

CHAPTER V - THE GAME: MOUNTJOY PLAYS A NEW CARD

MR. VIMPANY (of the College of Surgeons) was a burly man, heavily built from head to foot. His bold round eyes looked straight at his fellow-creatures with an expression of impudent good humour; his whiskers were bushy, his hands were big, his lips were thick, his legs were solid. Add to this a broad sunburnt face, and a grey coat with wide tails, a waistcoat with a check pattern, and leather riding-gaiters--and no stranger could have failed to mistake Mr. Vimpany for a farmer of the old school. He was proud of the false impression that he created. "Nature built me to be a farmer," he used to say. "But my poor foolish old mother was a lady by birth, and she insisted on her son being a professional man. I hadn't brains for the Law, or money for the Army, or morals for the Church. And here I am a country doctor--the one representative of slavery left in the nineteenth century. You may not believe me, but I never see a labourer at the plough that I don't envy him."

This was the husband of the elegant lady with the elaborate manners. This was the man who received Mountjoy with a "Glad to see you, sir," and a shake of the hand that hurt him.

"Coarse fare," said Mr. Vimpany, carving a big joint of beef; "but I can't afford anything better. Only a pudding to follow, and a glass of glorious old sherry. Miss Henley is good enough to excuse it--and my wife's used to it--and you will put up with it, Mr. Mountjoy, if you are half as amiable as you look. I'm an old-fashioned man. The pleasure of a glass of wine with you, sir."

Hugh's first experience of the "glorious old sherry" led him to a discovery, which proved to be more important than he was disposed to consider it at the moment. He merely observed, with some amusement, that Mr. Vimpany smacked his lips in hearty approval of the worst sherry that his guest had ever tasted. Here, plainly self-betrayed, was a medical man who was an exception to a general rule in the profession--here was a doctor ignorant of the difference between good wine and bad!

Both the ladies were anxious to know how Mountjoy had passed the night at the inn. He had only time to say that there was nothing to complain of, when Mr. Vimpany burst into an explosion of laughter.

"Oh, but you must have had something to complain of!" said the big doctor. "I would bet a hundred, if I could afford it, that the landlady tried to poison

you with her sour French wine."

"Do you speak of the claret at the inn, after having tasted it?" Mountjoy asked.

"What do you take me for?" cried Mr. Vimpany. "After all I have heard of that claret, I am not fool enough to try it myself, I can tell you." Mountjoy received this answer in silence. The doctor's ignorance and the doctor's prejudice, in the matter of wine, had started a new train of thought in Hugh's mind, which threatened serious consequences to Mr. Vimpany himself. There was a pause at the table; nobody spoke. The doctor saw condemnation of his rudeness expressed in his wife's face. He made a rough apology to Mountjoy, who was still preoccupied. "No offence, I hope? It's in the nature of me, sir, to speak my mind. If I could fawn and flatter, I should have got on better in my profession. I'm what they call a rough diamond. No, offence, I say?"

"None whatever, Mr. Vimpany."

"That's right! Try another glass of sherry."

Mountjoy took the sherry.

Iris looked at him, lost in surprise. It was unlike Hugh to be interested in a stranger's opinion of wine. It was unlike him to drink wine which was evidently not to his taste. And it was especially unlike his customary courtesy to let himself fall into thought at dinner-time, when there were other persons at the table. Was he ill? Impossible to look at him, and not see that he was in perfect health. What did it mean?

Finding Mountjoy inattentive, Mr. Vimpany addressed himself to Iris.

"I had to ride hard, Miss Henley, to get home in time for dinner. There are patients, I must tell you, who send for the doctor, and then seem to think they know more about it than the very man whom they have called in to cure them. It isn't he who tells them what their illness is; it's they who tell him. They dispute about the medical treatment that's best for them, and the one thing they are never tired of doing is talking about their symptoms. It was an old man's gabble that kept me late to-day. However, the Squire, as they call him in these parts, is a patient with a long purse; I am obliged to submit."

"A gentleman of the old school, dear Miss Henley," Mrs. Vimpany explained.

"Immensely rich. Is he better?" she asked, turning to her husband.

"Better?" cried the outspoken doctor. "Pooh! there's nothing the matter with him but gluttony. He went to London, and consulted a great man, a humbug with a handle to his name. The famous physician got rid of him in no time--sent him abroad to boil himself in foreign baths. He came home again worse than ever, and consulted poor Me. I found him at dinner--a perfect feast, I give you my word of honour!--and the old fool gorging himself till he was black in the face. His wine, I should have said, was not up to the mark; wanted body and flavour, you know. Ah, Mr. Mountjoy, this seems to interest you; reminds you of the landlady's wine--eh? Well, sir, how do you think I treated the Squire? Emptied his infirm old inside with an emetic--and there he was on his legs again. Whenever he overeats himself he sends for me; and pays liberally. I ought to be grateful to him, and I am. Upon my soul, I believe I should be in the bankruptcy court but for the Squire's stomach. Look at my wife! She's shocked at me. We ought to keep up appearances, my dear? Not I! When I am poor, I say I am poor. When I cure a patient, I make no mystery of it; everybody's welcome to know how it's done. Don't be down-hearted, Arabella; nature never meant your husband for a doctor, and there's the long and the short of it. Another glass of sherry, Mr. Mountjoy?"

All social ceremonies--including the curious English custom which sends the ladies upstairs, after dinner, and leaves the gentlemen at the table--found a devoted adherent in Mrs. Vimpany. She rose as if she had been presiding at a banquet, and led Miss Henley affectionately to the drawing-room. Iris glanced at Hugh. No; his mind was not at ease yet; the preoccupied look had not left his face.

