

CHAPTER XV - MR. HENLEY'S TEMPER

PROVIDED by nature with ironclad constitutional defences against illness, Mr. Henley was now and then troubled with groundless doubts of his own state of health. Acting under a delusion of this kind, he imagined symptoms which rendered a change of residence necessary from his town house to his country house, a few days only after his daughter had decided on the engagement of her new maid.

Iris gladly, even eagerly, adapted her own wishes to the furtherance of her father's plans. Sorely tried by anxiety and suspense, she needed all that rest and tranquillity could do for her. The first week in the country produced an improvement in her health. Enjoying the serene beauty of woodland and field, breathing the delicious purity of the air--sometimes cultivating her own corner in the garden, and sometimes helping the women in the lighter labours of the dairy--her nerves recovered their tone, and her spirits rose again to their higher level.

In the performance of her duties the new maid justified Miss Henley's confidence in her, during the residence of the household in the country.

She showed, in her own undemonstrative way, a grateful sense of her mistress's kindness. Her various occupations were intelligently and attentively pursued; her even temper never seemed to vary; she gave the servants no opportunities of complaining of her. But one peculiarity in her behaviour excited hostile remark, below-stairs. On the occasions when she was free to go out for the day, she always found some excuse for not joining any of the other female servants, who might happen to be similarly favoured. The one use she made of her holiday was to travel by railway to some place unknown; always returning at the right time in the evening. Iris knew enough of the sad circumstances to be able to respect her motives, and to appreciate the necessity for keeping the object of these solitary journeys a secret from her fellow-servants.

The pleasant life in the country house had lasted for nearly a month, when the announcement of Hugh's approaching return to England reached Iris. The fatal end of his father's long and lingering illness had arrived, and the funeral had taken place. Business, connected with his succession to the property, would detain him in London for a few days. Submitting to this necessity, he earnestly expressed the hope of seeing Iris again, the moment he was at liberty.

Hearing the good news, Mr. Henley obstinately returned to his plans--already twice thwarted--for promoting the marriage of Mountjoy and Iris.

He wrote to invite Hugh to his house in a tone of cordiality which astonished his daughter; and when the guest arrived, the genial welcome of the host had but one defect--Mr. Henley overacted his part. He gave the two young people perpetual opportunities of speaking to each other privately; and, on the principle that none are so blind as those who won't see, he failed to discover that the relations between them continued to be relations of friendship, do what he might. Hugh's long attendance on his dying father had left him depressed in spirits; Iris understood him, and felt for him. He was not ready with his opinion of the new maid, after he had seen Fanny Mere. "My inclination," he said, "is to trust the girl. And yet, I hesitate to follow my inclination--and I don't know why."

When Hugh's visit came to an end, he continued his journey in a northerly direction. The property left to him by his father included a cottage, standing in its own grounds, on the Scotch shore of the Solway Firth. The place had been neglected during the long residence of the elder Mr. Mountjoy on the Continent. Hugh's present object was to judge, by his own investigation, of the necessity for repairs.

On the departure of his guest, Mr. Henley (still obstinately hopeful of the marriage on which he had set his mind) assumed a jocular manner towards Iris, and asked if the Scotch cottage was to be put in order for the honeymoon. Her reply, gently as it was expressed, threw him into a state of fury. His vindictive temper revelled, not only in harsh words, but in spiteful actions. He sold one of his dogs which had specially attached itself to Iris; and, seeing that she still enjoyed the country, he decided on returning to London.

She submitted in silence. But the events of that past time, when her father's merciless conduct had driven her out of his house, returned ominously to her memory. She said to herself: "Is a day coming when I shall leave him again?" It was coming--and she little knew how.