

CHAPTER IX - MR. VIMPANY ON INTOXICATION

THERE was no unsteadiness in the doctor's walk, and no flush on his face. He certainly did strut when he entered the room; and he held up his head with dignity, when he discovered Mountjoy. But he seemed to preserve his self-control. Was the man sober again already?

His wife approached him with her set smile; the appearance of her lord and master filled Mrs. Vimpany with perfectly-assumed emotions of agreeable surprise.

"This is an unexpected pleasure," she said. "You seldom favour us with your company, my dear, so early in the evening! Are there fewer patients in want of your advice than usual?"

"You are mistaken, Arabella. I am here in the performance of a painful duty."

The doctor's language, and the doctor's manner, presented him to Iris in a character that was new to her. What effect had he produced on Mrs. Vimpany? That excellent friend to travellers in distress lowered her eyes to the floor, and modestly preserved silence. Mr. Vimpany proceeded to the performance of his duty; his painful responsibility seemed to strike him at first from a medical point of view.

"If there is a poison which undermines the sources of life," he remarked, "it is alcohol. If there is a vice that degrades humanity, it is intoxication. Mr. Mountjoy, are you aware that I am looking at you?"

"Impossible not to be aware of that," Hugh answered. "May I ask why you are looking at me?" It was not easy to listen gravely to Mr. Vimpany's denunciation of intemperance, after what had taken place at the dinner of that day. Hugh smiled. The moral majesty of the doctor entered its protest.

"This is really shameful," he said. "The least you can do is to take it seriously."

"What is it?" Mountjoy asked. "And why am I to take it seriously?"

Mr. Vimpany's reply was, to say the least of it, indirect. If such an expression may be permitted, it smelt of the stage. Viewed in connection

with Mrs. Vimpany's persistent assumption of silent humility, it suggested to Mountjoy a secret understanding, of some kind, between husband and wife.

"What has become of your conscience, sir?" Mr. Vimpany demanded. "Is that silent monitor dead within you? After giving me a bad dinner, do you demand an explanation? Ha! you shall have it."

Having delivered himself to this effect, he added action to words. Walking grandly to the door, he threw it open, and saluted Mountjoy with an ironical bow. Iris observed that act of insolence; her colour rose, her eyes glittered. "Do you see what he has just done?" she said to Mrs. Vimpany.

The doctor's wife answered softly: "I don't understand it." After a glance at her husband, she took Iris by the hand: "Dear Miss Henley, shall we retire to my room?"

Iris drew her hand away. "Not unless Mr. Mountjoy wishes it," she said.

"Certainly not!" Hugh declared. "Pray remain here; your presence will help me to keep my temper." He stepped up to Mr. Vimpany. "Have you any particular reason for opening that door?" he asked.

The doctor was a rascal; but, to do him justice, he was no coward. "Yes," he said, "I have a reason."

"What is it, if you please?"

"Christian forbearance," Mr. Vimpany answered.

"Forbearance towards me?" Mountjoy continued.

The doctor's dignity suddenly deserted him.

"Aha, my boy, you have got it at last!" he cried. "It's pleasant to understand each other, isn't it? You see, I'm a plain-spoken fellow; I don't wish to give offence. If there's one thing more than another I pride myself on, it's my indulgence for human frailty. But, in my position here, I'm obliged to be careful. Upon my soul, I can't continue my acquaintance with a man who-- oh, come! come! don't look as if you didn't understand me. The circumstances are against you, sir. You have treated me infamously."

"Under what circumstances have I treated you infamously?" Hugh asked.

"Under pretence of giving me a dinner," Mr. Vimpany shouted--"the worst dinner I ever sat down to!"

His wife signed to him to be silent. He took no notice of her. She insisted on being understood. "Say no more!" she warned him, in a tone of command.

The brute side of his nature, roused by Mountjoy's contemptuous composure, was forcing its way outwards; he set his wife at defiance.

"Then don't let him look at me as if he thought I was in a state of intoxication!" cried the furious doctor. "There's the man, Miss, who tried to make me tipsy," he went on, actually addressing himself to Iris. "Thanks to my habits of sobriety, he has been caught in his own trap. He's intoxicated. Ha, friend Mountjoy, have you got the right explanation at last? There's the door, sir!"

