

CHAPTER IV - ON THE ROAD TO ROME.

THERE was not a sound in the room. Romaine stood, looking at the priest

"Did you hear what I said?" Father Benwell asked.

"Yes."

"Do you understand that I really mean what I said?"

He made no reply--he waited, like a man expecting to hear more.

Father Benwell was alive to the vast importance, at such a moment, of not shrinking from the responsibility which he had assumed. "I see how I distress you," he said; "but, for your sake, I am bound to speak out. Romaine! the woman whom you have married is the wife of another man. Don't ask me how I know it--I do know it. You shall have positive proof, as soon as you have recovered. Come! rest a little in the easy-chair."

He took Romaine's arm, and led him to the chair, and made him drink some wine. They waited a while. Romaine lifted his head, with a heavy sigh.

"The woman whom I have married is the wife of another man." He slowly repeated the words to himself--and then looked at Father Benwell.

"Who is the man?" he asked.

"I introduced you to him, when I was as ignorant of the circumstances as you are," the priest answered. "The man is Mr. Bernard Winterfield."

Romayne half raised himself from the chair. A momentary anger glittered in his eyes, and faded out again, extinguished by the nobler emotions of grief and shame. He remembered Winterfield's introduction to Stella.

"Her husband!" he said, speaking again to himself. "And she let me introduce him to her. And she received him like a stranger." He paused, and thought of it. "The proofs, if you please, sir," he resumed, with sudden humility. "I don't want to hear any particulars. It will be enough for me if I know beyond all doubt that I have been deceived and disgraced."

Father Benwell unlocked his desk and placed two papers before Romayne. He did his duty with a grave indifference to all minor considerations. The time had not yet come for expressions of sympathy and regret.

"The first paper," he said, "is a certified copy of the register of the marriage of Miss Eyrecourt to Mr. Winterfield, celebrated (as you will see) by the English chaplain at Brussels, and witnessed by three persons. Look at the names."

The bride's mother was the first witness. The two names that followed were the names of Lord and Lady Loring. "They, too, in the conspiracy to deceive me!" Romayne said, as he laid the paper back on the table.

"I obtained that piece of written evidence," Father Benwell proceeded, "by the help of a reverend colleague of mine, residing at Brussels. I will give you his name and address, if you wish to make further inquiries."

"Quite needless. What is this other paper?"

"This other paper is an extract from the short-hand writer's notes (suppressed in the reports of the public journals) of proceedings in an English court of law, obtained at my request by my lawyer in London."

"What have I to do with it?"

He put the question in a tone of passive endurance--resigned to the severest moral martyrdom that could be inflicted on him.

"I will answer you in two words," said Father Benwell. "In justice to Miss Eyrecourt, I am bound to produce her excuse for marrying you."

Romayne looked at him in stern amazement.

"Excuse!" he repeated.

"Yes--excuse. The proceedings to which I have alluded declare Miss Eyrecourt's marriage to Mr. Winterfield to be null and void--by the English law--in consequence of his having been married at the time to another woman. Try to follow me. I will put it as briefly as possible. In justice to yourself, and to your future career, you must understand this revolting case thoroughly, from beginning to end."

With those prefatory words, he told the story of Winterfield's first marriage; altering nothing; concealing nothing; doing the fullest justice to Winterfield's innocence of all evil motive, from first to last. When the plain truth served his purpose, as it most assuredly did in this case, the man has never yet been found who could match Father Benwell at stripping himself of every vestige of reserve, and exhibiting his naked heart to the moral admiration of mankind.

"You were mortified, and I was surprised," he went on, "when Mr. Winterfield dropped his acquaintance with you. We now know that he acted like an honorable man."

He waited to see what effect he had produced. Romaine was in no state of mind to do justice to Winterfield or to any one. His pride was mortally wounded; his high sense of honor and delicacy writhed under the outrage inflicted on it.

"And mind this," Father Benwell persisted, "poor human nature has its right to all that can be justly conceded in the way of excuse and allowance. Miss Eyrecourt would naturally be advised by her friends, would naturally be eager, on her own part, to keep hidden from you what happened at Brussels. A sensitive woman, placed in a position so horribly false and degrading, must not be too severely judged, even when she does wrong. I am bound to say this--and more. Speaking from my own knowledge of all the parties, I have no doubt that Miss Eyrecourt and Mr. Winterfield did really part at the church door."

