

THE BLACK ROBE.

BY WILKIE COLLINS.

CHAPTER I.—FATHER BENWELL HITS.

Art has its trials as well as its triumphs. It is powerless to assert itself against the solid interests of every-day life.

Innocent of all suspicion of the conflicting interests which struggle now centered in himself, Romayne was carefully studying the pictures which had been made the pretext for inviting him to the house.

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advantages, Father?" "Leave it to me, son. Are they still talking about the picture?" "Yes."

"I have something more to say to you. Have you noticed the young lady?" "I thought her beautiful—but she looks a little cold."

"When you are as old as I am," he said, "you will not believe in appearances when women are concerned. Do you know what I think of her? Beautiful if you like—and dangerous as well."

"Dangerous? In what way?" "This is for your private ear, Arthur. She is in love with Romayne. Wait a minute. And Lady Loring—unless I am entirely mistaken in what I observed—knows it and favors it. The beautiful Stella may be the destruction of all our hopes, unless we keep Romayne out of her way."

"These words were whispered with an earnestness and agitation which surprised Penrose. His superior's equanimity was not easily overthrown."

"Are you sure, Father, of what you say?" he asked. "I am quite sure, or I would not have spoken."

"Do you think Mr. Romayne returns the feeling?" "Not yet, luckily. You must use your first friendly influence over him—what is his name? Her surname, I mean."

"Eyreccourt. Miss Stella Eyreccourt." "Very well. You must use your influence (when you are quite sure that it is an influence) to keep Mr. Romayne away from Miss Eyreccourt."

"I am entirely at your service, Mr. Romayne." "If you will kindly call at my hotel, in an hour's time, I shall have looked over my notes, and shall be ready for you with a list of titles and dates. There is the address."

"With those words he advanced to take his leave of Lady Loring and Stella. Father Benwell was a man possessed of extraordinary power of foresight—but he was not infallible. Seeing that Romayne was on the point of leaving the house, and feeling that he had paved the way successfully for Romayne's attentions, he too readily assumed that there was nothing further to be gained by remaining in the gallery. In arriving at this conclusion he was additionally influenced by private and personal considerations. The interval before Penrose called at the hotel might be usefully filled up by some wise words of advice, relating to the religious uses to which he might turn his intercourse with Romayne, when he had successfully established himself in the confidence of his employer. There might, no doubt, be future opportunities for accomplishing this object, but Father Benwell was not a man to trust too implicitly in the future. The present occasion was, in respect of its certainty, the occasion that he preferred. Making one of his ready and plausible excuses, he returned with Penrose to the library, and so committed (as he himself disapproved at a later period) his mistakes in the long record of his life.

In the meanwhile Romayne was not permitted to bring his visit to a conclusion without hospitable remonstrance on the part of Lady Loring. She felt for Stella with a woman's enthusiastic devotion to the interest of true love; and she had firmly resolved that a matter so trifling as the cultivation of Romayne's mind should not be allowed to stand in the way of the far more important enterprise of opening his heart to the influence of the sex.

"Stay and lunch with us," she said, when he held out his hand to bid her good-bye. "Thank you, Lady Loring, I never take lunch."

"Well, then, come and dine with us—no party; only ourselves. To-morrow and next day we are disengaged. Which day shall it be?" Romayne still resisted. "You are very kind. In my state of health I am unable to make engagements which I may not be able to keep."

Lady Loring was just as resolute on her side. She appealed to Stella. "Mr. Romayne persists, my dear, in putting me off with excuses. Try if you can persuade him."

"I am not likely to have any influence, Adelaide."

"The tons in which she replied struck Romayne. He looked at her. Her eyes gravely meeting his, held him with a strange fascination. She was not herself conscious how openly all that was noble and true in her nature, all that was most deeply and sensitively felt in her aspirations, spoke at that moment in her look. Romayne's face changed; he turned pale under the new emotion that she had roused in him. Lady Loring observed him attentively.

"Perhaps you underrated your influence, Stella?" she suggested to persuasion. "I have only been introduced to Mr. Romayne half an hour since. I should call that affectionation."

"Why?" Romayne asked, sharply. "Lord Loring looked unfeignedly surprised."

"My dear fellow, do you really think you are the sort of a man who impresses a woman unfavorably at first sight? For once in your life indulge in the amiable weakness of doing yourself justice, and find a better reason for her than the coincidence."

"Perhaps we have begun, Miss Eyreccourt, by misinterpreting one another," he said. "We may arrive at a better understanding when I have the honor of meeting you again."

He hesitated, and looked at Lady Loring. She was not the woman to let a fair opportunity escape her. "We will say to-morrow evening," she resumed, "at seven o'clock."

