

CHAPTER VII - DOCTORING THE DOCTOR

ASKING for Miss Henley at the doctor's door, Hugh was informed that she had gone out, with her invalid maid, for a walk. She had left word, if Mr. Mountjoy called in her absence, to beg that he would kindly wait for her return.

On his way up to the drawing-room, Mountjoy heard Mrs. Vimpany's sonorous voice occupied, as he supposed, in reading aloud. The door being opened for him, he surprised her, striding up and down the room with a book in her hand; grandly declaiming without anybody to applaud her. After what Hugh had already heard, he could only conclude that reminiscences of her theatrical career had tempted the solitary actress to make a private appearance, for her own pleasure, in one of those tragic characters to which her husband had alluded. She recovered her self-possession on Mountjoy's appearance, with the ease of a mistress of her art. "Pardon me," she said, holding up her book with one hand, and tapping it indicatively with the other: "Shakespeare carries me out of myself. A spark of the poet's fire burns in the poet's humble servant. May I hope that I have made myself understood? You look as if you had a fellow-feeling for me."

Mountjoy did his best to fill the sympathetic part assigned to him, and only succeeded in showing what a bad actor he would have been, if he had gone on the stage. Under the sedative influence thus administered, Mrs. Vimpany put away her book, and descended at once from the highest poetry to the lowest prose.

"Let us return to domestic events," she said indulgently. "Have the people at the inn given you a good dinner?"

"The people did their best," Mountjoy answered cautiously.

"Has my husband returned with you?" Mrs. Vimpany went on.

Mountjoy began to regret that he had not waited for Iris in the street. He was obliged to acknowledge that the doctor had not returned with him.

"Where is Mr. Vimpany?"

"At the inn."

"What is he doing there?"

Mountjoy hesitated. Mrs. Vimpany rose again into the regions of tragic poetry. She stepped up to him, as if he had been Macbeth, and she was ready to use the daggers. "I understand but too well," she declared in terrible tones. "My wretched husband's vices are known to me. Mr. Vimpany is intoxicated."

Hugh tried to make the best of it. "Only asleep," he said. Mrs. Vimpany looked at him once more. This time, it was Queen Katharine looking at Cardinal Wolsey. She bowed with lofty courtesy, and opened the door. "I have occasion," she said, "to go out"----and made an exit.

Five minutes later, Mountjoy (standing at the window, impatiently on the watch for the return of Iris) saw Mrs. Vimpany in the street. She entered a chemist's shop, on the opposite side of the way, and came out again with a bottle in her hand. It was enclosed in the customary medical wrapping of white paper. Majestically, she passed out of sight. If Hugh had followed her he would have traced the doctor's wife to the door of the inn.

The unemployed waiter was on the house-steps, looking about him--with nothing to see. He made his bow to Mrs. Vimpany, and informed her that the landlady had gone out.

"You will do as well," was the reply. "Is Mr. Vimpany here?"

The waiter smiled, and led the way through the passage to the foot of the stairs. "You can hear him, ma'am." It was quite true; Mr. Vimpany's snoring answered for Mr. Vimpany. His wife ascended the first two or three stairs, and stopped to speak again to the waiter. She asked what the two gentlemen had taken to drink with their dinner. They had taken "the French wine."

"And nothing else?"

The waiter ventured on a little joke. "Nothing else," he said--"and more than enough of it, too."

"Not more than enough, I suppose, for the good of the house," Mrs. Vimpany remarked.

"I beg your pardon, ma'am; the claret the two gentlemen drank is not charged for in the bill."

"What do you mean?"

The waiter explained that Mr. Mountjoy had purchased the whole stock of the wine. Suspicion, as well as surprise, appeared in Mrs. Vimpany's face. She had hitherto thought it likely that Miss Henley's gentleman-like friend might be secretly in love with the young lady. Her doubts of him, now, took a wider range of distrust. She went on up the stairs by herself, and banged the door of the private room as the easiest means of waking the sleeping man. To the utmost noise that she could make in this way, he was perfectly impenetrable. For a while she waited, looking at him across the table with unutterable contempt.

There was the man to whom the religion of the land and the law of the land, acting together in perfect harmony, had fettered her for life! Some women, in her position, might have wasted time in useless self-reproach. Mrs. Vimpany reviewed her miserable married life with the finest mockery of her own misfortune. "Virtue," she said to herself, "is its own reward."

Glancing with careless curiosity at the disorder of the dinner-table, she noticed some wine still left in the bottom of her husband's glass. Had artificial means been used to reduce him to his present condition? She tasted the claret. No; there was nothing in the flavour of it which betrayed that he had been drugged. If the waiter was to be believed, he had only drunk claret--and there he was, in a state of helpless stupefaction, nevertheless.

She looked again at the dinner-table, and discovered one, among the many empty bottles, with some wine still left in it. After a moment of reflection, she took a clean tumbler from the sideboard.

Here was the wine which had been an object of derision to Mr. Vimpany and his friends. They were gross feeders and drinkers; and it might not be amiss to put their opinions to the test. She was not searching for the taste of a drug now; her present experiment proposed to try the wine on its own merits.

At the time of her triumphs on the country stage--before the date of her unlucky marriage--rich admirers had entertained the handsome actress at suppers, which offered every luxury that the most perfect table could supply. Experience had made her acquainted with the flavour of the finest claret--and that experience was renewed by the claret which she was now tasting. It was easy to understand why Mr. Mountjoy had purchased the wine; and, after a little thinking, his motive for inviting Mr. Vimpany to

dinner seemed to be equally plain. Foiled in their first attempt at discovery by her own prudence and tact, his suspicions had set their trap. Her gross husband had been tempted to drink, and to talk at random (for Mr. Mountjoy's benefit) in a state of intoxication!