Romaine answered by a look--so disdainfully expressive of the most immovable unbelief that it absolutely justified the fatal advice by which Stella's worldly-wise friends had encouraged her to conceal the truth. Father Benwell prudently closed his lips. He had put the case with perfect fairness--his bitterest enemy could not have denied that.

Romayne took up the second paper, looked at it, and threw it back again on the table with an expression of disgust.

"You told me just now," he said, "that I was married to the wife of another man. And there is the judge's decision, releasing Miss Eyrecourt from her marriage to Mr. Winterfield. May I ask you to explain yourself?"

"Certainly. Let me first remind you that you owe religious allegiance to the principles which the Church has asserted, for centuries past, with all the authority of its divine institution. You admit that?"

"I admit it."

"Now, listen! In our church, Romayne, marriage is even more than a religious institution--it is a sacrament. We acknowledge no human laws which profane that sacrament. Take two examples of what I say. When the great Napoleon was at the height of his power, Pius the Seventh refused to acknowledge the validity of the Emperor's second marriage to Maria Louisa--while Josephine was living, divorced by the French Senate. Again, in the face of the Royal Marriage Act, the Church sanctioned the marriage of Mrs. Fitzherbert to George the Fourth, and still declares, in justice to her memory, that she was the king's lawful wife. In one word, marriage, to be marriage at all, must be the object of a purely religious celebration--and, this condition complied with, marriage is only to be dissolved by death. You remember what I told you of Mr. Winterfield?"

"Yes. His first marriage took place before the registrar."

"In plain English, Romayne, Mr. Winterfield and the woman-rider in the circus pronounced a formula of words before a layman in an office. That is not only no marriage, it is a blasphemous profanation of a holy rite.

Acts of Parliament which sanction such proceedings are acts of infidelity. The Church declares it, in defense of religion."

"I understand you," said Romaine. "Mr. Winterfield's marriage at Brussels--"

"Which the English law," Father Benwell interposed, "declares to be annulled by the marriage before the registrar, stands good, nevertheless, by the higher law of the Church. Mr. Winterfield is Miss Eyrecourt's husband, as long as they both live. An ordained priest performed the ceremony in a consecrated building--and Protestant marriages, so celebrated, are marriages acknowledged by the Catholic Church. Under those circumstances, the ceremony which afterward united you to Miss Eyrecourt--though neither you nor the clergyman were to blame--was a mere mockery. Need I to say any more? Shall I leave you for a while by yourself?"

"No! I don't know what I may think, I don't know what I may do, if you leave me by myself."

Father Benwell took a chair by Romaine's side. "It has been my hard duty to grieve and humiliate you," he said. "Do you bear me no ill will?" He held out his hand.

Romaine took it--as an act of justice, if not as an act of gratitude.

"Can I be of any use in advising you?" Father Benwell asked.

"Who can advise a man in my position?" Romaine bitterly rejoined.

"I can at least suggest that you should take time to think over your position."

"Time? take time? You talk as if my situation was endurable."

"Everything is endurable, Romaine!"

"It may be so to you, Father Benwell. Did you part with your humanity when you put on the black robe of the priest?"

"I parted, my son, with those weaknesses of our humanity on which women practice. You talk of your position. I will put it before you at its worst."

"For what purpose?"

"To show you exactly what you have now to decide. Judged by the law of England, Mrs. Romaine is your wife. Judged by the principles held sacred among the religious community to which you belong, she is not Mrs. Romaine--she is Mrs. Winterfield, living with you in adultery. If you regret your conversion--"

"I don't regret it, Father Benwell."

"If you renounce the holy aspirations which you have yourself acknowledged to me, return to your domestic life. But don't ask us, while you are living with that lady, to respect you as a member of our communion."

