

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

To the Secretary, S. J., Rome.

WHEN I wrote last, I hardly thought I should trouble you again so soon. The necessity has, however, arisen. I must ask for instructions, from our Most Reverend General, on the subject of Arthur Penrose.

I believe that I informed you that I decided to defer my next visit to Ten Acres Lodge for two or three days, in order that Winterfield (if he intended to do so) might have time to communicate with Mrs. Romaine, after his return from the country. Naturally enough, perhaps, considering the delicacy of the subject, he has not taken me into his confidence. I can only guess that he has maintained the same reserve with Mrs. Romaine.

My visit to the Lodge was duly paid this afternoon.

I asked first, of course, for the lady of the house, and hearing she was in the grounds, joined her there. She looked ill and anxious, and she received me with rigid politeness. Fortunately, Mrs. Eyrecourt (now convalescent) was staying at Ten Acres, and was then taking the air in her chair on wheels. The good lady's nimble and discursive tongue offered me an opportunity of referring, in the most innocent manner possible, to Winterfield's favorable opinion of Romaine's pictures. I need hardly say that I looked at Romaine's wife when I mentioned the name. She turned pale--probably fearing that I had some knowledge of her letter warning Winterfield not to trust me. If she had already been informed that he was not to be blamed, but to be pitied, in the matter of the marriage at Brussels, she would have turned red. Such, at least, is my experience, drawn from recollections of other days. \*

The ladies having served my purpose, I ventured into the house, to pay my respects to Romayne.

He was in the study, and his excellent friend and secretary was with him. After the first greetings Penrose left us. His manner told me plainly that there was something wrong. I asked no questions--waiting on the chance that Romayne might enlighten me.

"I hope you are in better spirits, now that you have your old companion with you," I said.

"I am very glad to have Penrose with me," he answered. And then he frowned and looked out of the window at the two ladies in the grounds.

It occurred to me that Mrs. Eyrecourt might be occupying the customary false position of a mother-in-law. I was mistaken. He was not thinking of his wife's mother--he was thinking of his wife.

"I suppose you know that Penrose had an idea of converting me?" he said, suddenly.

I was perfectly candid with him--I said I knew it, and approved of it. "May I hope that Arthur has succeeded in convincing you?" I ventured to add.

"He might have succeeded, Father Benwell, if he had chosen to go on."

This reply, as you may easily imagine, took me by surprise.

"Are you really so obdurate that Arthur despairs of your conversion?" I asked.

"Nothing of the sort! I have thought and thought of it--and I can tell you I was more than ready to meet him half way."

"Then where is the obstacle?" I exclaimed.

He pointed through the window to his wife. "There is the obstacle," he said, in a tone of ironical resignation.

Knowing Arthur's character as I knew it, I at last understood what had happened. For a moment I felt really angry. Under these circumstances, the wise course was to say nothing, until I could be sure of speaking with exemplary moderation. It doesn't do for a man in my position to show anger.

Romayne went on.

"We talked of my wife, Father Benwell, the last time you were here. You only knew, then, that her reception of Mr. Winterfield had determined him never to enter my house again. By way of adding to your information on the subject of 'petticoat government,' I may now tell you that Mrs. Romayne has forbidden Penrose to proceed with the attempt to convert me. By common consent, the subject is never mentioned between us." The bitter irony of his tone, thus far, suddenly disappeared. He spoke eagerly and anxiously. "I hope you are not angry with Arthur?" he said.

By this time my little fit of ill-temper was at an end. I answered--and it was really in a certain sense true--"I know Arthur too well to be angry with him."

Romayne seemed to be relieved. "I only troubled you with this last domestic incident," he resumed, "to bespeak your indulgence for Penrose. I am getting learned in the hierarchy of the Church, Father Benwell! You are the superior of my dear little friend, and you exercise authority over him. Oh, he is the kindest and best of men! It is not his fault. He submits to Mrs. Romayne--against his own better conviction--in the honest belief that he consults the interests of our married life."

I don't think I misinterpret the state of Romayne's mind, and mislead you, when I express my belief that this second indiscreet interference of his wife between his friend and himself will produce the very result which she dreads. Mark my words, written after the closest observation of him--this new irritation of Romayne's sensitive self-respect will hasten his conversion.

You will understand that the one alternative before me, after what has happened, is to fill the place from which Penrose has withdrawn. I abstained from breathing a word of this to Romayne. It is he, if I can manage it, who must invite me to complete the work of conversion--and, besides, nothing can be done until the visit of Penrose has come to an end. Romayne's secret sense of irritation may be safely left to develop itself, with time to help it.

I changed the conversation to the subject of his literary labors.

The present state of his mind is not favorable to work of that exacting kind. Even with the help of Penrose to encourage him, he does not get on to his satisfaction--and yet, as I could plainly perceive, the ambition to make a name in the world exercises a stronger influence over him than ever. All in our favor, my reverend friend--all in our favor!

I took the liberty of asking to see Penrose alone for a moment; and, this request granted, Romaine and I parted cordially. I can make most people like me, when I choose to try. The master of Vange Abbey is no exception to the rule. Did I tell you, by-the-by, that the property has a little declined of late in value? It is now not worth more than six thousand a year. We will improve it when it returns to the Church.

My interview with Penrose was over in two minutes. Dispensing with formality, I took his arm, and led him into the front garden.

"I have heard all about it," I said; "and I must not deny that you have disappointed me. But I know your disposition, and I make allowances. You have qualities, dear Arthur, which perhaps put you a little out of place among us. I shall be obliged to report what you have done--but you may trust me to put it favorably. Shake hands, my son, and, while we are still together, let us be as good friends as ever."

You may think that I spoke in this way with a view to my indulgent language being repeated to Romaine, and so improving the position which I have already gained in his estimation. Do you know, I really believe I meant it at the time! The poor fellow gratefully kissed my hand when I offered it to him--he was not able to speak. I wonder whether I am weak about Arthur? Say a kind word for him, when his conduct comes under notice--but pray don't mention this little frailty of mine; and don't suppose I have any sympathy with his weak-minded submission to Mrs. Romaine's prejudices. If I ever felt the smallest consideration for her (and I cannot call to mind any amiable emotion of that sort), her letter to Winterfield would have effectually extinguished it. There is something quite revolting to me in a deceitful woman.

In closing this letter, I may quiet the minds of our reverend brethren, if I assure them that my former objection to associating myself directly with the conversion of Romaine no longer exists.

Yes! even at my age, and with my habits, I am now resigned to hearing, and confuting, the trivial arguments of a man who is young enough to be my son. I shall write a carefully-guarded letter to Romaine, on the departure of Penrose; and I shall send him a book to read, from the influence of which I expect gratifying results. It is not a controversial work (Arthur has been beforehand with me there)--it is Wiseman's "Recollections of the Popes." I look to that essentially readable book to excite Romaine's imagination, by vivid descriptions of the splendors of the Church, and the vast influence and power of the higher priesthood. Does this sudden enthusiasm of mine surprise you? And are you altogether at a loss to know what it means?

It means, my friend, that I see our position toward Romaine in a new light. Forgive me, if I say no more for the present. I prefer to be silent, until my audacity is justified by events.

\* Father Benwell's experience had, in this case, not misled him. If Stella had remained unmarried, Winterfield might have justified himself. But he was honorably unwilling to disturb her relations with her husband, by satisfying her that he had never been unworthy of the affection which had once united them.