

CHAPTER VI - THE GAME: MOUNTJOY WINS

MR. HENLEY's telegram arrived at the inn the next morning.

He was willing to receive his daughter, but not unreservedly. The message was characteristic of the man: "Yes--on trial." Mountjoy was not shocked, was not even surprised. He knew that the successful speculations, by means of which Mr. Henley had accumulated his wealth, had raised against him enemies, who had spread scandalous reports which had never been completely refuted. The silent secession of friends, in whose fidelity he trusted, had hardened the man's heart and embittered his nature. Strangers in distress, who appealed to the rich retired merchant for help, found in their excellent references to character the worst form of persuasion that they could have adopted. Paupers without a rag of reputation left to cover them, were the objects of charity whom Mr. Henley relieved. When he was asked to justify his conduct, he said: "I have a sympathy with bad characters---I am one of them myself."

With the arrival of the dinner hour the doctor appeared, in no very amiable humour, at the inn.

"Another hard day's work," he said; "I should sink under it, if I hadn't a prospect of getting rid of my practice here. London--or the neighbourhood of London--there's the right place for a man like Me. Well? Where's the wonderful wine? Mind! I'm Tom-Tell-Truth; if I don't like your French tippie, I shall say so."

The inn possessed no claret glasses; they drank the grand wine in tumblers as if it had been vin ordinaire.

Mr. Vimpany showed that he was acquainted with the formalities proper to the ceremony of tasting. He filled his makeshift glass, he held it up to the light, and looked at the wine severely; he moved the tumbler to and fro under his nose, and smelt at it again and again; he paused and reflected; he tasted the claret as cautiously as if he feared it might be poisoned; he smacked his lips, and emptied his glass at a draught; lastly, he showed some consideration for his host's anxiety, and pronounced sentence on the wine.

"Not so good as you think it, sir. But nice light claret; clean and wholesome. I hope you haven't given too much for it?"

Thus far, Hugh had played a losing game patiently. His reward had come at last. After what the doctor had just said to him, he saw the winning card safe in his own hand.

The bad dinner was soon over. No soup, of course; fish, in the state of preservation usually presented by a decayed country town; steak that rivalled the toughness of india-rubber; potatoes whose aspect said, "stranger, don't eat us"; pudding that would have produced a sense of discouragement, even in the mind of a child; and the famous English cheese which comes to us, oddly enough, from the United States, and stings us vindictively when we put it into our mouths. But the wine, the glorious wine, would have made amends to anybody but Mr. Vimpany for the woeful deficiencies of the food. Tumbler-full after tumbler-full of that noble vintage poured down his thirsty and ignorant throat; and still he persisted in declaring that it was nice light stuff, and still he unforgivingly bore in mind the badness of the dinner.

"The feeding here," said this candid man, "is worse if possible than the feeding at sea, when I served as doctor on board a passenger-steamer. Shall I tell you how I lost my place? Oh, say so plainly, if you don't think my little anecdote worth listening to!"

"My dear sir, I am waiting to hear it."

"Very good. No offence, I hope? That's right! Well, sir, the captain of the ship complained of me to the owners; I wouldn't go round, every morning, and knock at the ladies' cabin-doors, and ask how they felt after a sea-sick night. Who doesn't know what they feel, without knocking at their doors? Let them send for the doctor when they want him. That was how I understood my duty; and there was the line of conduct that lost me my place. Pass the wine. Talking of ladies, what do you think of my wife? Did you ever see such distinguished manners before? My dear fellow, I have taken a fancy to you. Shake hands. I'll tell you another little anecdote. Where do you think my wife picked up her fashionable airs and graces? Ho! ho! On the stage! The highest branch of the profession, sir--a tragic actress. If you had seen her in Lady Macbeth, Mrs. Vimpany would have made your flesh creep. Look at me, and feast your eyes on a man who is above hypocritical objections to the theatre. Haven't I proved it by marrying an actress? But we don't mention it here. The savages in this beastly place wouldn't employ me, if they knew I had married a stage-player. Hullo! The bottle's empty again. Ha! here's another bottle, full. I love a man who has always got a full bottle to offer his friend. Shake hands. I say, Mountjoy, tell

me on your sacred word of honour, can you keep a secret? My wife's secret, sir! Stop! let me look at you again. I thought I saw you smile. If a man smiles at me, when I am opening my whole heart to him, by the living jingo, I would knock that man down at his own table! What? you didn't smile? I apologise. Your hand again; I drink your health in your own good wine. Where was I? What was I talking about?"

Mountjoy carefully humoured his interesting guest.

"You were about to honour me," he said, "by taking me into your confidence." Mr. Vimpany stared in tipsy bewilderment. Mountjoy tried again in plainer language: "You were going to tell me a secret."

This time, the doctor grasped the idea. He looked round cunningly to the door. "Any eavesdroppers?" he asked. "Hush! Whisper--this is serious--whisper! What was it I was going to tell you? What was the secret, old boy?"

Mountjoy answered a little too readily: "I think it related to Mrs. Vimpany."

Mrs. Vimpany's husband threw himself back in his chair, snatched a dirty handkerchief out of his pocket, and began to cry.