Romayne was silent. The more violent emotions aroused in him had, with time, subsided into calm. Tenderness, mercy, past affection, found their opportunity, and pleaded with him. The priest's bold language had missed the object at which it aimed. It had revived in Romayne's memory the image of Stella in the days when he had first seen her. How gently her influence had wrought on him for good! how tenderly, how truly, she had loved him. "Give me some more wine!" he cried. "I feel faint and giddy. Don't despise me, Father Benwell--I was once so fond of her!"

The priest poured out the wine. "I feel for you," he said. "Indeed, indeed, I feel for you."

It was not all a lie--there were grains of truth in that outburst of sympathy. Father Benwell was not wholly merciless. His far-seeing intellect, his daring duplicity, carried him straight on to his end in view. But, that end once gained--and, let it be remembered, not gained, in this case, wholly for himself--there were compassionate impulses left in him which sometimes forced their way to the surface. A man of high intelligence--however he may misuse it, however unworthy he may be of it--has a gift from Heaven. When you want to see unredeemed wickedness, look for it in a fool.

"Let me mention one circumstance," Father Benwell proceeded, "which may help to relieve you for the moment. In your present state of mind, you cannot return to The Retreat."

"Impossible!"

"I have had a room prepared for you in this house. Here, free from any disturbing influence, you can shape the future course of your life. If you wish to communicate with your residence at Highgate--"

"Don't speak of it!"

Father Benwell sighed. "Ah, I understand!" he said, sadly. "The house associated with Mr. Winterfield's visit--"

Romayne again interrupted him--this time by gesture only. The hand that had made the sign clinched itself when it rested afterward on the table. His eyes looked downward, under frowning brows. At the name of Winterfield, remembrances that poisoned every better influence in him rose venomously in his mind. Once more he loathed the deceit that had been practiced on him. Once more the detestable doubt of that asserted parting at the church door renewed its stealthy torment, and reasoned with him as if in words: She has deceived you in one thing; why not in another?

"Can I see my lawyer here?" he asked, suddenly.

"My dear Romayne, you can see any one whom you like to invite."

"I shall not trouble you by staying very long, Father Benwell."

"Do nothing in a hurry, my son. Pray do nothing in a hurry!"

Romayne paid no attention to this entreaty. Shrinking from the momentous decision that awaited him, his mind instinctively took refuge in the prospect of change of scene. "I shall leave England," he said, impatiently.

"Not alone!" Father Benwell remonstrated.

"Who will be my companion?"

"I will," the priest answered.

Romayne's weary eyes brightened faintly. In his desolate position, Father Benwell was the one friend on whom he could rely. Penrose was far away; the Lorings had helped to keep him deceived; Major Hynd had openly pitied and despised him as a victim to priestcraft.

"Can you go with me at any time?" he asked. "Have you no duties that keep you in England?"

"My duties, Romayne, are already confided to other hands."

"Then you have foreseen this?"

"I have thought it possible. Your journey may be long, or it may be short--you shall not go away alone."

"I can think of nothing yet; my mind is a blank," Romayne confessed sadly. "I don't know where I shall go."

"I know where you ought to go--and where you will go," said Father Benwell, emphatically.

"Where?"

"To Rome."

Romayne understood the true meaning of that brief reply. A vague sense of dismay began to rise in his mind. While he was still tortured by doubt, it seemed as if Father Benwell had, by some inscrutable process of prevision, planned out his future beforehand. Had the priest foreseen events?

No--he had only foreseen possibilities, on the day when it first occurred to him that Romayne's marriage was assailable, before the court of Romayne's conscience, from the Roman Catholic point of view. By this means, the misfortune of Romayne's marriage having preceded his conversion might be averted; and the one certain obstacle in the way of any change of purpose on his part--the obstacle of the priesthood--might still be set up, by the voluntary separation of the husband from the wife. Thus far the Jesuit had modestly described himself to his reverend colleagues, as regarding his position toward Romayne in a new light. His next letter might boldly explain to them what he had really meant. The triumph was won. Not a word more passed between his guest and himself that morning.

Before post-time, on the same day, Father Benwell wrote his last report to the Secretary of the Society of Jesus, in these lines:

"Romayne is free from the domestic ties that bound him. He leaves it to me to restore Vange Abbey to the Church; and he acknowledges a vocation for the priesthood. Expect us at Rome in a fortnight's time."