cruel. I am only a looker-on, I know. Domestic happiness can never be the happiness of my life. But I have observed my fellow-creatures of all degrees--and this, I tell you, is the result. The largest number of happy men are the husbands and fathers. Yes; I admit that they have terrible anxieties--but they are fortified by unflinching compensations and encouragements. Only the other day I met with a man who had suffered the loss of fortune and, worse still, the loss

of health. He endured those afflictions so calmly that he surprised me. 'What is the secret of your philosophy?' I asked. He answered, 'I can bear anything while I have my wife and my children.' Think of that, and judge for yourself how much happiness you may have left yet ungathered in your married life."

(Those words touched Stella's higher nature, as the dew touches the thirsty ground. Surely they were nobly spoken! How would her husband receive them?)

"I must think with your mind, Penrose, before I can do what you ask of me. Is there any method of transformation by which I can change natures with you?" That was all he said--and he said it despondingly.

Penrose understood, and felt for him.

"If there is anything in my nature, worthy to be set as an example to you," he replied, "you know to what blessed influence I owe self-discipline and serenity of mind. Remember what I said when I left you in London, to go back to my friendless life. I told you that I found, in the Faith I held, the one sufficient consolation which helped me to bear my lot. And--if there came a time of sorrow in the future--I entreated you to remember what I had said. Have you remembered it?"

"Look at the book here on my desk--look at the other books, within easy reach, on that table--are you satisfied?"

"More than satisfied. Tell me--do you feel nearer to an understanding of the Faith to which I have tried to convert you?"

There was a pause. "Say that I do feel nearer," Romaine resumed--"say that some of my objections are removed--are you really as eager as ever to make a Catholic of me, now that I am a married man?"

"I am even more eager," Penrose answered. "I have always believed that your one sure way to happiness lay through your conversion. Now, when I know, from what I have seen and heard in this room, that you are not reconciled, as you should be, to your new life, I am doubly confined in my belief. As God is my witness, I speak sincerely. Hesitate no longer! Be converted, and be happy."

"Have you not forgotten something, Penrose?"

"What have I forgotten?"

"A serious consideration, perhaps. I have a Protestant wife."

"I have borne that in mind, Romaine, throughout our conversation."

"And you still say--what you have just said?"

"With my whole heart, I say it! Be converted, and be happy. Be happy, and you will be a good husband. I speak in your wife's interest as well as in yours. People who are happy in each other's society, will yield a little on either side, even on questions of religious belief. And perhaps there may follow a more profitable result still. So far as I have observed, a good husband's example is gladly followed by his wife. Don't think that I am trying to persuade you against your will! I am only telling you, in my own justification, from what motives of love for yourself, and of true interest in your welfare, I speak. You implied just now that you had still some objections left. If I can remove them--well and good. If I fail--if you cannot

act on purely conscientious conviction--I not only advise, I entreat you, to remain as you are. I shall be the first to acknowledge that you have done right."

(This moderation of tone would appeal irresistibly, as Stella well knew, to her husband's ready appreciation of those good qualities in others which he did not himself possess. Once more her suspicion wronged Penrose. Had he his own interested motives for pleading her cause? At the bare thought of it, she left her chair and, standing under the window, boldly interrupted the conversation by calling to Romaine.)

"Lewis!" she cried, "why do you stay indoors on this beautiful day? I am sure Mr. Penrose would like a walk in the grounds."

Penrose appeared alone at the window. "You are quite right, Mrs. Romaine," he said; "we will join you directly."

In a few minutes he turned the corner of the house, and met Stella on the lawn. Romaine was not with him. "Is my husband not coming with us?" she asked. "He will follow us," Penrose answered. "I believe he has some letters to write."

Stella looked at him, suspecting some underhand exercise of influence on her husband.

