

BOOK THE FIFTH.

CHAPTER I - MRS. EYRECOURT'S DISCOVERY.

THE leaves had fallen in the grounds at Ten Acres Lodge, and stormy winds told drearily that winter had come.

An unchanging dullness pervaded the house. Romaine was constantly absent in London, attending to his new religious duties under the guidance of Father Benwell. The litter of books and manuscripts in the study was seen no more. Hideously rigid order reigned in the unused room. Some of Romaine's papers had been burned; others were imprisoned in drawers and cupboards--the history of the Origin of Religions had taken its melancholy place among the suspended literary enterprises of the time. Mrs. Eyrecourt (after a superficially cordial reconciliation with her son-in-law) visited her daughter every now and then, as an act of maternal sacrifice. She yawned perpetually; she read innumerable novels; she corresponded with her friends. In the long dull evenings, the once-lively lady sometimes openly regretted that she had not been born a man--with the three masculine resources of smoking, drinking, and swearing placed at her disposal. It was a dreary existence, and happier influences seemed but little likely to change it. Grateful as she was to her mother, no persuasion would induce Stella to leave Ten Acres and amuse herself in London. Mrs. Eyrecourt said, with melancholy and metaphorical truth, "There is no elasticity left in my child."

On a dim gray morning, mother and daughter sat by the fireside, with another long day before them.

"Where is that contemptible husband of yours?" Mrs. Eyrecourt asked, looking up from her book.

"Lewis is staying in town," Stella answered listlessly.

"In company with Judas Iscariot?"

Stella was too dull to immediately understand the allusion. "Do you mean Father Benwell?" she inquired.

"Don't mention his name, my dear. I have re-christened him on purpose to avoid it. Even his name humiliates me. How completely the fawning old wretch took me in--with all my knowledge of the world, too! He was so nice and sympathetic--such a comforting contrast, on that occasion, to you and your husband--I declare I forgot every reason I had for not trusting him. Ah, we women are poor creatures--we may own it among ourselves. If a man only has nice manners and a pleasant voice, how many of us can resist him? Even Romayne imposed upon me--assisted by his property, which in some degree excuses my folly. There is nothing to be done now, Stella, but to humor him. Do as that detestable priest does, and trust to your beauty (there isn't as much of it left as I could wish) to turn the scale in your favor. Have you any idea when the new convert will come back? I heard him ordering a fish dinner for himself, yesterday--because it was Friday. Did you join him at dessert-time, profanely supported by meat? What did he say?"

"What he has said more than once already, mama. His peace of mind is returning, thanks to Father Benwell. He was perfectly gentle and indulgent--but he looked as if he lived in a different world from mine. He told me he proposed to pass a week in, what he called, Retreat. I didn't ask him what it meant. Whatever it is, I suppose he is there now."

"My dear, don't you remember your sister began in the same way? She retreated. We shall have Romaine with a red nose and a double chin, offering to pray for us next! Do you recollect that French maid of mine--the woman I sent away, because she would spit, when she was out of temper, like a cat? I begin to think I treated the poor creature harshly. When I hear of Romaine and his Retreat, I almost feel inclined to spit, myself. There! let us go on with your reading. Take the first volume--I have done with it."

"What is it, mama?"

"A very remarkable work, Stella, in the present state of light literature in England--a novel that actually tells a story. It's quite incredible, I know. Try the book. It has another extraordinary merit--it isn't written by a woman."

Stella obediently received the first volume, turned over the leaves, and wearily dropped the wonderful novel on her lap. "I can't attend to it," she said. "My mind is too full of my own thoughts."

"About Romaine?" said her mother.

"No. When I think of my husband now, I almost wish I had his confidence in Priests and Retreats. The conviction grows on me, mama, that my worst troubles are still to come. When I was younger, I don't remember being tormented by presentiments of any kind. Did I ever talk of presentiments to you, in the bygone days?"

