

CHAPTER XI - MRS. VIMPANY'S FAREWELL

THE doctor's wife followed Miss Henley out of the room, as far as the landing--and waited there.

She had her reasons for placing this restraint on herself. The position of the landing concealed her from the view of a person in the hall. If she only listened for the sound of voices she might safely discover whether Lord Harry was, or was not, still in the house. In the first event, it would be easy to interrupt his interview with Iris, before the talk could lead to disclosures which Mrs. Vimpany had every reason to dread. In the second event, there would be no need to show herself.

Meanwhile, Iris opened the dining-room door and looked in.

Nobody was there. The one other room on the ground floor, situated at the back of the building, was the doctor's consulting-room. She knocked at the door. Mr. Vimpany's voice answered: "Come in." There he was alone, drinking brandy and water, and smoking his big black cigar.

"Where is Lord Harry?" she said.

"In Ireland, I suppose," Mr. Vimpany answered quietly.

Iris wasted no time in making useless inquiries. She closed the door again, and left him. He, too, was undoubtedly in the conspiracy to keep her deceived. How had it been done? Where was the wild lord, at that moment?

Whilst she was pursuing these reflections in the hall, Rhoda came up from the servants' tea-table in the kitchen. Her mistress gave her the necessary instructions for packing, and promised to help her before long. Mrs. Vimpany's audacious resolution to dispute the evidence of her own senses, still dwelt on Miss Henley's mind. Too angry to think of the embarrassment which an interview with Lord Harry would produce, after they had said their farewell words in Ireland, she was determined to prevent the doctor's wife from speaking to him first, and claiming him as an accomplice in her impudent denial of the truth. If he had been, by any chance, deluded into leaving the house, he would sooner or later discover the trick that had been played on him, and would certainly return. Iris took a chair in the hall.

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It is due to the doctor to relate that he had indeed justified his wife's confidence in him.

The diamond pin, undergoing valuation in London, still represented a present terror in his mind. The money, the money--he was the most attentive husband in England when he thought of the money! At the time when Lord Harry's carriage stopped at his house-door, he was in the dining-room, taking a bottle of brandy from the cellaret in the sideboard. Looking instantly out of the window, he discovered who the visitor was, and decided on consulting his instructions in the pocket-diary. The attempt was rendered useless, as soon as he had opened the book, by the unlucky activity of the servant in answering the door. Her master stopped her in the hall. He was pleasantly conscious of the recovery of his cunning. But his memory (far from active under the most favourable circumstances) was slower than ever at helping him now. On the spur of the moment he could only call to mind that he had been ordered to prevent a meeting between Lord Harry and Iris. "Show the gentleman into my consulting-room," he said.

Lord Harry found the doctor enthroned on his professional chair, surprised and delighted to see his distinguished friend. The impetuous Irishman at once asked for Miss Henley.

"Gone," Mr. Vimpany answered

"Gone--where?" the wild lord wanted to know next.

"To London."

"By herself?"

"No; with Mr. Hugh Mountjoy."

Lord Harry seized the doctor by the shoulders, and shook him: "You don't mean to tell me Mountjoy is going to marry her?"

Mr. Vimpany feared nothing but the loss of money. The weaker and the older man of the two, he nevertheless followed the young lord's example, and shook him with right good-will. "Let's see how you like it in your turn," he said. "As for Mountjoy, I don't know whether he is married or single--and don't care."

"The devil take your obstinacy! When did they start?"

"The devil take your questions! They started not long since."

"Might I catch them at the station?"

"Yes; if you go at once."

So the desperate doctor carried out his wife's instructions--without remembering the conditions which had accompanied them.

The way to the station took Lord Harry past the inn. He saw Hugh Mountjoy through the open house door paying his bill at the bar. In an instant the carriage was stopped, and the two men (never on friendly terms) were formally bowing to each other.

"I was told I should find you," Lord Harry said, "with Miss Henley, at the station."

"Who gave you your information?"

"Vimpany--the doctor."

"He ought to know that the train isn't due at the station for an hour yet."

"Has the blackguard deceived me? One word more, Mr. Mountjoy. Is Miss Henley at the inn?"

"No."

"Are you going with her to London?"

"I must leave Miss Henley to answer that."

"Where is she, sir?"

"There is an end to everything, my lord, in the world we live in. You have reached the end of my readiness to answer questions." The Englishman and the Irishman looked at each other: the Anglo-Saxon was impenetrably cool; the Celt was flushed and angry. They might have been on the brink of a quarrel, but for Lord Harry's native quickness of perception, and his exercise of it at that moment. When he had called at Mr. Vimpany's house, and had asked for Iris, the doctor had got rid of him by means of a lie. After this

discovery, at what conclusion could he arrive? The doctor was certainly keeping Iris out of his way. Reasoning in this rapid manner, Lord Harry let one offence pass, in his headlong eagerness to resent another. He instantly left Mountjoy. Again the carriage rattled back along the street; but it was stopped before it reached Mr. Vimpany's door.

Lord Harry knew the people whom he had to deal with, and took measures to approach the house silently, on foot. The coachman received orders to look out for a signal, which should tell him when he was wanted again.

Mr. Vimpany's ears, vigilantly on the watch for suspicious events, detected no sound of carriage wheels and no noisy use of the knocker. Still on his guard, however, a ring at the house-bell disturbed him in his consulting-room. Peeping into the hall, he saw Iris opening the door, and stole back to his room. "The devil take her!" he said, alluding to Miss Henley, and thinking of the enviable proprietor of the diamond pin.