"To-morrow," said Romayne. He shook hands with Stella and left the picture-gallery.

Thus far the conspiracy to marry him promised even more hopefully than the conspiracy to convert him. And Father Benwell, carefully instructing Penrose in the necessary room, was not aware of it.

"Have you known Miss Eyreccourt for a long time?" "She is my wife's oldest and dearest friend. I think, Romayne, you would feel interested in Stella, if you saw more of her."

Romayne bowed in silent submission to Lord Loring's prophetic remark.

"Let us look at the pictures," he said, quietly.

As he moved down the gallery the two priests met him. Father Benwell saw his opportunity of helping Penrose to procure a favorable impression.

"Forgive the curiosity of an old student, Mr. Romayne," he said, in his pleasant, cheerful way. "Lord Loring tells me you have set to the country for your books. Do you find a London hotel favorable to study?"

"It is a very quiet hotel," Romayne answered: "and the people know my ways." He turned to Arthur. "I have my own set of rooms, Mr. Penrose," he continued, "with a room at your disposal. The solitude of my house in the country is distasteful to me. There are times when I want to see the life in the streets as a relief. Though we are in a hotel, I can promise that you will not be troubled by interruptions, when you kindly lend me the use of your pen."

Father Benwell answered before Penrose could speak: "You may perhaps find my young friend's memory of some use to you, Mr. Romayne, as well as his pen. Penrose has studied in the Vatican library. If your reading leads you that way he knows more than most men of the rare old manuscripts which treat of the early history of Christianity."

This delicately-managed reference to Romayne's projected work on "The Origin of Religions" produced its effect. He became instantly interested in Penrose and his studies.

"I should like very much to speak to you about those manuscripts," he said. "Copies of some of them may, perhaps, be in the British Museum. Is it asking too much to inquire if you are disengaged this morning?"

"I am entirely at your service, Mr. Romayne." "If you will kindly call at my hotel, in an hour's time, I shall have looked over my notes, and shall be ready for you with a list of titles and dates. There is the address."

"With those words he advanced to take his leave of Lady Loring and Stella. Father Benwell was a man possessed of extraordinary power of foresight—but he was not infallible. Seeing that Romayne was on the point of leaving the house, and feeling that he had paved the way successfully for Romayne's attentions, he too readily assumed that there was nothing further to be gained by remaining in the gallery. In arriving at this conclusion he was additionally influenced by private and personal considerations. The interval before Penrose called at the hotel might be usefully filled up by some wise words of advice, relating to the religious uses to which he might turn his intercourse with Romayne, when he had successfully established himself in the confidence of his employer. There might, no doubt, be future opportunities for accomplishing this object, but Father Benwell was not a man to trust too implicitly in the future. The present occasion was, in respect of its certainty, the occasion that he preferred. Making one of his ready and plausible excuses, he returned with Penrose to the library, and so committed (as he himself disapproved at a later period) his mistakes in the long record of his life.

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it happened, in an attempt to Rome, written in:

"I had arranged with Penrose that he should call at my lodgings, and tell me how he had prospered at the first performance of his duties as secretary to Romayne."

"The moment he entered the room, the signs of disturbance in his face told that something serious had happened. I asked directly if there had been any disagreement between Romayne and himself."

"He repeated the word with every appearance of surprise. 'Disagreement?' he said. 'No words can do so sincerely I feel for Mr. Romayne, and how eager I am to be of service to him! 'Relieved so far, I naturally asked what had happened. Penrose betrayed a marked embarrassment in answering my question."

"I have innocently surprised a secret," he said, "on which I had no right to intrude. All that I can honorably tell you shall be told. I can only command me to speak when it is my duty toward a sorely-trying man to be silent, even to you."

"It is needless to say that I abstained from directly answering the strange inquiry. If I found it necessary to our interests to assert my spiritual authority, I was of course reserved to do it. 'Let me hear what you can tell,' I replied, 'and then I shall see.'"

"Upon this he spoke. I need scarcely recall to your memory how careful we were, in first planning the attempt to recover the Vange property, to assure ourselves of the promise of success, which the peculiar character of the present owner held out to us. In reporting what Penrose said, I communicate a discovery which I venture to think will be as welcome to you as it was to me."

"He began by reminding me of what I had myself told him in speaking of Romayne. 'You mentioned having heard from Lord Loring of a great sorrow or remorse from which he was suffering,' Penrose said; 'and you added that your informant obtained from mentioning that the nature of that remorse, or of the nervous malady connected with it, might be. I know what he suffers, and why he suffers, and with what noble resignation he submits to his affliction.'"