"Here's a false friend!" the creature whimpered. "Asks me to dinner, and takes advantage of my dependent situation to insult my wife. The loveliest of women, the sweetest of women, the innocentest of women. Oh, my wife! my wife!" He suddenly threw his handkerchief to the other end of the room, and burst out laughing. "Ho! ho! Mountjoy, what an infernal fool you must be to take me seriously. I can act, too. Do you think I care about my wife? She was a fine woman once: she's a bundle of old rags now. But she has her merits. Hush! I want to know something. Have you got a lord among your circle of acquaintance?"

Experience made Mountjoy more careful; perhaps a little too careful. He only said "Yes."

The doctor's dignity asserted itself. "That's a short answer, sir, to a man in my position. If you want me to believe you, mention your friend's name."

Here was a chance at last! "His name;" Mountjoy began, "is Lord Harry--"

Mr. Vimpany lost his dignity in an instant. He struck his heavy fist on the table, with a blow that made the tumblers jump.

"Coincidence!" he cried. "How wonderful--no; that's not the word--providential is the word--how providential are coincidences! I mean, of course, to a rightly constituted mind. Let nobody contradict me! When I say a rightly constituted mind I speak seriously; and a young man like you will be all the better for it. Mountjoy! dear Mountjoy! jolly Mountjoy! my wife's lord is your lord--Lord Harry. No; none of your nonsense--I won't have any more wine. Yes, I will; it might hurt your feelings if I didn't drink with you. Pass the bottle. Ha! That's a nice ring you've got on your finger. Perhaps you think it valuable? It's nothing, sir; it's dross, it's dirt, compared to my wife's diamond pin! There's a jewel, if you like! It will be worth a fortune to us when we sell it. A gift, dear sir! I'm afraid I've been too familiar with you. Speaking as a born gentleman, I beg to present my respects, and I call you 'dear sir.' Did I tell you the diamond pin was a gift? It's nothing of the sort; we are under no obligation; my wife, my admirable wife, has earned that diamond pin. By registered post; and what I call a manly letter from Lord Harry. He is deeply obliged (I give you the sense of it) by what my wife has done for him; ready money is scarce with my lord; he sends a family jewel, with his love. Oh, I'm not jealous. He's welcome to love Mrs. Vimpany, in her old age, if he likes. Did you say that, sir? Did you say that Lord Harry, or any man, was welcome to love Mrs. Vimpany? I have a great mind to throw this bottle at your head. No, I won't; it's wasting good wine! How kind of you to give me good wine. Who are you? I don't like dining with a stranger. Do you know any friend of mine? Do you know a man named Mountjoy? Do you know two men named Mountjoy? No: you don't. One of them is dead: killed by those murdering scoundrels what do you call them? Eh, what?" The doctor's voice began to falter, his head dropped; he slumbered suddenly and woke suddenly, and began talking again suddenly. "Would you like to be made acquainted with Lord Harry? I'll give you a sketch of his character before I introduce him. Between ourselves, he's a desperate wretch. Do you know why he employed my wife, my admirable wife? You will agree with me; he ought to have looked after his young woman himself. We've got his young woman safe in our house. A nice girl. Not my style; my medical knowledge certifies she's cold-blooded. Lord Harry has only to come over here and find her. Why the devil doesn't he come? What is it keeps him in Ireland? Do you know? I seem to have forgotten. My own belief is I've got softening of the brain. What's good for softening of the brain? There isn't a doctor living who won't tell you the right remedy--wine. Pass the wine. If this claret is worth a farthing, it's worth a guinea a bottle. I ask you in confidence; did you ever hear of such a fool as my wife's lord? His name escapes me. No matter; he stops in Ireland--hunting. Hunting what? The fox? Nothing so noble; hunting assassins. He's got some grudge against one of them. Means to kill one of them. A word in your ear; they'll kill him. Do you ever bet? Five to one, he's a dead man before the end of the week. When is the end of the

week? Tuesday, Wednesday--no, Saturday--that's the beginning of the week--no, it isn't--the beginning of the week isn't the Sabbath--Sunday, of course--we are not Christians, we are Jews--I mean we are Jews, we are not Christians--I mean--"

The claret got the better of his tongue, at last. He mumbled and muttered; he sank back in his chair; he chuckled; he hiccupped; he fell asleep.

All and more than all that Mountjoy feared, he had now discovered. In a state of sobriety, the doctor was probably one of those men who are always ready to lie. In a state of intoxication the utterances of his drunken delirium might unconsciously betray the truth. The reason which he had given for Lord Harry's continued absence in Ireland, could not be wisely rejected as unworthy of belief. It was in the reckless nature of the wild lord to put his own life in peril, in the hope of revenging Arthur Mountjoy on the wretch who had killed him. Taking this bad news for granted, was there any need to distress Iris by communicating the motive which detained Lord Harry in his own country? Surely not!

And, again, was there any immediate advantage to be gained by revealing the true character of Mrs. Vimpany, as a spy, and, worse still, a spy who was paid? In her present state of feeling, Iris would, in all probability, refuse to believe it.

Arriving at these conclusions, Hugh looked at the doctor snoring and choking in an easy-chair. He had not wasted the time and patience devoted to the stratagem which had now successfully reached its end. After what he had just heard--thanks to the claret--he could not hesitate to accomplish the speedy removal of Iris from Mr. Vimpany's house; using her father's telegram as the only means of persuasion on which it was possible to rely. Mountjoy left the inn without ceremony, and hurried away to Iris in the hope of inducing her to return to London with him that night.