

CHAPTER III - WINTERFIELD RETURNS.

TWICE Father Benwell called at Derwent's Hotel, and twice he was informed that no news had been received there of Mr. Winterfield. At the third attempt, his constancy was rewarded. Mr. Winterfield had written, and was expected to arrive at the hotel by five o'clock.

It was then half-past four. Father Benwell decided to await the return of his friend.

He was as anxious to deliver the papers which the proprietor of the asylum had confided to him, as if he had never broken a seal or used a counterfeit to hide the betrayal of a trust. The re-sealed packet was safe in the pocket of his long black frockcoat. His own future proceedings depended, in some degree, on the course which Winterfield might take, when he had read the confession of the unhappy woman who had once been his wife.

Would he show the letter to Stella, at a private interview, as an unanswerable proof that she had cruelly wronged him? And would it in this case be desirable--if the thing could be done--so to handle circumstances as that Romaine might be present, unseen, and might discover the truth for himself? In the other event--that is to say, if Winterfield abstained from communicating the confession to Stella--the responsibility of making the necessary disclosure must remain with the priest.

Father Benwell walked softly up and down the room, looking about him with quietly-observant eye. A side table in a corner was covered with letters, waiting Winterfield's return. Always ready for information of any sort, he even looked at the addresses on the letters.

The handwritings presented the customary variety of character. All but three of the envelopes showed the London district postmarks. Two of the other letters (addressed to Winterfield at his club) bore foreign postmarks; and one, as the altered direction showed, had been forward from Beaupark House to the hotel.

This last letter especially attracted the priest's attention.

The address was apparently in a woman's handwriting. And it was worthy of remark that she appeared to be the only person among Winterfield's correspondents who was not acquainted with the address of his hotel or of his club. Who could the person be? The subtly inquiring intellect of Father Benwell amused itself by speculating even on such a trifling problem as this. He little thought that he had a personal interest in the letter. The envelope contained Stella's warning to Winterfield to distrust no less a person than Father Benwell himself!

It was nearly half-past five before quick footsteps were audible outside. Winterfield entered the room.

"This is friendly indeed!" he said. "I expected to return to the worst of all solitudes--solitude in a hotel. You will stay and dine with me? That's right. You must have thought I was going to settle in Paris. Do you know what has kept me so long? The most delightful theater in the world--the Opera Comique. I am so fond of the bygone school of music, Father Benwell--the flowing graceful delicious melodies of the composers who followed Mozart. One can only enjoy that music in Paris. Would you believe that I waited a week to hear Nicolo's delightful Joconde for the second time. I was almost the only young man in the stalls. All round me were the old men who remembered the first performances of the opera, beating time with their wrinkled hands to the tunes which were associated with the happiest days of their lives. What's that I hear? My dog! I was obliged to leave him here, and he knows I have come back!"

He flew to the door and called down the stairs to have the dog set free. The spaniel rushed into the room and leaped into his master's outstretched arms. Winterfield returned his caresses, and kisses him as tenderly as a woman might have kissed her pet.

"Dear old fellow! it's a shame to have left you--I won't do it again. Father Benwell, have you many friends who would be as glad to see you as this friend? I haven't one. And there are fools who talk of a dog as an inferior being to ourselves! This creature's faithful love is mine, do what I may. I might be disgraced in the estimation of every human creature I know, and he would be as true to me as ever. And look at his physical qualities. What an ugly thing, for instance--I won't say your ear--I will say, my ear is; crumpled and wrinkled and naked. Look at the beautiful silky covering of his ear! What are our senses of smelling and hearing compared to his? We are proud of our reason. Could we find our way back, if they shut us up in a basket, and took us to a strange place away from home? If we both want to run downstairs in a hurry, which of us is securest against breaking his neck--I on my poor two legs, or he on his four? Who is the happy mortal who goes to bed without unbuttoning, and gets up again without buttoning? Here he is, on my lap, knowing I am talking about him, and too fond of me to say to himself, 'What a fool my master is!'"

Father Benwell listened to this rhapsody--so characteristic of the childish simplicity of the man--with an inward sense of impatience, which never once showed itself on the smiling surface of his face.

He had decided not to mention the papers in his pocket until some circumstance occurred which might appear to remind him naturally that he had such things about him. If he showed any anxiety to produce the envelope, he might expose himself to the suspicion of having some knowledge of the contents. When would Winterfield notice the side table, and open his letters?

The tick-tick of the clock on the mantel-piece steadily registered the progress of time, and Winterfield's fantastic attentions were still lavished on his dog.

Even Father Benwell's patience was sorely tried when the good country gentleman proceeded to mention not only the spaniel's name, but the occasion which had suggested it. "We call him Traveler, and I will tell you why. When he was only a puppy he strayed into the garden at Beaupark, so weary and footsore that we concluded he had come to us from a great distance. We advertised him, but he was never claimed--and here he is! If you don't object, we will give Traveler a treat to-day. He shall have dinner with us."

Perfectly understanding those last words, the dog jumped off his master's lap, and actually forwarded the views of Father Benwell in less than a minute more. Scampering round and round the room, as an appropriate expression of happiness, he came into collision with the side table and directed Winterfield's attention to the letters by scattering them on the floor.

Father Benwell rose politely, to assist in picking up the prostrate correspondence. But Traveler was beforehand with him. Warning the priest, with a low growl, not to interfere with another person's business, the dog picked up the letters in his mouth, and carried them by installments to his master's feet. Even then, the exasperating Winterfield went no further than patting Traveler. Father Benwell's endurance reached its limits. "Pray don't stand on ceremony with me," he said. "I will look at the newspaper while you read your letters."

Winterfield carelessly gathered the letters together, tossed them on the dining table at his side, and took the uppermost one of the little heap.

