

THE SECOND PERIOD

CHAPTER XIII - IRIS AT HOME

A LITTLE more than four months had passed, since the return of Iris to her father's house.

Among other events which occurred, during the earlier part of that interval, the course adopted by Hugh Mountjoy, when Miss Henley's suspicions of the Irish lord were first communicated to him, claims a foremost place.

It was impossible that the devoted friend of Iris could look at her, when they met again on their way to the station, without perceiving the signs of serious agitation. Only waiting until they were alone in the railway-carriage, she opened her heart unreservedly to the man in whose clear intellect and true sympathy she could repose implicit trust. He listened to what she could repeat of Lord Harry's language with but little appearance of surprise. Iris had only reminded him of one, among the disclosures which had escaped Mr. Vimpany at the inn. Under the irresistible influence of good wine, the doctor had revealed the Irish lord's motive for remaining in his own country, after the assassination of Arthur Mountjoy. Hugh met the only difficulty in his way, without shrinking from it. He resolved to clear his mind of its natural prejudice against the rival who had been preferred to him, before he assumed the responsibility of guiding Iris by his advice.

When he had in some degree recovered confidence in his own unbiased judgment, he entered on the question of Lord Harry's purpose in leaving England.

Without attempting to dispute the conclusion at which Iris had arrived, he did his best to alleviate her distress. In his opinion, he was careful to tell her, a discovery of the destination to which Lord Harry proposed to betake himself, might be achieved. The Irish lord's allusion to a new adventure, which would occupy him in searching for diamonds or gold, might indicate a contemplated pursuit of the assassin, as well as a plausible excuse to satisfy Iris. It was at least possible that the murderer might have been warned of his danger if he remained in England, and that he might have contemplated directing his flight to a distant country, which would not only offer a safe refuge, but also hold out (in its mineral treasures) a hope of gain. Assuming

that these circumstances had really happened, it was in Lord Harry's character to make sure of his revenge, by embarking in the steamship by which the assassin of Arthur Mountjoy was a passenger.

Wild as this guess at the truth undoubtedly was, it had one merit: it might easily be put to the test.

Hugh had bought the day's newspaper at the station. He proposed to consult the shipping advertisements relating, in the first place, to communication with the diamond-mines and the goldfields of South Africa.

This course of proceeding at once informed him that the first steamer, bound for that destination, would sail from London in two days' time. The obvious precaution to take was to have the Dock watched; and Mountjoy's steady old servant, who knew Lord Harry by sight, was the man to employ.

Iris naturally inquired what good end could be attained, if the anticipated discovery actually took place.

To this Mountjoy answered, that the one hope--a faint hope, he must needs confess--of inducing Lord Harry to reconsider his desperate purpose, lay in the influence of Iris herself. She must address a letter to him, announcing that his secret had been betrayed by his own language and conduct, and declaring that she would never again see him, or hold any communication with him, if he persisted in his savage resolution of revenge. Such was the desperate experiment which Mountjoy's generous and unselfish devotion to Iris now proposed to try.

The servant (duly entrusted with Miss Henley's letter) was placed on the watch--and the event which had been regarded as little better than a forlorn hope, proved to be the event that really took place. Lord Harry was a passenger by the steamship.

Mountjoy's man presented the letter entrusted to him, and asked respectfully if there was any answer. The wild lord read it--looked (to use the messenger's own words) like a man cut to the heart--seemed at a loss what to say or do--and only gave a verbal answer: "I sincerely thank Miss Henley, and I promise to write when the ship touches at Madeira." The servant continued to watch him when he went on board the steamer; saw him cast a look backwards, as if suspecting that he might have been followed; and then lost sight of him in the cabin. The vessel sailed after a long interval of delay, but he never reappeared on the deck.

The ambiguous message sent to her aroused the resentment of Iris; she thought it cruel. For some weeks perhaps to come, she was condemned to remain in doubt, and was left to endure the trial of her patience, without having Mountjoy at hand to encourage and console her. He had been called away to the south of France by the illness of his father.