"There I stopped. You know the emotional nature of the man. He was only by a hard struggle with himself that he abstained from bursting into tears. I gave him time, and then I asked how he made the discovery."

"He hesitated, but he answered plainly, so far. 'We were sitting together at the table, looking over his notes and memoranda,' Penrose said, 'when he suddenly dropped the manuscript from which he was reading to me. A ghastly paleness overspread his face. He started up, and put both his hands to his ears as if he heard something dreadful, and was trying to deafen himself to it. I ran to the door to call for help. He stopped me; he spoke in faint, gasping tones, forbidding me to call any one in to witness what he suffered. 'It would soon be over. If I had not courage to remain with him I could go, and return when he was himself again. I so pitied him that I found the courage to remain. When it was over, he took me by the hand and thanked me. I had said by him like a friend, he said, and like a friend he would treat me. Sooner or later (those were his exact words) I must be taken into his confidence, and it should be now. He told me his melancholy story. I implore you, Father, don't ask me to repeat it. Be content if I tell you the effect of it on myself. The effect of the one consolation for him, it is in my holy religion. With all my heart I love myself to his conversion, and, in my inmost soul, I feel the conviction that I shall succeed.'"

"To this he alluded in this tone, Penrose spoke. I was restrained from pressing him to reveal Romayne's confession. The confession is of no consequence to you. You know how the moral force of Arthur's earnestness and enthusiasm for his otherwise weak character, I too, believe he will succeed."

"But, before I close these lines, there is a question which I must submit to your consideration. 'If you are already informed that there is a woman in love with Romayne if I can prevent it. But other women may try their temptations on him. Even the conversion from which we hope and expect so much, cannot be relied on to secure the restoration of the Vange property. It is not enough for us that the property is not entailed, and that there is no real relation with any pretensions to inherit it. While Romayne remains a marriageable man there is always the danger of his being seduced by some woman whose power of clothing their ideas in such chaste and eloquent language, or addressing themselves directly to the hearts of their hearers to a greater extent than the voice of a Scotchman. If he were concluded, another song would be sung. The preacher then arose again and said: 'If any of our visitors here desire to say a few words they are perfectly welcome.'"

One of the strangers present arose and explained the recently inaugurated custom of passing the contribution box. He said that it had not been originated by the Quakers, but that the chaplain desired to see the chapel enlarged, who desired that they might be accommodated more conveniently. He then passed the hat and got a liberal collection."

"Let us lay aside our seats and form in a circle." The settlers were placed beside the walls. A small circle of singers formed in the center of the chapel. Around the walls the other worshippers formed in double file, and marched, all joined in the Shaker hymns, and kept up constantly a swinging motion of their arms and hands in time with the rhythm. They took a very graceful, graceful step; the women leading and the small boys bringing up the rear. The gently form and bearing of one woman, apparently one of the Eldresses of the community, was noticed by every beholder. A handsome male girl handedkerchief and the real grace exhibited in her walk distinguished her from her sister Shakers. The slightest error of one very aged and infirm Shaker, who was participating in this. Four or five songs were sung, and accompanied by this strange, sober walk-around. One of the scap-locked lads was in the file with the Elder, and the little fellow

both lengthened his stride and drew down his face to equal proportions with the Elder.

The Lewiston (N. Y.) Journal says: Some of our readers have been favored by a service. Many have had to be the benefit of both we give a report of last Sunday's Shaker meeting at the little chapel on the border of Androscoggin county some eleven miles from Lewiston. Shaker village is perched on one of the most arduous hills of the country. Miles away you can see the large stone fortress-like building where one of the two Shaker families composing the community lives. The second family home is in a weather-stained, old-fashioned building, almost one hundred years of age. It was built in 1795, and the elder said, after service, last Sunday. 'It's not for a Christian to live to this side in perfect harmony with a new one.' The Shakers in their dignified dark coats and gaiters, gathered in their neat, plain gowns, glistering white pointed kerchiefs and their long, flowing, hair, were all engaged in marking from the house to the chapel when the reporter arrived. In the church the Shakers formed, standing in two squares, the males in one and the females in the other. The two divisions stood facing each other, with their hands clasped in front of them. In the rear ranks of each body stood the young women, who were dressed in their usual dress of gray and black, and had a dozen girls apparently four to fourteen years, marked contrast with the closely-concealed looks of the Shaker women. The little boys, who were dressed in their usual dress of blue and white, were all engaged in marking from the house to the chapel when the reporter arrived. In the church the Shakers formed, standing in two squares, the males in one and the females in the other. The two divisions stood facing each other, with their hands clasped in front of them. 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