Fate was certainly against the priest on that evening. The first letter that Winterfield opened led him off to another subject of conversation before he had read it to the end. Father Benwell's hand, already in his coat pocket, appeared again--empty.

"Here's a proposal to me to go into Parliament," said the Squire. "What do you think of representative institutions, Father Benwell? To my mind, representative institutions are on their last legs. Honorable Members vote away more of our money every year. They have no alternative between suspending liberty of speech, or sitting helpless while half a dozen impudent idiots stop the progress of legislation from motives of the meanest kind. And they are not even sensitive enough to the national honor to pass a social law among themselves which makes it as disgraceful in a gentleman to buy a seat by bribery as to cheat at cards. I declare I think the card-sharper the least degraded person of the two. He doesn't encourage his inferiors to be false to a public trust. In short, my dear sir, everything wears out in this world--and why should the House of Commons be an exception to the rule?"

He picked up the next letter from the heap. As he looked at the address, his face changed. The smile left his lips, the gayety died out of his eyes. Traveler, entreating for more notice with impatient forepaws applied to his master's knees, saw the alteration, and dropped into a respectfully recumbent position. Father Benwell glanced sidelong off the columns of the newspaper, and waited for events with all the discretion, and none of the good faith, of the dog.

"Forwarded from Beaupark," Winterfield said to himself. He opened the letter--read it carefully to the end--thought over it--and read it again.

"Father Benwell!" he said suddenly.

The priest put down the newspaper. For a few moments more nothing was audible but the steady tick-tick of the clock.

"We have not been very long acquainted," Winterfield resumed. "But our association has been a pleasant one, and I think I owe to you the duty of a friend. I don't belong to your Church; but I hope you will believe me when I say that ignorant prejudice against the Catholic priesthood is not one of my prejudices."

Father Benwell bowed, in silence.

"You are mentioned," Winterfield proceeded, "in the letter which I have just read."

"Are you at liberty to tell me the name of your correspondent?" Father Benwell asked.

"I am not at liberty to do that. But I think it due to you, and to myself, to tell you what the substance of the letter is. The writer warns me to be careful in my intercourse with you. Your object (I am told) is to make yourself acquainted with events in my past life, and you have some motive which my correspondent has thus far failed to discover. I speak plainly, but I beg you to understand that I also speak impartially. I condemn no man unheard--least of all, a man whom I have had the honor of receiving under my own roof."

He spoke with a certain simple dignity. With equal dignity, Father Benwell answered. It is needless to say that he now knew Winterfield's correspondent to be Romaine's wife.

"Let me sincerely thank you, Mr. Winterfield, for a candor which does honor to us both," he said. "You will hardly expect me--if I may use such an expression--to condescend to justify myself against an accusation which is an anonymous accusation so far as I am concerned. I prefer to meet that letter by a plain proof; and I leave you to judge whether I am still worthy of the friendship to which you have so kindly alluded."

With this preface he briefly related the circumstances under which he had become possessed of the packet, and then handed it to Winterfield--with the seal uppermost.

"Decide for yourself," he concluded, "whether a man bent on prying into your private affairs, with that letter entirely at his mercy, would have been true to the trust reposed in him."

He rose and took his hat, ready to leave the room, if his honor was profaned by the slightest expression of distrust. Winterfield's genial and unsuspecting nature instantly accepted the offered proof as conclusive. "Before I break the seal," he said, "let me do you justice. Sit down again, Father Benwell, and forgive me if my sense of duty has hurried me into hurting your feelings. No man ought to know better than I do how often people misjudge and wrong each other."

They shook hands cordially. No moral relief is more eagerly sought than relief from the pressure of a serious explanation. By common consent, they now spoke as lightly as if nothing had happened. Father Benwell set the example.

"You actually believe in a priest!" he said gayly. "We shall make a good Catholic of you yet."

"Don't be too sure of that," Winterfield replied, with a touch of his quaint humor. "I respect the men who have given to humanity the inestimable blessing of quinine--to say nothing of preserving learning and civilization--but I respect still more my own liberty as a free Christian."

"Perhaps a free thinker, Mr. Winterfield?"

"Anything you like to call it, Father Benwell, so long as it is free."

They both laughed. Father Benwell went back to his newspaper. Winterfield broke the seal of the envelope and took out the inclosures.

The confession was the first of the papers at which he happened to look. At the opening lines he turned pale. He read more, and his eyes filled with tears. In low broken tones he said to the priest, "You have innocently brought me most distressing news. I entreat your pardon if I ask to be left alone."

Father Benwell said a few well-chosen words of sympathy, and immediately withdrew. The dog licked his master's hand, hanging listlessly over the arm of the chair.

Later in the evening, a note from Winterfield was left by messenger at the priest's lodgings. The writer announced, with renewed expressions of regret, that he would be again absent from London on the next day, but that he hoped to return to the hotel and receive his guest on the evening of the day after.

Father Benwell rightly conjectured that Winterfield's destination was the town in which his wife had died.

His object in taking the journey was not, as the priest supposed, to address inquiries to the rector and the landlady, who had been present at the fatal illness and the death--but to justify his wife's last expression of belief in the mercy and compassion of the man whom she had injured. On that "nameless grave," so sadly and so humbly referred to in the confession, he had resolved to place a simple stone cross, giving to her memory the name which she had shrunk from profaning in her lifetime. When he had written the brief inscription which recorded the death of "Emma, wife of Bernard Winterfield," and when he had knelt for a while by the low turf mound, his errand had come to its end. He thanked the good rector; he left gifts with the landlady and her children, by which he was gratefully remembered for many a year afterward; and then, with a heart relieved, he went back to London.

Other men might have made their sad little pilgrimage alone. Winterfield took his dog with him. "I must have something to love," he said to the rector, "at such a time as this."