If she had been able to estimate the noble qualities in the nature of Penrose, she might have done him the justice to arrive at a truer conclusion. It was he who had asked leave (when Stella had interrupted them) to take the opportunity of speaking alone with Mrs. Romaine. He had said to his friend, "If I am wrong in my anticipation of the effect of your change of religion on your wife, let me find it out from herself. My one object is to act justly toward you and toward her. I should never

forgive myself if I made mischief between you, no matter how innocent of any evil intention I might be." Romaine had understood him. It was Stella's misfortune ignorantly to misinterpret everything that Penrose said or did, for the all-sufficient reason that he was a Catholic priest. She had drawn the conclusion that her husband had deliberately left her alone with Penrose, to be persuaded or deluded into giving her sanction to aid the influence of the priest. "They shall find they are mistaken," she thought to herself.

"Have I interrupted an interesting conversation?" she inquired abruptly. "When I asked you to come out, were you talking to my husband about his historical work?"

"No, Mrs. Romaine; we were not speaking at that time of the book."

"May I ask an odd question, Mr. Penrose?"

"Certainly!"

"Are you a very zealous Catholic?"

"Pardon me. I am a priest. Surely my profession speaks for me?"

"I hope you are not trying to convert my husband?"

Penrose stopped and looked at her attentively.

"Are you strongly opposed to your husband's conversion?" he asked.

"As strongly," she answered, "as a woman can be."

"By religious conviction, Mrs. Romaine?"

"No. By experience."

Penrose started. "Is it indiscreet," he said gently, "to inquire what your experience may have been?"

"I will tell you what my experience has been," Stella replied. "I am ignorant of theological subtleties, and questions of doctrine are quite beyond me. But this I do know. A well-meaning and zealous Catholic shortened my father's life, and separated me from an only sister whom I dearly loved. I see I shock you--and I daresay you think I am exaggerating?"

"I hear what you say, Mrs. Romaine, with very great pain--I don't presume to form any opinion thus far."

"My sad story can be told in a few words," Stella proceeded. "When my elder sister was still a young girl, an aunt of ours (my mother's sister) came to stay with us. She had married abroad, and she was, as I have said, a zealous Catholic. Unknown to the rest of us, she held conversations on religion with my sister--worked on the enthusiasm which was part of the girl's nature--and accomplished her conversion. Other influences, of which I know nothing, were afterward brought to bear on my sister. She declared her intention of entering a convent. As she was under age, my father had only to interpose his authority to prevent this. She was his favorite child. He had no heart to restrain her by force--he could only try all that the kindest and best of fathers could do to persuade her to remain at home. Even after the years that have

passed, I cannot trust myself to speak of it composedly. She persisted; she was as hard as stone. My aunt, when she was entreated to interfere, called her heartless obstinacy 'a vocation.' My poor father's loving resistance was worn out; he slowly drew nearer and nearer to death, from the day when she left us. Let me do her justice, if I can. She has not only never regretted entering the convent--she is so happily absorbed in her religious duties that she has not the slightest wish to see her mother or me. My mother's patience was soon worn out. The last time I went to the convent, I went by myself. I shall never go there again. She could not conceal her sense of relief when I took my leave of her. I need say no more. Arguments are thrown away on me, Mr. Penrose, after what I have seen and felt. I have no right to expect that the consideration of my happiness will influence you--but I may perhaps ask you, as a gentleman, to tell me the truth. Do you come here with the purpose of converting my husband?"

Penrose owned the truth, without an instant's hesitation.

"I cannot take your view of your sister's pious devotion of herself to a religious life," he said. "But I can, and will, answer you truly. From the time when I first knew him, my dearest object has been to convert your husband to the Catholic Faith."

Stella drew back from him, as if he had stung her, and clasped her hands in silent despair.

"But I am bound as a Christian," he went on, "to do to others as I would they should do to me."

She turned on him suddenly, her beautiful face radiant with hope, her hand trembling as it caught him by the arm.

"Speak plainly!" she cried.

He obeyed her to the letter.

"The happiness of my friend's wife, Mrs. Romaine, is sacred to me for his sake. Be the good angel of your husband's life. I abandon the purpose of converting him."

He lifted her hand from his arm and raised it respectfully to his lips. Then, when he had bound himself by a promise that was sacred to him, the terrible influence of the priesthood shook even that brave and lofty soul. He said to himself, as he left her, "God forgive me if I have done wrong!"