

### **CHAPTER III - THE REGISTERED PACKET**

MOUNTJOY began by alluding to the second of Miss Henley's letters to her father, and to a passage in it which mentioned Mrs. Vimpany with expressions of the sincerest gratitude.

"I should like to know more," he said, "of a lady whose hospitality at home seems to equal her kindness as a fellow-traveller. Did you first meet with her on the railway?"

"She travelled by the same train to Dublin, with me and my maid, but not in the same carriage," Iris answered; "I was so fortunate as to meet with her on the voyage from Dublin to Holyhead. We had a rough crossing; and Rhoda suffered so dreadfully from sea-sickness that she frightened me. The stewardess was attending to ladies who were calling for her in all directions; I really don't know what misfortune might not have happened, if Mrs. Vimpany had not come forward in the kindest manner, and offered help. She knew so wonderfully well what was to be done, that she astonished me. 'I am the wife of a doctor,' she said; 'and I am only imitating what I have seen my husband do, when his assistance has been required, at sea, in weather like this.' In her poor state of health, Rhoda was too much exhausted to go on by the train, when we got to Holyhead. She is the best of good girls, and I am fond of her, as you know. If I had been by myself, I daresay I should have sent for medical help. What do you think dear Mrs. Vimpany offered to do? 'Your maid is only faint,' she said. 'Give her rest and some iced wine, and she will be well enough to go on by the slow train. Don't be frightened about her; I will wait with you.' And she did wait. Are there many strangers, Hugh, who are as unselfishly good to others as my chance-acquaintance in the steamboat?"

"Very few, I am afraid."

Mountjoy made that reply with some little embarrassment; conscious of a doubt of Mrs. Vimpany's disinterested kindness, which seemed to be unworthy of a just man.

Iris went on.

"Rhoda was sufficiently recovered," she said, "to travel by the next train, and there seemed to be no reason for feeling any more anxiety. But, after a time, the fatigue of the journey proved to be too much for her. The poor girl turned

pale--and fainted. Mrs. Vimpany revived her, but as it turned out, only for a while. She fell into another fainting fit; and my travelling-companion began to look anxious. There was some difficulty in restoring Rhoda to her senses. In dread of another attack, I determined to stop at the next station. It looked such a poor place, when we got to it, that I hesitated. Mrs. Vimpany persuaded me to go on. The next station, she said, was her station. 'Stop there,' she suggested, 'and let my husband look at the girl. I ought not perhaps to say it, but you will find no better medical man out of London.' I took the good creature's advice gratefully. What else could I do?"

"What would you have done," Mountjoy inquired, "if Rhoda had been strong enough to get to the end of the journey?"

"I should have gone on to London, and taken refuge in a lodging--you were in town, as I believed, and my father might relent in time. As it was, I felt my lonely position keenly. To meet with kind people, like Mr. Vimpany and his wife, was a real blessing to such a friendless creature as I am--to say nothing of the advantage to Rhoda, who is getting better every day. I should like you to see Mrs. Vimpany, if she is at home. She is a little formal and old fashioned in her manner--but I am sure you will be pleased with her. Ah! you look round the room! They are poor, miserably poor for persons in their position, these worthy friends of mine. I have had the greatest difficulty in persuading them to let me contribute my share towards the household expenses. They only yielded when I threatened to go to the inn. You are looking very serious, Hugh. Is it possible that you see some objection to my staying in this house?"

The drawing-room door was softly opened, at the moment when Iris put that question. A lady appeared on the threshold. Seeing the stranger, she turned to Iris.

"I didn't know, dear Miss Henley, that you had a visitor. Pray pardon my intrusion."

The voice was deep; the articulation was clear; the smile presented a certain modest dignity which gave it a value of its own. This was a woman who could make such a commonplace thing as an apology worth listening to. Iris stopped her as she was about to leave the room. "I was just wishing for you," she said. "Let me introduce my old friend, Mr. Mountjoy. Hugh, this is the lady who has been so kind to me--Mrs. Vimpany."

