

## **CHAPTER VIII - HER FATHER'S MESSAGE**

LOOKING out of the drawing-room window, for the tenth time at least, Mountjoy at last saw Iris in the street, returning to the house.

She brought the maid with her into the drawing-room, in the gayest of good spirits, and presented Rhoda to Mountjoy.

"What a blessing a good long walk is, if we only knew it!" she exclaimed. "Look at my little maid's colour! Who would suppose that she came here with heavy eyes and pale cheeks? Except that she loses her way in the town, whenever she goes out alone, we have every reason to congratulate ourselves on our residence at Honeybuzzard. The doctor is Rhoda's good genius, and the doctor's wife is her fairy godmother."

Mountjoy's courtesy having offered the customary congratulations, the maid was permitted to retire; and Iris was free to express her astonishment at the friendly relations established (by means of the dinner-table) between the two most dissimilar men on the face of creation.

"There is something overwhelming," she declared, "in the bare idea of your having asked him to dine with you--on such a short acquaintance, and being such a man! I should like to have peeped in, and seen you entertaining your guest with the luxuries of the hotel larder. Seriously, Hugh, your social sympathies have taken a range for which I was not prepared. After the example that you have set me, I feel ashamed of having doubted whether Mr. Vimpany was worthy of his charming wife. Don't suppose that I am ungrateful to the doctor! He has found his way to my regard, after what he has done for Rhoda. I only fail to understand how he has possessed himself of your sympathies."

So she ran on, enjoying the exercise of her own sense of humour in innocent ignorance of the serious interests which she was deriding.

Mountjoy tried to stop her, and tried in vain.

"No, no," she persisted as mischievously as ever, "the subject is too interesting to be dismissed. I am dying to know how you and your guest got through the dinner. Did he take more wine than was good for him? And, when he forgot his good manners, did he set it all right again by saying, 'No offence,' and passing the bottle?"

Hugh could endure it no longer. "Pray control your high spirits for a moment," he said. "I have news for you from home."

Those words put an end to her outbreak of gaiety, in an instant.

"News from my father?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Is he coming here?"

"No; I have heard from him."

"A letter?"

"A telegram," Mountjoy explained, "in answer to a letter from me. I did my best to press your claims on him, and I am glad to say I have not failed."

"Hugh, dear Hugh! have you succeeded in reconciling us?"

Mountjoy produced the telegram. "I asked Mr. Henley," he said, "to let me know at once whether he would receive you, and to answer plainly Yes or No. The message might have been more kindly expressed--but, at any rate, it is a favourable reply."

Iris read the telegram. "Is there another father in the world," she said sadly, "who would tell his daughter, when she asks to come home, that he will receive her on trial?"

"Surely, you are not offended with him, Iris?"

She shook her head. "I am like you," she said. "I know him too well to be offended. He shall find me dutiful, he shall find me patient. I am afraid I must not expect you to wait for me in Honeybuzzard. Will you tell my father that I hope to return to him in a week's time?"

"Pardon me, Iris, I see no reason why you should waste a week in this town. On the contrary, the more eager you show yourself to return to your father, the more likely you are to recover your place in his estimation. I had planned to take you home by the next train."

Iris looked at him in astonishment. "Is it possible that you mean what you

say?" she asked.

"My dear, I do most assuredly mean what I say. Why should you hesitate? What possible reason can there be for staying here any longer?"

"Oh, Hugh, how you disappoint me! What has become of your kind feeling, your sense of justice, your consideration for others? Poor Mrs. Vimpany!"

"What has Mrs. Vimpany to do with it?"

Iris was indignant.

"What has Mrs. Vimpany to do with it?" she repeated. "After all that I owe to that good creature's kindness; after I have promised to accompany her--she has so few happy days, poor soul!--on excursions to places of interest in the neighbourhood, do you expect me to leave her--no! it's worse than that--do you expect me to throw her aside like an old dress that I have worn out? And this after I have so unjustly, so ungratefully suspected her in my own thoughts? Shameful! shameful!"

With some difficulty, Mountjoy controlled himself. After what she had just said, his lips were sealed on the subject of Mrs. Vimpany's true character. He could only persist in appealing to her duty to her father.

"You are allowing your quick temper to carry you to strange extremities," he answered. "If I think it of more importance to hasten a reconciliation with your father than to encourage you to make excursions with a lady whom you have only known for a week or two, what have I done to deserve such an outbreak of anger? Hush! Not a word more now! Here is the lady herself."

As he spoke, Mrs. Vimpany joined them; returning from her interview with her husband at the inn. She looked first at Iris, and at once perceived signs of disturbance in the young lady's face.

