

CHAPTER XIV - THE LADY'S MAID

IT was not easy to form a positive opinion of the young woman who now presented herself in Miss Henley's room.

If the Turkish taste is truly reported as valuing beauty in the female figure more than beauty in the female face, Fanny Mere's personal appearance might have found, in Constantinople, the approval which she failed to receive in London. Slim and well balanced, firmly and neatly made, she interested men who met her by accident (and sometimes even women), if they happened to be walking behind her. When they quickened their steps, and, passing on, looked back at her face, they lost all interest in Fanny from that moment. Painters would have described the defect in her face as "want of colour." She was one of the whitest of fair female human beings. Light flaxen hair, faint blue eyes with no expression in them, and a complexion which looked as if it had never been stirred by a circulation of blood, produced an effect on her fellow-creatures in general which made them insensible to the beauty of her figure, and the grace of her movements. There was no betrayal of bad health in her strange pallor: on the contrary, she suggested the idea of rare physical strength. Her quietly respectful manner was, so to say, emphasised by an underlying self-possession, which looked capable of acting promptly and fearlessly in the critical emergencies of life. Otherwise, the expression of character in her face was essentially passive. Here was a steady, resolute young woman, possessed of qualities which failed to show themselves on the surface--whether good qualities or bad qualities experience alone could determine.

Finding it impossible, judging by a first impression, to arrive at any immediate decision favourable or adverse to the stranger, Iris opened the interview with her customary frankness; leaving the consequences to follow as they might.

"Take a seat, Fanny," she said, "and let us try if we can understand each other. I think you will agree with me that there must be no concealments between us. You ought to know that your mistress has told me why she parted with you. It was her duty to tell me the truth, and it is my duty not to be unjustly prejudiced against you after what I have heard. Pray believe me when I say that I don't know, and don't wish to know, what your temptation may have been--"

"I beg your pardon, Miss, for interrupting you. My temptation was vanity."

Whether she did or did not suffer in making that confession, it was impossible to discover. Her tones were quiet; her manner was unobtrusively respectful; the pallor of her face was not disturbed by the slightest change of colour. Was the new maid an insensible person? Iris began to fear already that she might have made a mistake.

"I don't expect you to enter into particulars," she said; "I don't ask you here to humiliate yourself."

"When I got your letter, Miss, I tried to consider how I might show myself worthy of your kindness," Fanny answered. "The one way I could see was not to let you think better of me than I deserve. When a person, like me, is told, for the first time, that her figure makes amends for her face, she is flattered by the only compliment that has been paid to her in all her life. My excuse, Miss (if I have an excuse) is a mean one---I couldn't resist a compliment. That is all I have to say."

Iris began to alter her opinion. This was not a young woman of the ordinary type. It began to look possible, and more than possible, that she was worthy of a helping hand. The truth seemed to be in her.

"I understand you, and feel for you." Having replied in those words, Iris wisely and delicately changed the subject. "Let me hear how you are situated at the present time," she continued. "Are your parents living?"

"My father and mother are dead, Miss."

"Have you any other relatives?"

"They are too poor to be able to do anything for me. I have lost my character--and I am left to help myself."

"Suppose you fail to find another situation?" Iris suggested.

"Yes, Miss?"

"How can you help yourself?"

"I can do what other girls have done."

"What do you mean?"

"Some of us starve on needlework. Some take to the streets. Some end it in the river. If there is no other chance for me, I think I shall try that way," said the poor creature, as quietly as if she was speaking of some customary prospect that was open to her. "There will be nobody to be sorry for me--and, as I have read, drowning is not a very painful death."

"You shock me, Fanny! I, for one, should be sorry for you."

"Thank you, Miss."

"And try to remember," Iris continued, "that there may be chances in the future which you don't see yet. You speak of what you have read, and I have already noticed how clearly and correctly you express yourself. You must have been educated. Was it at home? or at school?"

"I was once sent to school," Fanny replied, not quite willingly.

"Was it a private school?"

"Yes."

That short answer warned Iris to be careful.

"Recollections of school," she said good-humouredly, "are not the pleasantest recollections in some of our lives. Perhaps I have touched on a subject which is disagreeable to you?"

"You have touched on one of my disappointments, Miss. While my mother lived, she was my teacher. After her death, my father sent me to school. When he failed in business, I was obliged to leave, just as I had begun to learn and like it. Besides, the girls found out that I was going away, because there was no money at home to pay the fees--and that mortified me. There is more that I might tell you. I have a reason for hating my recollections of the school--but I mustn't mention that time in my life which your goodness to me tries to forget."

All that appealed to her, so simply and so modestly, in that reply, was not lost on Iris. After an interval of silence, she said:

"Can you guess what I am thinking of, Fanny?"

"No, Miss."

"I am asking myself a question. If I try you in my service shall I never regret it?"

For the first time, strong emotion shook Fanny Mere. Her voice failed her, in the effort to speak. Iris considerately went on.

"You will take the place," she said, "of a maid who has been with me for years--a good dear creature who has only left me through ill-health. I must not expect too much of you; I cannot hope that you will be to me what Rhoda Bennet has been."

Fanny succeeded in controlling herself. "Is there any hope," she asked, "of my seeing Rhoda Bennet?"

"Why do you wish to see her?"

"You are fond of her, Miss---that is one reason."

"And the other?"

"Rhoda Bennet might help me to serve you as I want to serve you; she might perhaps encourage me to try if I could follow her example." Fanny paused, and clasped her hands fervently. The thought that was in her forced its way to expression. "It's so easy to feel grateful," she said--"and, oh, so hard to show it!"

"Come to me," her new mistress answered, "and show it to-morrow."

Moved by that compassionate impulse, Iris said the words which restored to an unfortunate creature a lost character and a forfeited place in the world.