

CHAPTER IV - THE GAME: MOUNTJOY LOSES

SURPRISE silenced Hugh for the moment. Iris understood the look that he fixed on her, and answered it. "I am quite sure," she told him, "of what I say."

Mountjoy's well-balanced mind hesitated at rushing to a conclusion.

"I am sure you are convinced of what you tell me," he said. "But mistakes do sometimes happen in forming a judgment of handwriting."

In the state of excitement that now possessed her, Iris was easily irritated; she was angry with Hugh for only supposing that she might have made a mistake. He had himself, as she reminded him, seen Lord Harry's handwriting in past days. Was it possible to be mistaken in those bold thickly-written characters, with some of the letters so quaintly formed? "Oh, Hugh, I am miserable enough as it is," she broke out; "don't distract me by disputing what I know! Think of a woman so kind, so disinterested, so charming--the very opposite of a false creature--think of Mrs. Vimpany having deceived me!"

There was not the slightest reason, thus far, for placing that interpretation on what had happened. Mountjoy gently, very gently, remonstrated.

"My dear, we really don't know yet that Mrs. Vimpany has been acting under Lord Harry's instructions. Wait a little before you suspect your fellow-traveller of offering her services for the purpose of deceiving you."

Iris was angry with him again: "Why did Mrs. Vimpany never tell me she knew Lord Harry? Isn't that suspicious?"

Mountjoy smiled. "Let me put a question on my side," he said. "Did you tell Mrs. Vimpany you knew Lord Harry?" Iris made no reply; her face spoke for her. "Well, then," he urged, "is your silence suspicious? I am far, mind, from saying that this may not be a very unpleasant discovery. Only let us be sure first that we are right."

With most of a woman's merits, Miss Henley had many of a woman's faults. Still holding to her own conclusion, she asked how they could expect to be sure of anything if they addressed their inquiries to a person who had already deceived them.

Mountjoy's inexhaustible indulgence still made allowances for her. "When Mrs. Vimpany comes back," he said, "I will find an opportunity of mentioning Lord Harry's name. If she tells us that she knows him, there will be good reason in that one circumstance, as it seems to me, for continuing to trust her."

"Suppose she shams ignorance," Iris persisted, "and looks as if she had never heard of his name before?"

"In that case, I shall own that I was wrong, and shall ask you to forgive me."

The finer and better nature of Iris recovered its influence at these words. "It is I who ought to beg pardon," she said. "Oh, I wish I could think before I speak: how insolent and ill-tempered I have been! But suppose I turn out to be right, Hugh, what will you do then?"

"Then, my dear, it will be my duty to take you and your maid away from this house, and to tell your father what serious reasons there are"---- He abruptly checked himself. Mrs. Vimpany had returned; she was in perfect possession of her lofty courtesy, sweetened by the modest dignity of her smile.

"I have left you, Miss Henley, in such good company," she said, with a gracious inclination of her head in the direction of Mountjoy, "that I need hardly repeat my apologies--unless, indeed, I am interrupting a confidential conversation."

It was possible that Iris might have betrayed herself, when the doctor's wife had looked at her after examining the address on the packet. In this case Mrs. Vimpany's allusion to "a confidential conversation" would have operated as a warning to a person of experience in the by-ways of deceit. Mountjoy's utmost exertion of cunning was not capable of protecting him on such conditions as these. The opportunity of trying his proposed experiment with Lord Harry's name seemed to have presented itself already. He rashly seized on it.

"You have interrupted nothing that was confidential," he hastened to assure Mrs. Vimpany. "We have been speaking of a reckless young gentleman, who is an acquaintance of ours. If what I hear is true, he has already become public property; his adventures have found their way into some of the newspapers."

Here, if Mrs. Vimpany had answered Hugh's expectations, she ought to have asked who the young gentleman was. She merely listened in polite silence.

With a woman's quickness of perception, Iris saw that Mountjoy had not only pounced on his opportunity prematurely, but had spoken with a downright directness of allusion which must at once have put such a ready-witted person as Mrs. Vimpany on her guard. In trying to prevent him from pursuing his unfortunate experiment in social diplomacy, Iris innocently repeated Mountjoy's own mistake. She, too, seized her opportunity prematurely. That is to say, she was rash enough to change the subject.

"You were talking just now, Hugh, of our friend's adventures," she said; "I am afraid you will find yourself involved in an adventure of no very agreeable kind, if you engage a bed at the inn. I never saw a more wretched-looking place."

It was one of Mrs. Vimpany's many merits that she seldom neglected an opportunity of setting her friends at their ease.

"No, no, dear Miss Henley," she hastened to say; "the inn is really a more clean and comfortable place than you suppose. A hard bed and a scarcity of furniture are the worst evils which your friend has to fear. Do you know," she continued, addressing herself to Mountjoy, "that I was reminded of a friend of mine, when you spoke just now of the young gentleman whose adventures are in the newspapers. Is it possible that you referred to the brother of the present Earl of Norland? A handsome young Irishman--with whom I first became acquainted many years since. Am I right in supposing that you and Miss Henley know Lord Harry?" she asked.

What more than this could an unprejudiced mind require? Mrs. Vimpany had set herself right with a simplicity that defied suspicion. Iris looked at Mountjoy. He appeared to know when he was beaten. Having acknowledged that Lord Harry was the young gentleman of whom he and Miss Henley had been speaking, he rose to take leave.

