

CHAPTER VI - THE SADDEST OF ALL WORDS.

ON the tenth morning, dating from the dispatch of Father Benwell's last letter to Rome, Penrose was writing in the study at Ten Acres Lodge, while Romaine sat at the other end of the room, looking listlessly at a blank sheet of paper, with the pen lying idle beside it. On a sudden he rose, and, snatching up paper and pen, threw them irritably into the fire.

"Don't trouble yourself to write any longer," he said to Penrose. "My dream is over. Throw my manuscripts into the waste paper basket, and never speak to me of literary work again."

"Every man devoted to literature has these fits of despondency," Penrose answered. "Don't think of your work. Send for your horse, and trust to fresh air and exercise to relieve your mind."

Romaine barely listened. He turned round at the fireplace and studied the reflection of his face in the glass.

"I look worse and worse," he said thoughtfully to himself.

It was true. His flesh had fallen away; his face had withered and whitened; he stooped like an old man. The change for the worse had been steadily proceeding from the time when he left Vange Abbey.

"It's useless to conceal it from me!" he burst out, turning toward Penrose. "I believe I am in some way answerable--though you all deny it--for the French boy's death. Why not? His voice is still in my ears, and the stain of his brother's blood is on me. I am under a spell! Do you believe in the

witches--the merciless old women who made wax images of the people who injured them, and stuck pins in their mock likenesses, to register the slow wasting away of their victims day after day? People disbelieve it in these times, but it has never been disproved." He stopped, looked at Penrose, and suddenly changed his tone. "Arthur! what is the matter with you? Have you had a bad night? Has anything happened?"

For the first time in Romaine's experience of him, Penrose answered evasively.

"Is there nothing to make me anxious," he said, "when I hear you talk as you are talking now? The poor French boy died of a fever. Must I remind you again that he owed the happiest days of his life to you and your good wife?"

Romaine still looked at him without attending to what he said.

"Surely you don't think I am deceiving you?" Penrose remonstrated.

"No; I was thinking of something else. I was wondering whether I really know you as well as I thought I did. Am I mistaken in supposing that you are not an ambitious man?"

"My only ambition is to lead a worthy life, and to be as useful to my fellow-creatures as I can. Does that satisfy you?"

Romaine hesitated. "It seems strange--" he began.

"What seems strange?"

"I don't say it seems strange that you should be a priest," Romaine explained. "I am only surprised that a man of your simple way of thinking should have attached himself to the Order of the Jesuits."

"I can quite understand that," said Penrose. "But you should remember that circumstances often influence a man in his choice of a vocation. It has been so with me. I am a member of a Roman Catholic family. A Jesuit College was near our place of abode, and a near relative of mine--since dead--was one of the resident priests." He paused, and added in a lower tone: "When I was little more than a lad I suffered a disappointment, which altered my character for life. I took refuge in the College, and I have found patience and peace of mind since that time. Oh, my friend, you might have been a more contented man--" He stopped again. His interest in the husband had all but deceived him into forgetting his promise to the wife.

Romaine held out his hand. "I hope I have not thoughtlessly hurt you?" he said.

Penrose took the offered hand, and pressed it fervently. He tried to speak--and suddenly shuddered, like a man in pain. "I am not very well this morning," he stammered; "a turn in the garden will do me good."

Romaine's doubts were confirmed by the manner in which Penrose left him. Something had unquestionably happened, which his friend shrank from communicating to him. He sat down again at his desk and tried to read. The time passed--and he was still left alone. When the door was at last opened it was only Stella who entered the room.

"Have you seen Penrose?" he asked.

The estrangement between them had been steadily widening of late. Romaine had expressed his resentment at his wife's interference between Penrose and himself by that air of contemptuous endurance which is the hardest penalty that a man can inflict on the woman who loves him. Stella had submitted with a proud and silent resignation--the most unfortunate form of protest that she could have adopted toward a man of Romaine's temper. When she now appeared, however, in her husband's study, there was a change in her expression which he instantly noticed. She looked at him with eyes softened by sorrow. Before she could answer his first question, he hurriedly added another. "Is Penrose really ill?"

