

CHAPTER VII - THE IMPULSIVE SEX.

AFTER a lapse of a few days, Father Benwell was again a visitor at Ten Acres Lodge--by Romaine's invitation. The priest occupied the very chair, by the study fireside, in which Penrose had been accustomed to sit.

"It is really kind of you to come to me," said Romaine, "so soon after receiving my acknowledgment of your letter. I can't tell you how I was touched by the manner in which you wrote of Penrose. To my shame I confess it, I had no idea that you were so warmly attached to him."

"I hardly knew it myself, Mr. Romaine, until our dear Arthur was taken away from us."

"If you used your influence, Father Benwell, is there no hope that you might yet persuade him--?"

"To withdraw from the Mission? Oh, Mr. Romaine, don't you know Arthur's character better than that? Even his gentle temper has its resolute side. The zeal of the first martyrs to Christianity is the zeal that burns in that noble nature. The Mission has been the dream of his life--it is endeared to him by the very dangers which we dread. Persuade Arthur to desert the dear and devoted colleagues who have opened their arms to him? I might as soon persuade that statue in the garden to desert its pedestal, and join us in this room. Shall we change the sad subject? Have you received the book which I sent you with my letter?"

Romaine took up the book from his desk. Before he could speak of it some one called out briskly, on the other side of the door: "May I come in?"--and came in, without waiting to be asked. Mrs. Eyrecourt, painted and robed for the morning--wafting perfumes as she moved--appeared in

the study. She looked at the priest, and lifted her many-ringed hands with a gesture of coquettish terror.

"Oh, dear me! I had no idea you were here, Father Benwell. I ask ten thousand pardons. Dear and admirable Romaine, you don't look as if you were pleased to see me. Good gracious! I am not interrupting a confession, am I?"

Father Benwell (with his paternal smile in perfect order) resigned his chair to Mrs. Eyrecourt. The traces of her illness still showed themselves in an intermittent trembling of her head and her hands. She had entered the room, strongly suspecting that the process of conversion might be proceeding in the absence of Penrose, and determined to interrupt it. Guided by his subtle intelligence, Father Benwell penetrated her motive as soon as she opened the door. Mrs. Eyrecourt bowed graciously, and took the offered chair. Father Benwell sweetened his paternal smile and offered to get a footstool.

"How glad I am," he said, "to see you in your customary good spirits! But wasn't it just a little malicious to talk of interrupting a confession? As if Mr. Romaine was one of Us! Queen Elizabeth herself could hardly have said a sharper thing to a poor Catholic priest."

"You clever creature!" said Mrs. Eyrecourt. "How easily you see through a simple woman like me! There--I give you my hand to kiss and I will never try to deceive you again. Do you know, Father Benwell, a most extraordinary wish has suddenly come to me. Please don't be offended. I wish you were a Jew."

"May I ask why?" Father Benwell inquired, with an apostolic suavity worthy of the best days of Rome.

Mrs. Eyrecourt explained herself with the modest self-distrust of a maiden of fifteen. "I am really so ignorant, I hardly know how to put it. But learned persons have told me that it is the peculiarity of the Jews-- may I say, the amiable peculiarity?--never to make converts. It would be so nice if you would take a leaf out of their book, when we have the happiness of receiving you here. My lively imagination pictures you in a double character. Father Benwell everywhere else; and--say, the patriarch Abraham at Ten Acres Lodge."

Father Benwell lifted his persuasive hands in courteous protest. "My dear lady! pray make your mind easy. Not one word on the subject of religion has passed between Mr. Romaine and myself--"

"I beg your pardon," Mrs. Eyrecourt interposed, "I am afraid I fail to follow you. My silent son-in-law looks as if he longed to smother me, and my attention is naturally distracted. You were about to say--?"

"I was about to say, dear Mrs. Eyrecourt, that you are alarming yourself without any reason. Not one word, on any controversial subject, has passed--"

Mrs. Eyrecourt cocked her head, with the artless vivacity of a bird. "Ah, but it might, though!" she suggested, slyly.

Father Benwell once more remonstrated in dumb show, and Romaine lost his temper.

"Mrs. Eyrecourt!" he cried, sternly.

Mrs. Eyrecourt screamed, and lifted her hands to her ears. "I am not deaf, dear Romaine, and I am not to be put down by any ill-timed

exhibition of, what I may call, domestic ferocity. Father Benwell sets you an example of Christian moderation. Do, please, follow it."

Romayne refused to follow it.

"Talk on any other topic that you like, Mrs. Eyrecourt. I request you--don't oblige me to use a harder word--I request you to spare Father Benwell and myself any further expression of your opinion on controversial subjects."

A son-in-law may make a request, and a mother-in-law may decline to comply. Mrs. Eyrecourt declined to comply.

"No, Romayne, it won't do. I may lament your unhappy temper, for my daughter's sake--but I know what I am about, and you can't provoke me. Our reverend friend and I understand each other. He will make allowances for a sensitive woman, who has had sad experience of conversions in her own household. My eldest daughter, Father Benwell--a poor foolish creature--was converted into a nunnery. The last time I saw her (she used to be sweetly pretty; my dear husband quite adored her)--the last time I saw her she had a red nose, and, what is even more revolting at her age, a double chin. She received me with her lips pursed up, and her eyes on the ground, and she was insolent enough to say that she would pray for me. I am not a furious old man with a long white beard, and I don't curse my daughter and rush out into a thunderstorm afterward--but I know what King Lear felt, and I have struggled with hysterics just as he did. With your wonderful insight into human nature, I am sure you will sympathize with and forgive me. Mr. Penrose, as my daughter tells me, behaved in the most gentleman-like manner. I make the same appeal to your kind forbearance. The bare prospect of our dear friend here becoming a Catholic--"

Romayne's temper gave way once more.

