

CHAPTER XII - LORD HARRY'S DEFENCE

AFTER a short interval, the drawing-room door was opened again. Waiting on the threshold, the Irish lord asked if he might come in.

Iris replied coldly. "This is not my house," she said; "I must leave you to decide for yourself."

Lord Harry crossed the room to speak to her and stopped. There was no sign of relenting towards him in that dearly-loved face. "I wonder whether it would be a relief to you," he suggested with piteous humility, "if I went away?"

If she had been true to herself, she would have said, Yes. Where is the woman to be found, in her place, with a heart hard enough to have set her that example? She pointed to a chair. He felt her indulgence gratefully. Following the impulse of the moment, he attempted to excuse his conduct.

"There is only one thing I can say for myself," he confessed, "I didn't begin by deceiving you. While you had your eye on me, Iris, I was an honourable man."

This extraordinary defence reduced her to silence. Was there another man in the world who would have pleaded for pardon in that way? "I'm afraid I have not made myself understood," he said. "May I try again?"

"If you please."

The vagabond nobleman made a resolute effort to explain himself intelligibly, this time:

"See now! We said good-bye, over there, in the poor old island. Well, indeed I meant it, when I owned that I was unworthy of you. I didn't contradict you, when you said you could never be my wife, after such a life as I have led. And, do remember, I submitted to your returning to England, without presuming to make a complaint. Ah, my sweet girl, it was easy to submit, while I could look at you, and hear the sound of your voice, and beg for that last kiss--and get it. Reverend gentlemen talk about the fall of Adam. What was that to the fall of Harry, when he was back in his own little cottage, without the hope of ever seeing you again? To the best of my recollection, the serpent that tempted Eve was up a tree. I found the serpent that

tempted Me, sitting waiting in my own armchair, and bent on nothing worse than borrowing a trifle of money. Need I say who she was? I don't doubt that you think her a wicked woman."

Never ready in speaking of acts of kindness, on her own part, Iris answered with some little reserve: "I have learnt to think better of Mrs. Vimpany than you suppose."

Lord Harry began to look like a happy man, for the first time since he had entered the room.

"I ought to have known it!" he burst out. "Yours is the well-balanced mind, dear, that tempers justice with mercy. Mother Vimpany has had a hard life of it. Just change places with her for a minute or so--and you'll understand what she has had to go through. Find yourself, for instance, in Ireland, without the means to take you back to England. Add to that, a husband who sends you away to make money for him at the theatre, and a manager (not an Irishman, thank God!) who refuses to engage you--after your acting has filled his dirty pockets in past days--because your beauty has faded with time. Doesn't your bright imagination see it all now? My old friend Arabella, ready and anxious to serve me--and a sinking at this poor fellow's heart when he knew, if he once lost the trace of you, he might lose it for ever--there's the situation, as they call it on the stage. I wish I could say for myself what I may say for Mrs. Vimpany. It's such a pleasure to a clever woman to engage in a little deceit--we can't blame her, can we?"

Iris protested gently against a code of morality which included the right of deceit among the privileges of the sex. Lord Harry slipped through her fingers with the admirable Irish readiness; he agreed with Miss Henley that he was entirely wrong.

"And don't spare me while you're about it," he suggested. "Lay all the blame of that shameful stratagem on my shoulders. It was a despicable thing to do. When I had you watched, I acted in a manner--I won't say unworthy of a gentleman; have I been a gentleman since I first ran away from home? Why, it's even been said my way of speaking is no longer the way of a gentleman; and small wonder, too, after the company I've kept. Ah, well! I'm off again, darling, on a sea voyage. Will you forgive me now? or will you wait till I come back, if I do come back? God knows!" He dropped on his knees, and kissed her hand. "Anyway," he said, "whether I live or whether I die, it will be some consolation to remember that I asked your pardon--and perhaps got it."

"Take it, Harry; I can't help forgiving you!"

She had done her best to resist him, and she had answered in those merciful words.

The effect was visible, perilously visible, as he rose from his knees. Her one chance of keeping the distance between them, on which she had been too weak to insist, was not to encourage him by silence. Abruptly, desperately, she made a commonplace inquiry about his proposed voyage. "Tell me," she resumed, "where are you going when you leave England?"

"Oh, to find money, dear, if I can--to pick up diamonds, or to hit on a mine of gold, and so forth."