"If you had done anything of the sort, my love (excuse me, if I speak plainly), I should have said, 'Stella, your liver is out of order'; and I should have opened the family medicine-chest. I will only say now send

for the carriage; let us go to a morning concert, dine at a restaurant, and finish the evening at the play."

This characteristic proposal was entirely thrown away on Stella. She was absorbed in pursuing her own train of thought. "I almost wish I had told Lewis," she said to herself absently.

"Told him of what, my dear?"

"Of what happened to me with Winterfield."

Mrs. Eyrecourt's faded eyes opened wide in astonishment.

"Do you really mean it?" she asked.

"I do, indeed."

"Are you actually simple enough, Stella, to think that a man of Romaine's temper would have made you his wife if you had told him of the Brussels marriage?"

"Why not?"

"Why not! Would Romaine--would any man--believe that you really did part from Winterfield at the church door? Considering that you are a married woman, your innocence, my sweet child, is a perfect phenomenon! It's well there were wiser people than you to keep your secret."

"Don't speak too positively, mama. Lewis may find it out yet."

"Is that one of your presentiments?"

"Yes."

"How is he to find it out, if you please?"

"I am afraid, through Father Benwell. Yes! yes! I know you only think him a fawning old hypocrite--you don't fear him as I do. Nothing will persuade me that zeal for his religion is the motive under which that man acts in devoting himself to Romaine. He has some abominable object in view, and his eyes tell me that I am concerned in it."

Mrs. Eyrecourt burst out laughing.

"What is there to laugh at?" Stella asked.

"I declare, my dear, there is something absolutely provoking in your utter want of knowledge of the world! When you are puzzled to account for anything remarkable in a clergyman's conduct (I don't care, my poor child, to what denomination he belongs) you can't be wrong in attributing his motive to--Money. If Romaine had turned Baptist or Methodist, the reverend gentleman in charge of his spiritual welfare would not have forgotten--as you have forgotten, you little goose--that his convert was a rich man. His mind would have dwelt on the chapel, or the mission, or the infant school, in want of funds; and--with no more abominable object in view than I have, at this moment, in poking the fire--he would have ended in producing his modest subscription list and would have betrayed

himself (just as our odious Benwell will betray himself) by the two amiable little words, Please contribute. Is there any other presentiment, my dear, on which you would like to have your mother's candid opinion?"

Stella resignedly took up the book again.

"I daresay you are right," she said. "Let us read our novel."

Before she had reached the end of the first page, her mind was far away again from the unfortunate story. She was thinking of that "other presentiment," which had formed the subject of her mother's last satirical inquiry. The vague fear that had shaken her when she had accidentally touched the French boy, on her visit to Camp's Hill, still from time to time troubled her memory. Even the event of his death had failed to dissipate the delusion, which associated him with some undefined evil influence that might yet assert itself. A superstitious forewarning of this sort was a weakness new to her in her experience of herself. She was heartily ashamed of it--and yet it kept its hold. Once more the book dropped on her lap. She laid it aside, and walked wearily to the window to look at the weather.

Almost at the same moment Mrs. Eyrecourt's maid disturbed her mistress over the second volume of the novel by entering the room with a letter.

"For me?" Stella asked, looking round from the window.

"No, ma'am--for Mrs. Eyrecourt."

The letter had been brought to the house by one of Lady Loring's servants. In delivering it he had apparently given private instructions to

the maid. She laid her finger significantly on her lips when she gave the letter to her mistress.

In these terms Lady Loring wrote:

"If Stella happens to be with you, when you receive my note, don't say anything which will let her know that I am your correspondent. She has always, poor dear, had an inveterate distrust of Father Benwell; and, between ourselves, I am not sure that she is quite so foolish as I once thought. The Father has unexpectedly left us--with a well-framed excuse which satisfied Lord Loring. It fails to satisfy Me. Not from any wonderful exercise of penetration on my part, but in consequence of something I have just heard in course of conversation with a Catholic friend. Father Benwell, my dear, turns out to be a Jesuit; and, what is more, a person of such high authority in the Order, that his concealment of his rank, while he was with us, must have been a matter of necessity. He must have had some very serious motive for occupying a position so entirely beneath him as his position in our house. I have not the shadow of a reason for associating this startling discovery with dear Stella's painful misgivings--and yet there is something in my mind which makes me want to hear what Stella's mother thinks. Come and have a talk about it as soon as you possibly can."