Mrs. Vimpany felt that this outrage was beyond endurance. If something was not done to atone for it, Miss Henley would be capable--her face, at that moment, answered for her--of leaving the house with Mr. Mountjoy. Mrs. Vimpany seized her husband indignantly by the arm.

"You brute, you have spoilt everything!" she said to him. "Apologise directly to Mr. Mountjoy. You won't?"

"I won't!"

Experience had taught his wife how to break him to her will. "Do you remember my diamond pin?" she whispered.

He looked startled. Perhaps he thought she had lost the pin.

"Where is it?" he asked eagerly.

"Gone to London to be valued. Beg Mr. Mountjoy's pardon, or I will put the money in the bank--and not one shilling of it do you get."

In the meanwhile, Iris had justified Mrs. Vimpany's apprehensions. Her indignation noticed nothing but the insult offered to Hugh. She was too seriously agitated to be able to speak to him. Still admirably calm, his one anxiety was to compose her.

"Don't be afraid," he said; "it is impossible that I can degrade myself by

quarrelling with Mr. Vimpany. I only wait here to know what you propose to do. You have Mrs. Vimpany to think of."

"I have nobody to think of but You," Iris replied. "But for me, you would never have been in this house. After the insult that has been offered to you--oh, Hugh, I feel it too!--let us return to London together. I have only to tell Rhoda we are going away, and to make my preparations for travelling. Send for me from the inn, and I will be ready in time for the next train."

Mrs. Vimpany approached Mountjoy, leading her husband.

"Sorry I have offended you," the doctor said. "Beg your pardon. It's only a joke. No offence, I hope?"

His servility was less endurable than his insolence. Telling him that he need say no more, Mountjoy bowed to Mrs. Vimpany, and left the room. She returned his bow mechanically, in silence. Mr. Vimpany followed Hugh out--thinking of the diamond pin, and eager to open the house door, as another act of submission which might satisfy his wife.

Even a clever woman will occasionally make mistakes; especially when her temper happens to have been roused. Mrs. Vimpany found herself in a false position, due entirely to her own imprudence.

She had been guilty of three serious errors. In the first place she had taken it for granted that Mr. Vimpany's restorative mixture would completely revive the sober state of his brains. In the second place, she had trusted him with her vengeance on the man who had found his way to her secrets through her husband's intemperance. In the third place, she had rashly assumed that the doctor, in carrying out her instructions for insulting Mountjoy, would keep within the limits which she had prescribed to him, when she hit on the audacious idea of attributing his disgraceful conduct to the temptation offered by his host's example. As a consequence of these acts of imprudence, she had exposed herself to a misfortune that she honestly dreaded--the loss of the place which she had carefully maintained in Miss Henley's estimation. In the contradictory confusion of feelings, so often found in women, this deceitful and dangerous creature had been conquered--little by little, as she had herself described it--by that charm of sweetness and simplicity in Iris, of which her own depraved nature presented no trace. She now spoke with hesitation, almost with timidity, in addressing the woman whom she had so cleverly deceived, at the time when they first met.

"Must I give up all, Miss Henley, that I most value?" she asked.

"I hardly understand you, Mrs. Vimpany."

"I will try to make it plainer. Do you really mean to leave me this evening?"

"I do."

"May I own that I am grieved to hear it? Your departure will deprive me of some happy hours, in your company."

"Your husband's conduct leaves me no alternative," Iris replied.

"Pray do not humiliate me by speaking of my husband! I only want to know if there is a harder trial of my fortitude still to come. Must I lose the privilege of being your friend?"

"I hope I am not capable of such injustice as that," Iris declared. "It would be hard indeed to lay the blame of Mr. Vimpany's shameful behaviour on you. I don't forget that you made him offer an apology. Some women, married to such a man as that, might have been afraid of him. No, no; you have been a good friend to me--and I mean to remember it."

Mrs. Vimpany's gratitude was too sincerely felt to be expressed with her customary readiness. She only said what the stupidest woman in existence could have said: "Thank you."

In the silence that followed, the rapid movement of carriage wheels became audible in the street. The sound stopped at the door of the doctor's house.