What secrets might the helpless wretch not have betrayed before the wine had completely stupefied him?

Urged by rage and fear, she shook him furiously. He woke; he glared at her with bloodshot eyes; he threatened her with his clenched fist. There was but one way of lifting his purblind stupidity to the light. She appealed to his experience of himself, on many a former occasion: "You fool, you have been drinking again--and there's a patient waiting for you." To that dilemma he was accustomed; the statement of it partially roused him. Mrs. Vimpany tore off the paper wrapping, and opened the medicine-bottle which she had brought with her.

He stared at it; he muttered to himself: "Is she going to poison me?" She seized his head with one hand, and held the open bottle to his nose. "Your own prescription," she cried, "for yourself and your hateful friends."

His nose told him what words might have tried vainly to say: he swallowed the mixture. "If I lose the patient," he muttered oracularly, "I lose the money." His resolute wife dragged him out of his chair. The second door in the dining-room led into an empty bed-chamber. With her help, he got into the room, and dropped on the bed.

Mrs. Vimpany consulted her watch.

On many a former occasion she had learnt what interval of repose was required, before the sobering influence of the mixture could successfully assert itself. For the present, she had only to return to the other room. The waiter presented himself, asking if there was anything he could do for her. Familiar with the defective side of her husband's character, he understood what it meant when she pointed to the bedroom door. "The old story, ma'am," he said, with an air of respectful sympathy. "Can I get you a cup of tea?"

Mrs. Vimpany accepted the tea, and enjoyed it thoughtfully.

She had two objects in view--to be revenged on Mountjoy, and to find a way of forcing him to leave the town before he could communicate his discoveries to Iris. How to reach these separate ends, by one and the same means, was

still the problem which she was trying to solve, when the doctor's coarse voice was audible, calling for somebody to come to him.

If his head was only clear enough, by this time, to understand the questions which she meant to put, his answers might suggest the idea of which she was in search. Rising with alacrity, Mrs. Vimpany returned to the bed-chamber.

"You miserable creature," she began, "are you sober now?"

"I'm as sober as you are."

"Do you know," she went on, "why Mr. Mountjoy asked you to dine with him?"

"Because he's my friend."

"He is your worst enemy. Hold your tongue! I'll explain what I mean directly. Rouse your memory, if you have got a memory left. I want to know what you and Mr. Mountjoy talked about after dinner."

He stared at her helplessly. She tried to find her way to his recollection by making suggestive inquiries. It was useless; he only complained of being thirsty. His wife lost her self-control. She was too furiously angry with him to be able to remain in the room. Recovering her composure when she was alone, she sent for soda-water and brandy. Her one chance of making him useful was to humour his vile temper; she waited on him herself.

In some degree, the drink cleared his muddled head. Mrs. Vimpany tried his memory once more. Had he said this? Had he said that? Yes: he thought it likely. Had he, or had Mr. Mountjoy, mentioned Lord Harry's name? A glimmer of intelligence showed itself in his stupid eyes. Yes--and they had quarrelled about it: he rather thought he had thrown a bottle at Mr. Mountjoy's head. Had they, either of them, said anything about Miss Henley? Oh, of course! What was it? He was unable to remember. Had his wife done bothering him, now?

"Not quite," she replied. "Try to understand what I am going to say to you. If Lord Harry comes to us while Miss Henley is in our house--"

He interrupted her: "That's your business."

"Wait a little. It's my business, if I hear beforehand that his lordship is

coming. But he is quite reckless enough to take us by surprise. In that case, I want you to make yourself useful. If you happen to be at home, keep him from seeing Miss Henley until I have seen her first."

"Why?"

"I want an opportunity, my dear, of telling Miss Henley that I have been wicked enough to deceive her, before she finds it out for herself. I may hope she will forgive me, if I confess everything."

The doctor laughed: "What the devil does it matter whether she forgives you or not?"

"It matters a great deal."

"Why, you talk as if you were fond of her!"

"I am."

The doctor's clouded intelligence was beginning to clear; he made a smart reply: "Fond of her, and deceiving her--aha!"

"Yes," she said quietly, "that's just what it is. It has grown on me, little by little; I can't help liking Miss Henley."

"Well," Mr. Vimpany remarked, "you are a fool!" He looked at her cunningly. "Suppose I do make myself useful, what am I to gain by it?"

"Let us get back," she suggested, "to the gentleman who invited you to dinner, and made you tipsy for his own purposes."

"I'll break every bone in his skin!"

"Don't talk nonsense! Leave Mr. Mountjoy to me."

"Do you take his part? I can tell you this. If I drank too much of that poisonous French stuff, Mountjoy set me the example. He was tipsy--as you call it--shamefully tipsy, I give you my word of honour. What's the matter now?"

His wife (so impenetrably cool, thus far) had suddenly become excited. There was not the smallest fragment of truth in what he had just said of Hugh, and Mrs. Vimpany was not for a moment deceived by it. But the lie had,

accidentally, one merit--it suggested to her the idea which she had vainly tried to find over her cup of tea. "Suppose I show you how you may be revenged on Mr. Mountjoy," she said.

"Well?"

"Will you remember what I asked you to do for me, if Lord Harry takes us by surprise?"

He produced his pocket-diary, and told her to make a memorandum of it. She wrote as briefly as if she had been writing a telegram: "Keep Lord Harry from seeing Miss Henley, till I have seen her first."

"Now," she said, taking a chair by the bedside, "you shall know what a clever wife you have got. Listen to me."