Hugh's impulse, under the circumstances, was to dispense with the formality of a bow, and to shake hands. Mrs. Vimpany met this friendly

advance with a suavity of action, not often seen in these days of movement without ceremony. She was a tall slim woman, of a certain age. Art had so cleverly improved her complexion that it almost looked like nature. Her cheeks had lost the plumpness of youth, but her hair (thanks again perhaps to Art) showed no signs of turning grey. The expression of her large dark eyes--placed perhaps a little too near her high aquiline nose--claimed admiration from any person who was so fortunate as to come within their range of view. Her hands, long, yellow, and pitiably thin, were used with a grace which checked to some extent their cruel betrayal of her age. Her dress had seen better days, but it was worn with an air which forbade it to look actually shabby. The faded lace that encircled her neck fell in scanty folds over her bosom. She sank into a chair by Hugh's side. "It was a great pleasure to me, Mr. Mountjoy, to offer my poor services to Miss Henley; I can't tell you how happy her presence makes me in our little house." The compliment was addressed to Iris with every advantage that smiles and tones could offer. Oddly artificial as it undoubtedly was, Mrs. Vimpany's manner produced nevertheless an agreeable impression. Disposed to doubt her at first, Mountjoy found that she was winning her way to a favourable change in his opinion. She so far interested him, that he began to wonder what her early life might have been, when she was young and handsome. He looked again at the portraits of actresses on the walls, and the plays on the bookshelf--and then (when she was speaking to Iris) he stole a sly glance at the doctor's wife. Was it possible that this remarkable woman had once been an actress? He attempted to put the value of that guess to the test by means of a complimentary allusion to the prints.

"My memory as a playgoer doesn't extend over many years," he began; "but I can appreciate the historical interest of your beautiful prints." Mrs. Vimpany bowed gracefully--and dumbly. Mountjoy tried again. "One doesn't often see the famous actresses of past days," he proceeded, "so well represented on the walls of an English house."

This time, he had spoken to better purpose. Mrs. Vimpany answered him in words.

"I have many pleasant associations with the theatre," she said, "first formed in the time of my girlhood."

Mountjoy waited to hear something more. Nothing more was said. Perhaps this reticent lady disliked looking back through a long interval of years, or perhaps she had her reasons for leaving Mountjoy's guess at the truth still lost in doubt. In either case, she deliberately dropped the subject. Iris took it up. Sitting by the only table in the room, she was in a position which placed

her exactly opposite to one of the prints--the magnificent portrait of Mrs. Siddons as The Tragic Muse.

"I wonder if Mrs. Siddons was really as beautiful as that?" she said, pointing to the print. "Sir Joshua Reynolds is reported to have sometimes flattered his sitters."

Mrs. Vimpany's solemn self-possessed eyes suddenly brightened; the name of the great actress seemed to interest her. On the point, apparently, of speaking, she dropped the subject of Mrs. Siddons as she had dropped the subject of the theatre. Mountjoy was left to answer Iris.

"We are none of us old enough," he reminded her, "to decide whether Sir Joshua's brush has been guilty of flattery or not." He turned to Mrs. Vimpany, and attempted to look into her life from a new point of view. "When Miss Henley was so fortunate as to make your acquaintance," he said, "you were travelling in Ireland. Was it your first visit to that unhappy country?"

"I have been more than once in Ireland."

Having again deliberately disappointed Mountjoy, she was assisted in keeping clear of the subject of Ireland by a fortunate interruption. It was the hour of delivery by the afternoon-post. The servant came in with a small sealed packet, and a slip of printed paper in her hand.

"It's registered, ma'am," the woman announced. "The postman says you are to please sign this. And he seems to be in a hurry."

She placed the packet and the slip of paper on the table, near the inkstand. Having signed the receipt, Mrs. Vimpany took up the packet, and examined the address. She instantly looked at Iris, and looked away again. "Will you excuse me for a moment?" saying this she left the room, without opening the packet.

The moment the door closed on her, Iris started up, and hurried to Mountjoy.

"Oh, Hugh," she said, "I saw the address on that packet when the servant put it on the table!"

"My dear, what is there to excite you in the address?"

"Don't speak so loud! She may be listening outside the door."

Not only the words, but the tone in which they were spoken, amazed Mountjoy. "Your friend, Mrs. Vimpany!" he exclaimed.

"Mrs. Vimpany was afraid to open the packet in our presence," Iris went on: "you must have seen that. The handwriting is familiar to me; I am certain of the person who wrote the address."

"Well? And who is the person?"

She whispered in his ear:

"Lord Harry."