Jovial Mr. Vimpany pushed the bottle across the table to his guest, and held out a handful of big black cigars.

"Now for the juice of the grape," he cried, "and the best cigar in all England!"

He had just filled his glass, and struck a light for his cigar, when the servant came in with a note. Some men relieve their sense of indignation in one way, and some in another. The doctor's form of relief was an oath. "Talk about slavery!" he shouted. "Find me such a slave in all Africa as a man in my profession. There isn't an hour of the day or night that he can call his own. Here's a stupid old woman with an asthma, who has got another spasmodic attack--and I must leave my dinner-table and my friend, just as we are enjoying ourselves. I have half a mind not to go."

The inattentive guest suddenly set himself right in his host's estimation. Hugh remonstrated with an appearance of interest in the case, which the doctor interpreted as a compliment to himself: "Oh, Mr. Vimpany, humanity! humanity!"

"Oh, Mr. Mountjoy, money! money!" the facetious doctor answered. "The old lady is our Mayor's mother, sir. You don't seem to be quick at taking a joke. Make your mind easy; I shall pocket my fee."

As soon as he had closed the door, Hugh Mountjoy uttered a devout ejaculation. "Thank God!" he said--and walked up and down the room, free to think without interruption at last.

The subject of his meditations was the influence of intoxication in disclosing the hidden weaknesses and vices of a man's character by exhibiting them just as they are, released from the restraint which he exercises over himself when he is sober. That there was a weak side, and probably a vicious side, in Mr. Vimpany's nature it was hardly possible to doubt. His blustering good humour, his audacious self-conceit, the tones of his voice, the expression in his eyes, all revealed him (to use one expressive word) as a humbug. Let drink subtly deprive him of his capacity for self-concealment! and the true nature of his wife's association with Lord Harry might sooner or later show itself--say, in after-dinner talk, under skilful management. The right method of entrapping him into a state of intoxication (which might have presented serious difficulties under other circumstances) was suggested, partly by his ignorance of the difference between good wine and bad, and partly by Mountjoy's knowledge of the excellent quality of the landlady's claret. He had recognised, as soon as he tasted it, that finest vintage of Bordeaux, which conceals its true strength--to a gross and ignorant taste--under the exquisite delicacy of its flavour. Encourage Mr. Vimpany by means of a dinner at the inn, to give his opinion as a man whose judgment in claret was to be seriously consulted--and permit him also to discover that Hugh was rich enough to have been able to buy the wine--and the attainment of the end in view would be simply a question of time. There was certainly the chance to be reckoned with, that his thick head might prove to be too strong for the success of the experiment. Mountjoy determined to try it, and did try it nevertheless.

Mr. Vimpany returned from his medical errand, thoroughly well satisfied with himself.

"The Mayor's mother has reason to thank you, sir," he announced. "If you hadn't hurried me away, the wretched old creature would have been choked."

A regular stand-up fight, by Jupiter, between death and the doctor!--and the doctor has won! Give me the reward of merit. Pass the bottle."

He took up the decanter, and looked at it.

"Why, what have you been about?" he asked. "I made up my mind that I should want the key of the cellar when I came back, and I don't believe you have drunk a drop in my absence. What does it mean?"

"It means that I am not worthy of your sherry," Mountjoy answered. "The Spanish wines are too strong for my weak digestion."

Mr. Vimpany burst into one of his explosions of laughter. "You miss the landlady's vinegar--eh?"

"Yes, I do! Wait a minute, doctor; I have a word to say on my side--and, like you, I mean what I say. The landlady's vinegar is some of the finest Chateau Margaux I have ever met with--thrown away on ignorant people who are quite unworthy of it."

The doctor's natural insolence showed itself. "You have bought this wonderful wine, of course?" he said satirically.

"That," Mountjoy answered, "is just what I have done."

For once in his life, Mr. Vimpany's self-sufficient readiness of speech failed him. He stared at his guest in dumb amazement. On this occasion, Mountjoy improved the opportunity to good purpose. Mr. Vimpany accepted with the utmost readiness an invitation to dine on the next day at the inn. But he made a condition. "In case I don't agree with you about that Chateau--what-you-call-it," he said, "you won't mind my sending home for a bottle of sherry?"

The next event of the day was a visit to the most interesting monument of antiquity in the town. In the absence of the doctor, caused by professional engagements, Miss Henley took Mountjoy to see the old church--and Mrs. Vimpany accompanied them, as a mark of respect to Miss Henley's friend.

When there was a chance of being able to speak confidentially, Iris was eager in praising the doctor's wife. "You can't imagine, Hugh, how agreeable she has been, and how entirely she has convinced me that I was wrong, shamefully wrong, in thinking of her as I did. She sees that you dislike her, and yet she speaks so nicely of you. 'Your clever friend enjoys your society,'

she said; 'pray accompany me when I take him to see the church.' How unselfish!"

Mountjoy kept his own counsel. The generous impulses which sometimes led Iris astray were, as he well knew, beyond the reach of remonstrance. His own opinion of Mrs. Vimpany still pronounced steadily against her. Prepared for discoveries, on the next day, which might prove too serious to be trifled with, he now did his best to provide for future emergencies.

After first satisfying himself that there was nothing in the present state of the maid's health which need detain her mistress at Honeybuzzard, he next completed his preparations by returning to the inn, and writing to Mr. Henley. With strict regard to truth, his letter presented the daughter's claim on the father under a new point of view. Whatever the end of it might be, Mr. Henley was requested to communicate his intentions by telegraph. Will you receive Iris? was the question submitted. The answer expected was: Yes or No.