"If anything can make me a Catholic," he said, "your interference will do it."

"Out of sheer perversity, dear Romaine?"

"Not at all, Mrs. Eyrecourt. If I became a Catholic, I might escape from the society of ladies, in the refuge of a monastery."

Mrs. Eyrecourt hit him back again with the readiest dexterity.

"Remain a Protestant, my dear, and go to your club. There is a refuge for you from the ladies--a monastery, with nice little dinners, and all the newspapers and periodicals." Having launched this shaft, she got up, and recovered her easy courtesy of look and manner. "I am so much obliged to you, Father Benwell. I have not offended you, I hope and trust?"

"You have done me a service, dear Mrs. Eyrecourt. But for your salutary caution, I might have drifted into controversial subjects. I shall be on my guard now."

"How very good of you! We shall meet again, I hope, under more agreeable circumstances. After that polite allusion to a monastery, I understand that my visit to my son-in-law may as well come to an end. Please don't forget five o'clock tea at my house."

As she approached the door, it was opened from the outer side. Her daughter met her half-way. "Why are you here, mamma?" Stella asked.

"Why, indeed, my love! You had better leave the room with me. Our amiable Romaine's present idea is to relieve himself of our society by retiring to a monastery. Don't you see Father Benwell?"

Stella coldly returned the priest's bow--and looked at Romaine. She felt a vague forewarning of what had happened. Mrs. Eyrecourt proceeded to enlighten her, as an appropriate expression of gratitude. "We are indeed indebted to Father Benwell, my dear. He has been most considerate and kind--"

Romaine interrupted her without ceremony. "Favor me," he said, addressing his wife, "by inducing Mrs. Eyrecourt to continue her narrative in some other room."

Stella was hardly conscious of what her mother or her husband had said. She felt that the priest's eyes were on her. Under any other circumstances, Father Benwell's good breeding and knowledge of the world would have impelled him to take his departure. As things were, he knew perfectly well that the more seriously Romaine was annoyed, in his presence, the better his own private interests would be served. Accordingly, he stood apart, silently observant of Stella. In spite of Winterfield's reassuring reply to her letter, Stella instinctively suspected and dreaded the Jesuit. Under the spell of those watchful eyes she trembled inwardly; her customary tact deserted her; she made an indirect apology to the man whom she hated and feared.

"Whatever my mother may have said to you, Father Benwell, has been without my knowledge."

Romaine attempted to speak, but Father Benwell was too quick for him.

"Dear Mrs. Romaine, nothing has been said which needs any disclaimer on your part."

"I should think not!" Mrs. Eyrecourt added. "Really, Stella, I don't understand you. Why may I not say to Father Benwell what you said to Mr. Penrose? You trusted Mr. Penrose as your friend. I can tell you this-- I am quite sure you may trust Father Benwell."

Once more Romaine attempted to speak. And, once more, Father Benwell was beforehand with him.

"May I hope," said the priest, with a finely ironical smile, "that Mrs. Romaine agrees with her excellent mother?"

With all her fear of him, the exasperating influence of his tone and his look was more than Stella could endure. Before she could restrain them, the rash words flew out of her lips.

"I am not sufficiently well acquainted with you, Father Benwell, to express an opinion."

With that answer, she took her mother's arm and left the room.

The moment they were alone, Romaine turned to the priest, trembling with anger. Father Benwell, smiling indulgently at the lady's little outbreak, took him by the hand, with peace-making intentions, "Now don't--pray don't excite yourself!"

Romayne was not to be pacified in that way. His anger was trebly intensified by the long-continued strain on his nerves of the effort to control himself.

"I must, and will, speak out at last!" he said. "Father Benwell, the ladies of my household have inexcusably presumed on the consideration which is due to women. No words can say how ashamed I am of what has happened. I can only appeal to your admirable moderation and patience to accept my apologies, and the most sincere expression of my regret."

"No more, Mr. Romayne! As a favor to Me, I beg and entreat you will say no more. Sit down and compose yourself."

But Romayne was impenetrable to the influence of friendly and forgiving demonstrations. "I can never expect you to enter my house again!" he exclaimed.

"My dear sir, I will come and see you again, with the greatest pleasure, on any day that you may appoint--the earlier day the better. Come! come! let us laugh. I don't say it disrespectfully, but poor dear Mrs. Eyrecourt has been more amusing than ever. I expect to see our excellent Archbishop to-morrow, and I must really tell him how the good lady felt insulted when her Catholic daughter offered to pray for her. There is hardly anything more humorous, even in Moliere. And the double chin, and the red nose--all the fault of those dreadful Papists. Oh, dear me, you still take it seriously. How I wish you had my sense of humor! When shall I come again, and tell you how the Archbishop likes the story of the nun's mother?"

He held out his hand with irresistible cordiality. Romayne took it gratefully--still bent, however, on making atonement.

"Let me first do myself the honor of calling on You," he said. "I am in no state to open my mind--as I might have wished to open it to you--after what has happened. In a day or two more--"

"Say the day after to-morrow," Father Benwell hospitably suggested. "Do me a great favor. Come and eat your bit of mutton at my lodgings. Six o'clock, if you like--and some remarkably good claret, a present from one of the Faithful. You will? That's hearty! And do promise me to think no more of our little domestic comedy. Relieve your mind. Look at Wiseman's 'Recollections of the Popes.' Good-by--God bless you!"

The servant who opened the house door for Father Benwell was agreeably surprised by the Papist's cheerfulness. "He isn't half a bad fellow," the man announced among his colleagues. "Give me half-a-crown, and went out humming a tune."