"No, Lewis. He is distressed."

"About what?"

"About you, and about himself."

"Is he going to leave us?"

"Yes."

"But he will come back again?"

Stella took a chair by her husband's side. "I am truly sorry for you, Lewis," she said. "It is even a sad parting for me. If you will let me say it, I have a sincere regard for dear Mr. Penrose."

Under other circumstances, this confession of feeling for the man who had sacrificed his dearest aspiration to the one consideration of her

happiness, might have provoked a sharp reply. But by this time Romaine had really become alarmed. "You speak as if Arthur was going to leave England," he said.

"He leaves England this afternoon," she answered, "for Rome."

"Why does he tell this to you, and not to me?" Romaine asked.

"He cannot trust himself to speak of it to you. He begged me to prepare you--"

Her courage failed her. She paused. Romaine beat his hand impatiently on the desk before him. "Speak out!" he cried. "If Rome is not the end of the journey--what is?"

Stella hesitated no longer.

"He goes to Rome," she said "to receive his instructions, and to become personally acquainted with the missionaries who are associated with him. They will leave Leghorn in the next vessel which sets sail for a port in Central America. And the dangerous duty intrusted to them is to re-establish one of the Jesuit Missions destroyed by the savages years since. They will find their church a ruin, and not a vestige left of the house once inhabited by the murdered priests. It is not concealed from them that they may be martyred, too. They are soldiers of the Cross; and they go--willingly go--to save the souls of the Indians, at the peril of their lives."

Romaine rose, and advanced to the door. There, he turned, and spoke to Stella. "Where is Arthur?" he said.

Stella gently detained him.

"There was one word more he entreated me to say--pray wait and hear it," she pleaded. "His one grief is at leaving You. Apart from that, he devotes himself gladly to the dreadful service which claims him. He has long looked forward to it, and has long prepared himself for it. Those, Lewis, are his own words."

There was a knock at the door. The servant appeared, to announce that the carriage was waiting.

Penrose entered the room as the man left it.

"Have you spoken for me?" he said to Stella. She could only answer him by a gesture. He turned to Romyne with a faint smile.

"The saddest of all words must be spoken," he said. "Farewell!"

Pale and trembling, Romyne took his hand. "Is this Father Benwell's doing?" he asked.

"No!" Penrose answered firmly. "In Father Benwell's position it might have been his doing, but for his goodness to me. For the first time since I have known him he has shrunk from a responsibility. For my sake he has left it to Rome. And Rome has spoken. Oh, my more than friend--my brother in love--!"

His voice failed him. With a resolution which was nothing less than heroic in a man of his affectionate nature, he recovered his composure.

"Let us make it as little miserable as it can be," he said. "At every opportunity we will write to each other. And, who knows--I may yet come back to you? God has preserved his servants in dangers as great as any that I shall encounter. May that merciful God bless and protect you! Oh, Romaine, what happy days we have had together!" His last powers of resistance were worn out. Tears of noble sorrow dimmed the friendly eyes which had never once looked unkindly on the brother of his love. He kissed Romaine. "Help me out!" he said, turning blindly toward the hall, in which the servant was waiting. That last act of mercy was not left to a servant. With sisterly tenderness, Stella took his hand and led him away. "I shall remember you gratefully as long as I live," she said to him when the carriage door was closed. He waved his hand at the window, and she saw him no more.

She returned to the study.

The relief of tears had not come to Romaine. He had dropped into a chair when Penrose left him. In stony silence he sat there, his head down, his eyes dry and staring. The miserable days of their estrangement were forgotten by his wife in the moment when she looked at him. She knelt by his side and lifted his head a little and laid it on her bosom. Her heart was full--she let the caress plead for her silently. He felt it; his cold fingers pressed her hand thankfully; but he said nothing. After a long interval, the first outward expression of sorrow that fell from his lips showed that he was still thinking of Penrose.

"Every blessing falls away from me," he said. "I have lost my best friend."

Years afterward Stella remembered those words, and the tone in which he had spoken them.