Concealing her anxiety under that wonderful stage smile, which affords a refuge to so many secrets, Mrs. Vimpany said a few words excusing her absence. Miss Henley answered, without the slightest change in her friendly manner to the doctor's wife. The signs of disturbance were evidently attributable to some entirely unimportant cause, from Mrs. Vimpany's point of view. Mr. Mountjoy's discoveries had not been communicated yet.

In Hugh's state of mind, there was some irritating influence in the presence of the mistress of the house, which applied the spur to his wits. He

mischievously proposed submitting to her the question in dispute between Iris and himself.

"It is a very simple matter," he said to Mrs. Vimpany. "Miss Henley's father is anxious that she should return to him, after an estrangement between them which is happily at an end. Do you think she ought to allow any accidental engagements to prevent her from going home at once? If she requests your indulgence, under the circumstances, has she any reason to anticipate a refusal?"

Mrs. Vimpany's expressive eyes looked up, with saintly resignation, at the dirty ceiling--and asked in dumb show what she had done to deserve the injury implied by a doubt.

"Mr. Mountjoy," she said sternly, "you insult me by asking the question."--  
"Dear Miss Henley," she continued, turning to Iris, "you will do me justice, I am sure. Am I capable of allowing my own feelings to stand in the way, when your filial duty is concerned? Leave me, my sweet friend. Go! I entreat you, go home!"

She retired up the stage--no, no; she withdrew to the other end of the room--and burst into the most becoming of all human tears, theatrical tears. Impulsive Iris hastened to comfort the personification of self-sacrifice, the model of all that was most unselfish in female submission. "For shame! for shame!" she whispered, as she passed Mountjoy.

Beaten again by Mrs. Vimpany--with no ties of relationship to justify resistance to Miss Henley; with two women against him, entrenched behind the privileges of their sex--the one last sacrifice of his own feelings, in the interests of Iris, that Hugh could make was to control the impulse which naturally urged him to leave the house. In the helpless position in which he had now placed himself, he could only wait to see what course Mrs. Vimpany might think it desirable to take. Would she request him, in her most politely malicious way, to bring his visit to an end? No: she looked at him--hesitated--directed a furtive glance towards the view of the street from the window--smiled mysteriously--and completed the sacrifice of her own feelings in these words:

"Dear Miss Henley, let me help you to pack up."

Iris positively refused.

"No," she said, "I don't agree with Mr. Mountjoy. My father leaves it to me to

name the day when we meet. I hold you, my dear, to our engagement--I don't leave an affectionate friend as I might leave a stranger."

Even if Mr. Mountjoy communicated his discoveries to Miss Henley, on the way home, there would be no danger now of her believing him. Mrs. Vimpany put her powerful arm round the generous Iris, and, with infinite grace, thanked her by a kiss.

"Your kindness will make my lonely lot in life harder than ever to bear," she murmured, "when you are gone."

"But we may hope to meet in London," Iris reminded her; "unless Mr. Vimpany alters his mind about leaving this place."

"My husband will not do that, dear. He is determined to try his luck, as he says, in London. In the meantime you will give me your address, won't you? Perhaps you will even promise to write to me?"

Iris instantly gave her promise, and wrote down her address in London.

Mountjoy made no attempt to interfere: it was needless.

If the maid had not fallen ill on the journey, and if Mrs. Vimpany had followed Miss Henley to London, there would have been little to fear in the discovery of her address--and there was little to fear now. The danger to Iris was not in what might happen while she was living under her father's roof, but in what might happen if she was detained (by plans for excursions) in Mr. Vimpany's house, until Lord Harry might join her there.

Rather than permit this to happen, Hugh (in sheer desperation) meditated charging Mrs. Vimpany, to her face, with being the Irish lord's spy, and proving the accusation by challenging her to produce the registered letter and the diamond pin.

While he was still struggling with his own reluctance to inflict this degrading exposure on a woman, the talk between the two ladies came to an end. Mrs. Vimpany returned again to the window. On this occasion, she looked out into the street--with her handkerchief (was it used as a signal?) exhibited in her hand. Iris, on her side, advanced to Mountjoy. Easily moved to anger, her nature was incapable of sullen perseverance in a state of enmity. To see Hugh still patiently waiting--still risking the chances of insult--devoted to her, and forgiving her--was at once a reproach that punished Iris, and a mute appeal that no true woman's heart could resist.

With tears in her eyes she said to him: "There must be no coolness between you and me. I lost my temper, and spoke shamefully to you. My dear, I am indeed sorry for it. You are never hard on me--you won't be hard on me now?"

She offered her hand to him. He had just raised it to his lips--when the drawing-room door was roughly opened. They both looked round.

The man of all others whom Hugh least desired to see was the man who now entered the room. The victim of "light claret"--privately directed to lurk in the street, until he saw a handkerchief fluttering at the window--had returned to the house; primed with his clever wife's instructions; ready and eager to be even with Mountjoy for the dinner at the inn.