But the fortunes of Miss Henley, at this period of her life, had their brighter side. She found reason to congratulate herself on the reconciliation which had brought her back to her father. Mr. Henley had received her, not perhaps with affection, but certainly with kindness. "If we don't get in each other's way, we shall do very well; I am glad to see you again." That was all he had said to her, but it meant much from a soured and selfish man.

Her only domestic anxiety was caused by another failure in the health of her maid.

The Doctor declared that medical help would be of no avail, while Rhoda Bennet remained in London. In the country she had been born and bred, and to the country she must return. Mr. Henley's large landed property, on the north of London, happened to include a farm in the neighbourhood of Muswell Hill. Wisely waiting for a favourable opportunity, Iris alluded to the good qualities which had made Rhoda almost as much her friend as her servant, and asked leave to remove the invalid to the healthy air of the farm.

Her anxiety about the recovery of a servant so astonished Mr. Henley, that he was hurried (as he afterwards declared) into granting his daughter's request. After this concession, the necessary arrangements were easily made. The influence of Iris won the goodwill of the farmer and his wife; Rhoda, as an expert and willing needlewoman, being sure of a welcome, for her own sake, in a family which included a number of young children. Miss Henley had only to order her carriage, and to be within reach of the farm. A week seldom passed without a meeting between the mistress and the maid.

In the meantime, Mountjoy (absent in France) did not forget to write to Iris.

His letters offered little hope of a speedy return. The doctors had not concealed from him that his father's illness would end fatally; but there were reserves of vital power still left, which might prolong the struggle. Under these melancholy circumstances, he begged that Iris would write to him. The oftener she could tell him of the little events of her life at home, the more kindly she would brighten the days of a dreary life.

Eager to show, even in a trifling matter, how gratefully she appreciated

Mountjoy's past kindness, Iris related the simple story of her life at home, in weekly letters addressed to her good friend. After telling Hugh (among other things) of Rhoda's establishment at the farm, she had some unexpected results to relate, which had followed the attempt to provide herself with a new maid.

Two young women had been successively engaged--each recommended, by the lady whom she had last served, with that utter disregard of moral obligation which appears to be shamelessly on the increase in the England of our day. The first of the two maids, described as "rather excitable," revealed infirmities of temper which suggested a lunatic asylum as the only fit place for her. The second young woman, detected in stealing eau-de-cologne, and using it (mixed with water) as an intoxicating drink, claimed merciful construction of her misconduct, on the ground that she had been misled by the example of her last mistress.

At the third attempt to provide herself with a servant, Iris was able to report the discovery of a responsible person who told the truth--an unmarried lady of middle age.

In this case, the young woman was described as a servant thoroughly trained in the performance of her duties, honest, sober, industrious, of an even temper, and unprovided with a "follower" in the shape of a sweetheart. Even her name sounded favourably in the ear of a stranger--it was Fanny Mere. Iris asked how a servant, apparently possessed of a faultless character, came to be in want of a situation. At this question the lady sighed, and acknowledged that she had "made a dreadful discovery," relating to the past life of her maid. It proved to be the old, the miserably old, story of a broken promise of marriage, and of the penalty paid as usual by the unhappy woman. "I will say nothing of my own feelings," the maiden lady explained. "In justice to the other female servants, it was impossible for me to keep such a person in my house; and, in justice to you, I must most unwillingly stand in the way of Fanny Mere's prospects by mentioning my reason for parting with her."

"If I could see the young woman and speak to her," Iris said, "I should like to decide the question of engaging her, for myself."

The lady knew the address of her discharged servant, and--with some appearance of wonder--communicated it. Miss Henley wrote at once, telling Fanny Mere to come to her on the following day.

When she woke on the next morning, later than usual, an event occurred

which Iris had been impatiently expecting for some time past. She found a letter waiting on her bedside table, side by side with her cup of tea. Lord Harry had written to her at last.

Whether he used his pen or his tongue, the Irish lord's conduct was always more or less in need of an apology. Here were the guilty one's new excuses, expressed in his customary medley of frank confession and flowery language:

"I am fearing, my angel, that I have offended you. You have too surely said to yourself, This miserable Harry might have made me happy by writing two lines--and what does he do? He sends a message in words which tell me nothing.