The fine observation of Iris detected something not quite easy in his manner, as he made that reply. He tried to change the subject: she deliberately returned to it. "Your account of your travelling plans is rather vague," she told him. "Do you know when you are likely to return?"

He took her hand. One of the rings on her fingers happened to be turned the wrong way. He set it in the right position, and discovered an opal. "Ah! the unlucky stone!" he cried, and turned it back again out of sight. She drew away her hand. "I asked you," she persisted, "when you expect to return?"

He laughed--not so gaily as usual.

"How do I know I shall ever get back?" he answered. "Sometimes the seas turn traitor, and sometimes the savages. I have had so many narrow escapes of my life, I can't expect my luck to last for ever." He made a second attempt to change the subject. "I wonder whether you're likely to pay another visit to Ireland? My cottage is entirely at your disposal, Iris dear. Oh, when I'm out of the way, of course! The place seemed to please your fancy, when you saw it. You will find it well taken care of, I answer for that."

Iris asked who was taking care of his cottage.

The wild lord's face saddened. He hesitated; rose from his chair restlessly, and walked away to the window; returned, and made up his mind to reply.

"My dear, you know her. She was the old housekeeper at--"

His voice failed him. He was unable, or unwilling, to pronounce the name of Arthur's farm.

Knowing, it is needless to say, that he had alluded to Mrs. Lewson, Iris warmly commended him for taking care of her old nurse. At the same time, she remembered the unfriendly terms in which the housekeeper had alluded to Lord Harry, when they had talked of him.

"Did you find no difficulty," she asked, "in persuading Mrs. Lewson to enter your service?"

"Oh, yes, plenty of difficulty; I found my bad character in my way, as usual." It was a relief to him, at that moment, to talk of Mrs. Lewson; the Irish humour and the Irish accent both asserted themselves in his reply. "The curious old creature told me to my face I was a scamp. I took leave to remind her that it was the duty of a respectable person, like herself, to reform scamps; I also mentioned that I was going away, and she would be master and mistress too on my small property. That softened her heart towards me. You will mostly find old women amenable, if you get at them by way of their dignity. Besides, there was another lucky circumstance that helped me. The neighbourhood of my cottage has some attraction for Mrs. Lewson. She didn't say particularly what it was--and I never asked her to tell me."

"Surely you might have guessed it, without being told," Iris reminded him. "Mrs. Lewson's faithful heart loves poor Arthur's memory--and Arthur's grave is not far from your cottage."

"Don't speak of him!"

It was said loudly, peremptorily, passionately. He looked at her with angry astonishment in his face. "You loved him too!" he said. "Can you speak of him quietly? The noblest, truest, sweetest man that ever the Heavens looked on, foully assassinated. And the wretch who murdered him still living, free--oh, what is God's providence about?--is there no retribution that will follow him? no just hand that will revenge Arthur's death?"

As those fierce words escaped him, he was no longer the easy, gentle, joyous creature whom Iris had known and loved. The furious passions of the Celtic race glittered savagely in his eyes, and changed to a grey horrid pallor the healthy colour that was natural to his face. "Oh, my temper, my temper!" he cried, as Iris shrank from him. "She hates me now, and no wonder." He staggered away from her, and burst into a convulsive fit of crying, dreadful to hear. Compassion, divine compassion, mastered the earthlier emotion of terror in the great heart of the woman who loved him. She followed him, and laid her hand caressingly on his shoulder. "I don't hate you, my dear," she

said. "I am sorry for Arthur--and, oh, so sorry for You!" He caught her in his arms. His gratitude, his repentance, his silent farewell were all expressed in a last kiss. It was a moment, never to be forgotten to the end of their lives. Before she could speak, before she could think, he had left her.

She called him back, through the open door. He never returned; he never even replied. She ran to the window, and threw it up--and was just in time to see him signal to the carriage and leap into it. Her horror of the fatal purpose that was but too plainly rooted in him--her conviction that he was on the track of the assassin, self devoted to exact the terrible penalty of blood for blood--emboldened her to insist on being heard. "Come back," she cried. "I must, I will, speak with you."

He waved his hand to her with a gesture of despair. "Start your horses," he shouted to the coachman. Alarmed by his voice and his look, the man asked where he should drive to. Lord Harry pointed furiously to the onward road. "Drive," he answered, "to the Devil!"

THE END OF THE FIRST PERIOD