

## **CHAPTER X - THE MOCKERY OF DECEIT**

HAD Mountjoy arrived to take Iris away, before her preparations for travelling were complete? Both the ladies hurried to the window, but they were too late. The rapid visitor, already hidden from them under the portico, was knocking smartly at the door. In another minute, a man's voice in the hall asked for "Miss Henley." The tones--clear, mellow, and pleasantly varied here and there by the Irish accent--were not to be mistaken by any one who had already heard them. The man in the hall was Lord Harry.

In that serious emergency, Mrs. Vimpany recovered her presence of mind.

She made for the door, with the object of speaking to Lord Harry before he could present himself in the drawing-room. But Iris had heard him ask for her in the hall; and that one circumstance instantly stripped of its concealments the character of the woman in whose integrity she had believed. Her first impression of Mrs. Vimpany--so sincerely repented, so eagerly atoned for--had been the right impression after all! Younger, lighter, and quicker than the doctor's wife, Iris reached the door first, and laid her hand on the lock.

"Wait a minute," she said.

Mrs. Vimpany hesitated. For the first time in her life at a loss what to say, she could only sign to Iris to stand back. Iris refused to move. She put her terrible question in the plainest words:

"How does Lord Harry know that I am in this house?"

The wretched woman (listening intently for the sound of a step on the stairs) refused to submit to a shameful exposure, even now. To her perverted moral sense, any falsehood was acceptable, as a means of hiding herself from discovery by Iris. In the very face of detection, the skilled deceiver kept up the mockery of deceit.

"My dear," she said, "what has come to you? Why won't you let me go to my room?"

Iris eyed her with a look of scornful surprise. "What next?" she said. "Are you impudent enough to pretend that I have not found you out, yet?"

Sheer desperation still sustained Mrs. Vimpany's courage. She played her assumed character against the contemptuous incredulity of Iris, as she had sometimes played her theatrical characters against the hissing and hooting of a brutal audience.

"Miss Henley," she said, "you forget yourself!"

"Do you think I didn't see in your face," Iris rejoined, "that you heard him, too? Answer my question."

"What question?"

"You have just heard it."

"No!"

"You false woman!"

"Don't forget, Miss Henley, that you are speaking to a lady."

"I am speaking to Lord Harry's spy!"

Their voices rose loud; the excitement on either side had reached its climax; neither the one nor the other was composed enough to notice the sound of the carriage-wheels, leaving the house again. In the meanwhile, nobody came to the drawing-room door. Mrs. Vimpany was too well acquainted with the hot-headed Irish lord not to conclude that he would have made himself heard, and would have found his way to Iris, but for some obstacle, below stairs, for which he was not prepared. The doctor's wife did justice to the doctor at last. Another person had, in all probability, heard Lord Harry's voice--and that person might have been her husband.

Was it possible that he remembered the service which she had asked of him; and, even if he had succeeded in calling it to mind, was his discretion to be trusted? As those questions occurred to her, the desire to obtain some positive information was more than she was able to resist. Mrs. Vimpany attempted to leave the drawing-room for the second time.

But the same motive had already urged Miss Henley to action. Again, the younger woman outstripped the older. Iris descended the stairs, resolved to discover the cause of the sudden suspension of events in the lower part of the house.