"My sweet girl, the reason why is that I was in two minds when your man stopped me on my way to the ship.

"Whether it was best for you--I was not thinking of myself--to confess the plain truth, or to take refuge in affectionate equivocation, was more than I could decide at the time. When minutes are enough for your intelligence, my stupidity wants days. Well! I saw it at last. A man owes the truth to a true woman; and you are a true woman. There you find a process of reasoning--I have been five days getting hold of it.

"But tell me one thing first. Brutus killed a man; Charlotte Corday killed a man. One of the two victims was a fine tyrant, and the other a mean tyrant. Nobody blames those two historical assassins. Why then blame me for wishing to make a third? Is a mere modern murderer beneath my vengeance, by comparison with two classical tyrants who did their murders by deputy? The man who killed Arthur Mountjoy is (next to Cain alone) the most atrocious homicide that ever trod the miry ways of this earth. There is my reply! I call it a crusher.

"So now my mind is easy. Darling, let me make your mind easy next.

"When I left you at the window of Vimpany's house, I was off to the other railroad to find the murderer in his hiding-place by the seaside. He had left it; but I got a trace, and went back to London--to the Docks. Some villain in Ireland, who knows my purpose, must have turned traitor. Anyhow, the wretch has escaped me.

"Yes; I searched the ship in every corner. He was not on board. Has he gone on before me, by an earlier vessel? Or has he directed his flight to some

other part of the world? I shall find out in time. His day of reckoning will come, and he, too, shall know a violent death! Amen. So be it. Amen.

"Have I done now? Bear with me, gentle Iris--there is a word more to come.

"You will wonder why I went on by the steamship--all the way to South Africa--when I had failed to find the man I wanted, on board. What was my motive? You, you alone, are always my motive. Lucky men have found gold, lucky men have found diamonds. Why should I not be one of them? My sweet, let us suppose two possible things; my own elastic convictions would call them two likely things, but never mind that. Say, I come back a reformed character; there is your only objection to me, at once removed! And take it for granted that I return with a fortune of my own finding. In that case, what becomes of Mr. Henley's objection to me? It melts (as Shakespeare says somewhere) into thin air. Now do take my advice, for once. Show this part of my letter to your excellent father, with my love. I answer beforehand for the consequences. Be happy, my Lady Harry--as happy as I am--and look for my return on an earlier day than you may anticipate. Yours till death, and after.

"HARRY."

Like the Irish lord, Miss Henley was "in two minds," while she rose, and dressed herself. There were parts of the letter for which she loved the writer, and parts of it for which she hated him.

What a prospect was before that reckless man--what misery, what horror, might not be lying in wait in the dreadful future! If he failed in the act of vengeance, that violent death of which he had written so heedlessly might overtake him from another hand. If he succeeded, the law might discover his crime, and the infamy of expiation on the scaffold might be his dreadful end. She turned, shuddering, from the contemplation of those hideous possibilities, and took refuge in the hope of his safe, his guiltless return. Even if his visions of success, even if his purposes of reform (how hopeless at his age!) were actually realised, could she consent to marry the man who had led his life, had written this letter, had contemplated (and still cherished) his merciless resolution of revenge? No woman in her senses could let the bare idea of being his wife enter her mind. Iris opened her writing-desk, to hide the letter from all eyes but her own. As she secured it with the key, her heart sank under the return of a terror remembered but too well. Once more, the superstitious belief in a destiny that was urging Lord Harry and herself nearer and nearer to each other, even when they seemed to be most widely and most surely separated, thrilled her under the

chilling mystery of its presence. She dropped helplessly into a chair. Oh, for a friend who could feel for her, who could strengthen her, whose wise words could restore her to her better and calmer self! Hugh was far away; and Iris was left to suffer and to struggle alone.

Heartfelt aspirations for help and sympathy! Oh, irony of circumstances, how were they answered? The housemaid entered the room, to announce the arrival of a discharged servant, with a lost character.

"Let the young woman come in," Iris said. Was Fanny Mere the friend whom she had been longing for? She looked at her troubled face in the glass--and laughed bitterly.