After what had passed, Iris felt the necessity of speaking privately to Hugh. The necessary excuse presented itself in the remote situation of the inn. "You will never find your way back," she said, "through the labyrinth of crooked streets in this old town. Wait for me a minute, and I will be your guide."

Mrs. Vimpany protested. "My dear! let the servant show the way."

Iris held gaily to her resolution, and ran away to her room. Mrs. Vimpany yielded with her best grace. Miss Henley's motive could hardly have been plainer to her, if Miss Henley had confessed it herself. "What a charming girl!" the doctor's amiable wife said to Mountjoy, when they were alone. "If I were a man, Miss Iris is just the young lady that I should fall in love with." She looked significantly at Mountjoy. Nothing came of it. She went on: "Miss Henley must have had many opportunities of being married; but the right man has, I fear, not yet presented himself." Once more her eloquent eyes consulted Mountjoy, and once more nothing came of it. Some women are easily discouraged. Impenetrable Mrs. Vimpany was one of the other women; she had not done with Mountjoy yet--she invited him to dinner on the next day.

"Our early hour is three o'clock," she said modestly. "Pray join us. I hope to have the pleasure of introducing my husband."

Mountjoy had his reasons for wishing to see the husband. As he accepted the invitation, Miss Henley returned to accompany him to the inn.

Iris put the inevitable question to Hugh as soon as they were out of the doctor's house--"What do you say of Mrs. Vimpany now?"

"I say that she must have been once an actress," Mountjoy answered; "and that she carries her experience of the stage into private life."

"What do you propose to do next?"

"I propose to wait, and see Mrs. Vimpany's husband to-morrow."

"Why?"

"Mrs. Vimpany, my dear, is too clever for me. If--observe, please, that I do her the justice of putting it in that way--if she is really Lord Harry's creature, employed to keep watch on you, and to inform him of your next place of residence in England, I own that she has completely deceived me. In that case, it is just possible that the husband is not such a finished and perfect humbug as the wife. I may be able to see through him. I can but try."

Iris sighed. "I almost hope you may not succeed," she said.

Mountjoy was puzzled, and made no attempt to conceal it. "I thought you only wanted to get at the truth," he answered.

"My mind might be easier, perhaps, if I was left in doubt," she suggested. "A perverse way of thinking has set up my poor opinion against yours. But I am getting back to my better sense. I believe you were entirely right when you tried to prevent me from rushing to conclusions; it is more than likely that I have done Mrs. Vimpany an injustice. Oh, Hugh, I ought to keep a friend--I who have so few friends--when I have got one! And there is another feeling in me which I must not conceal from you. When I remember Lord Harry's noble conduct in trying to save poor Arthur, I cannot believe him capable of such hateful deceit as consenting to our separation, and then having me secretly watched by a spy. What monstrous inconsistency! Can anybody believe it? Can anybody account for it?"

"I think I can account for it, Iris, if you will let me make the attempt. You are mistaken to begin with."

"How am I mistaken?"

"You shall see. There is no such creature as a perfectly consistent human being on the face of the earth--and, strange as it may seem to you, the human beings themselves are not aware of it. The reason for this curious state of things is not far to seek. How can people who are ignorant--as we see every day--of their own characters be capable of correctly estimating the characters of others? Even the influence of their religion fails to open their eyes to the truth. In the Prayer which is the most precious possession of Christendom, their lips repeat the entreaty that they may not be led into temptation--but their minds fail to draw the inference. If that pathetic petition means anything, it means that virtuous men and women are capable of becoming vicious men and women, if a powerful temptation puts them to the test. Every Sunday, devout members of the congregation in church--models of excellence in their own estimation, and in the estimation of their neighbours--declare that they have done those things which they ought not to have done, and that there is no health in them. Will you believe that they are encouraged by their Prayer-books to present this sad exposure of the frailty of their own admirable characters? How inconsistent--and yet how entirely true! Lord Harry, as you rightly say, behaved nobly in trying to save my dear lost brother. He ought, as you think, and as other people think, to be consistently noble, after that, in all his thoughts and actions, to the end of his life. Suppose that temptation does try him--such temptation, Iris, as you innocently present--why doesn't he offer a superhuman resistance? You might as well ask, Why is he a mortal man? How inconsistent, how improbable, that he should have tendencies to evil in him, as well as tendencies to good! Ah, I see you don't like this. It would be infinitely more agreeable (wouldn't it?) if Lord Harry was one of the entirely

consistent characters which are sometimes presented in works of fiction. Our good English readers are charmed with the man, the woman, or the child, who is introduced to them by the kind novelist as a being without faults. Do they stop to consider whether this is a true picture of humanity? It would be a terrible day for the book if they ever did that. But the book is in no danger. The readers would even fail to discover the falseness of the picture, if they were presented to themselves as perfect characters. 'We mustn't say so, but how wonderfully like us!' There would be the only impression produced. I am not trying to dishearten you; I want to encourage you to look at humanity from a wider and truer point of view. Do not be too readily depressed, if you find your faith shaken in a person whom you have hitherto believed to be good. That person has been led into temptation. Wait till time shows you that the evil influence is not everlasting, and that the good influence will inconsistently renew your faith out of the very depths of your despair. Humanity, in general, is neither perfectly good nor perfectly wicked: take it as you find it. Is this a hard lesson to learn? Well! it's easy to do what other people do, under similar circumstances. Listen to the unwelcome truth to-day, my dear; and forget it to-morrow."

They parted at the door of the inn.