At the unexpected appearance of Iris, Lord Harry forgot every consideration which ought to have been present to his mind, at that critical moment.

He advanced to her with both hands held out in cordial greeting. She signed to him contemptuously to stand back--and spoke in tones cautiously lowered, after a glance at the door of the consulting-room.

"My only reason for consenting to see you," she said, "is to protect myself from further deception. Your disgraceful conduct is known to me. Go now," she continued, pointing to the stairs, "and consult with your spy, as soon as you like." The Irish lord listened--guiltily conscious of having deserved what she had said to him--without attempting to utter a word in excuse.

Still posted at the head of the stairs, the doctor's wife heard Iris speaking; but the tone was not loud enough to make the words intelligible at that distance; neither was any other voice audible in reply. Vaguely suspicions of some act of domestic treachery, Mrs. Vimpany began to descend the stairs. At the turning which gave her a view of the hall, she stopped; thunderstruck by the discovery of Lord Harry and Miss Henley, together.

The presence of a third person seemed, in some degree, to relieve Lord Harry. He ran upstairs to salute Mrs. Vimpany, and was met again by a cold reception and a hostile look.

Strongly and strangely contrasted, the two confronted each other on the stairs. The faded woman, wan and ghastly under cruel stress of mental

suffering, stood face to face with a fine, tall, lithe man, in the prime of his health and strength. Here were the bright blue eyes, the winning smile, and the natural grace of movement, which find their own way to favour in the estimation of the gentler sex. This irreclaimable wanderer among the perilous by-ways of the earth--christened "Irish blackguard," among respectable members of society, when they spoke of him behind his back--attracted attention, even among the men. Looking at his daring, finely-formed face, they noticed (as an exception to a general rule, in these days) the total suppression, by the razor, of whiskers, moustache, and beard. Strangers wondered whether Lord Harry was an actor or a Roman Catholic priest. Among chance acquaintances, those few favourites of Nature who are possessed of active brains, guessed that his life of adventure might well have rendered disguise necessary to his safety, in more than one part of the world. Sometimes they boldly put the question to him. The hot temper of an Irishman, in moments of excitement, is not infrequently a sweet temper in moments of calm. What they called Lord Harry's good-nature owned readily that he had been indebted, on certain occasions, to the protection of a false beard, And perhaps a colouring of his face and hair to match. The same easy disposition now asserted itself, under the merciless enmity of Mrs. Vimpany's eyes. "If I have done anything to offend you," he said, with an air of puzzled humility, "I'm sure I am sorry for it. Don't be angry, Arabella, with an old friend. Why won't you shake hands?"

"I have kept your secret, and done your dirty work," Mrs. Vimpany replied. "And what is my reward? Miss Henley can tell you how your Irish blundering has ruined me in a lady's estimation. Shake hands, indeed! You will never shake hands with Me again as long as you live!"

She said those words without looking at him; her eyes were resting on Iris now. From the moment when she had seen the two together, she knew that it was all over; further denial in the face of plain proofs would be useless indeed! Submission was the one alternative left.

"Miss Henley," she said, "if you can feel pity for another woman's sorrow and shame, let me have a last word with you--out of this man's hearing."

There was nothing artificial in her tones or her looks; no acting could have imitated the sad sincerity with which she spoke. Touched by that change, Iris accompanied her as she ascended the stairs. After a little hesitation, Lord Harry followed them. Mrs. Vimpany turned on him when they reached the drawing-room landing. "Must I shut the door in your face?" she asked.

He was as pleasantly patient as ever:

"You needn't take the trouble to do that, my dear; I'll only ask your leave to sit down and wait on the stairs. When you have done with Miss Henley, just call me in. And, by the way, don't be alarmed in case of a little noise--say a heavy man tumbling downstairs. If the blackguard it's your misfortune to be married to happens to show himself, I shall be under the necessity of kicking him. That's all."

Mrs. Vimpany closed the door. She spoke to Iris respectfully, as she might have addressed a stranger occupying a higher rank in life than herself.

"There is an end, madam, to one short acquaintance; and, as we both know, an end to it for ever. When we first met--let me tell the truth at last!--I felt a malicious pleasure in deceiving you. After that time, I was surprised to find that you grew on my liking, Can you understand the wickedness that tried to resist you? It was useless; your good influence has been too strong for me. Strange, isn't it? I have lived a life of deceit, among bad people. What could you expect of me, after that? I heaped lies on lies--I would have denied that the sun was in the heavens--rather than find myself degraded in your opinion. Well! that is all over--useless, quite useless now. Pray don't mistake me. I am not attempting to excuse myself; a confession was due to you; the confession is made. It is too late to hope that you will forgive me. If you will permit it, I have only one favour to ask. Forget me."

She turned away with a last hopeless look, who said as plainly as if in words: "I am not worth a reply."

Generous Iris insisted on speaking to her.

"I believe you are truly sorry for what you have done," she said; "I can never forget that--I can never forget You." She held out her pitying hand. Mrs. Vimpany was too bitterly conscious of the past to touch it. Even a spy is not beneath the universal reach of the heartache. There were tears in the miserable woman's eyes when she had looked her last at Iris Henley.