Mrs. Eyrecourt put the letter in her pocket smiling quietly to herself.

Applying to Lady Loring's letter the infallible system of solution which she had revealed to her daughter, Mrs. Eyrecourt solved the mystery of the priest's conduct without a moment's hesitation. Lord Loring's check, in Father Benwell's pocket, representing such a liberal subscription that my lord was reluctant to mention it to my lady--there was the reading of the riddle, as plain as the sun at noonday! Would it be desirable to enlighten Lady Loring as she had already enlightened Stella? Mrs. Eyrecourt decided in the negative. As Roman Catholics, and as old friends of Romaine, the Lorings naturally rejoiced in his conversion. But as old friends also of Romaine's wife, they were bound not to express

their sentiments too openly. Feeling that any discussion of the priest's motives would probably lead to the delicate subject of the conversion, Mrs. Eyrecourt prudently determined to let the matter drop. As a consequence of this decision, Stella was left without the slightest warning of the catastrophe which was now close at hand.

Mrs. Eyrecourt joined her daughter at the window.

"Well, my dear, is it clearing up? Shall we take a drive before luncheon?"

"If you like, mama."

She turned to her mother as she answered.

The light of the clearing sky, at once soft and penetrating, fell full on her. Mrs. Eyrecourt, looking at her as usual, suddenly became serious: she studied her daughter's face with an eager and attentive scrutiny.

"Do you see any extraordinary change in me?" Stella asked, with a faint smile.

Instead of answering, Mrs. Eyrecourt put her arm round Stella with a loving gentleness, entirely at variance with any ordinary expression of her character. The worldly mother's eyes rested with a lingering tenderness on the daughter's face. "Stella!" she said softly--and stopped, at a loss for words for the first time in her life.

After a while, she began again. "Yes; I see a change in you," she whispered--"an interesting change which tells me something. Can you guess what it is?"

Stella's color rose brightly, and faded again.

She laid her head in silence on her mother's bosom. Worldly, frivolous, self-interested, Mrs. Eyrecourt's nature was the nature of a woman--and the one great trial and triumph of a woman's life, appealing to her as a trial and a triumph soon to come to her own child, touched fibers under the hardened surface of her heart which were still unprofaned. "My poor darling," she said, "have you told the good news to your husband?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"He doesn't care, now, for anything that I can tell him."

"Nonsense, Stella! You may win him back to you by a word--and do you hesitate to say the word? I shall tell him!"

Stella suddenly drew herself away from her mother's caressing arm. "If you do," she cried, "no words can say how inconsiderate and how cruel I shall think you. Promise--on your word of honor--promise you will leave it to me!"

"Will you tell him, yourself--if I leave it to you?"

"Yes--at my own time. Promise!"

"Hush, hush! don't excite yourself, my love; I promise. Give me a kiss. I declare I am agitated myself!" she exclaimed, falling back into her customary manner. "Such a shock to my vanity, Stella--the prospect of becoming a grandmother! I really must ring for Matilda, and take a few drops of red lavender. Be advised by me, my poor dear, and we will turn the priest out of the house yet. When Romayne comes back from his ridiculous Retreat--after his fasting and flagellation, and Heaven knows what besides--then bring him to his senses; then is the time to tell him. Will you think of it?"

"Yes; I will think of it."

"And one word more, before Matilda comes in. Remember the vast importance of having a male heir to Vange Abbey. On these occasions you may practice with perfect impunity on the ignorance of the men. Tell him you're sure it's going to be a boy!"