

CHAPTER XVI - THE DOCTOR IN FULL DRESS

MR. HENLEY'S household had been again established in London, when a servant appeared one morning with a visiting card, and announced that a gentleman had called who wished to see Miss Henley. She looked at the card. The gentleman was Mr. Vimpany.

On the point of directing the man to say that she was engaged, Iris checked herself.

Mrs. Vimpany's farewell words had produced a strong impression on her. There had been moments of doubt and gloom in her later life, when the remembrance of that unhappy woman was associated with a feeling (perhaps a morbid feeling) of self-reproach. It seemed to be hard on the poor penitent wretch not to have written to her. Was she still leading the same dreary life in the mouldering old town? Or had she made another attempt to return to the ungrateful stage? The gross husband, impudently presenting himself with his card and his message, could answer those questions if he could do nothing else. For that reason only Iris decided that she would receive Mr. Vimpany.

On entering the room, she found two discoveries awaiting her, for which she was entirely unprepared.

The doctor's personal appearance exhibited a striking change; he was dressed, in accordance with the strictest notions of professional propriety, entirely in black. More remarkable still, there happened to be a French novel among the books on the table--and that novel Mr. Vimpany, barbarous Mr. Vimpany, was actually reading with an appearance of understanding it!

"I seem to surprise you," said the doctor. "Is it this?" He held up the French novel as he put the question.

"I must own that I was not aware of the range of your accomplishments," Iris answered.

"Oh, don't talk of accomplishments! I learnt my profession in Paris. For nigh on three years I lived among the French medical students. Noticing this book on the table, I thought I would try whether I had forgotten the language--in the time that has passed (you know) since those days. Well, my memory isn't a good one in most things, but strange to say (force of habit, I

suppose), some of my French sticks by me still. I hope I see you well, Miss Henley. Might I ask if you noticed the new address, when I sent up my card?"

"I only noticed your name."

The doctor produced his pocket-book, and took out a second card. With pride he pointed to the address: "5 Redburn Road, Hampstead Heath." With pride he looked at his black clothes. "Strictly professional, isn't it?" he said. "I have bought a new practice; and I have become a new man. It isn't easy at first. No, by jingo--I beg your pardon--I was about to say, my own respectability rather bothers me; I shall get used to it in time. If you will allow me, I'll take a liberty. No offence, I hope?"

He produced a handful of his cards, and laid them out in a neat little semicircle on the table.

"A word of recommendation, when you have the chance, would be a friendly act on your part," he explained. "Capital air in Redburn Road, and a fine view of the Heath out of the garret windows--but it's rather an out-of-the-way situation. Not that I complain; beggars mustn't be choosers. I should have preferred a practice in a fashionable part of London; but our little windfall of money--"

He came to a full stop in the middle of a sentence. The sale of the superb diamond pin, by means of which Lord Harry had repaid Mrs. Vimpany's services, was, of all domestic events, the last which it might be wise to mention in the presence of Miss Henley. He was awkwardly silent. Taking advantage of that circumstance, Iris introduced the subject in which she felt interested.

"How is Mrs. Vimpany?" she asked.

"Oh, she's all right!"

"Does she like your new house?"

The doctor made a strange reply. "I really can't tell you," he said.

"Do you mean that Mrs. Vimpany declines to express an opinion?"

He laughed. "In all my experience," he said, "I never met with a woman who did that! No, no; the fact is, my wife and I have parted company. There's no

need to look so serious about it! Incompatibility of temper, as the saying is, has led us to a friendly separation. Equally a relief on both sides. She goes her way, I go mine."

His tone disgusted Iris--and she let him see it. "Is it of any use to ask you for Mrs. Vimpany's address?" she inquired.

His atrocious good-humour kept its balance as steadily as ever: "Sorry to disappoint you. Mrs. Vimpany hasn't given me her address. Curious, isn't it? The fact is, she moped a good deal, after you left us; talked of her duty, and the care of her soul, and that sort of thing. When I hear where she is, I'll let you know with pleasure. To the best of my belief, she's doing nurse's work somewhere."

"Nurse's work? What do you mean?"

"Oh, the right thing--all in the fashion. She belongs to what they call a Sisterhood; goes about, you know, in a shabby black gown, with a poke bonnet. At least, so Lord Harry told me the other day."

In spite of herself, Iris betrayed the agitation which those words instantly roused in her. "Lord Harry!" she exclaimed. "Where is he? In London?"

"Yes--at Parker's Hotel."

"When did he return?"

"Oh, a few days ago; and--what do you think?--he's come back from the goldfields a lucky man. Damn it, I've let the cat out of the bag! I was to keep the thing a secret from everybody, and from you most particularly. He's got some surprise in store for you. Don't tell him what I've done! We had a little misunderstanding, in past days, at Honeybuzzard--and, now we are friends again, I don't want to lose his lordship's interest."

Iris promised to be silent. But to know that the wild lord was in England again, and to remain in ignorance whether he had, or had not, returned with the stain of bloodshed on him, was more than she could endure.

"There is one question I must ask you," she said. "I have reason to fear that Lord Harry left this country, with a purpose of revenge--"

Mr. Vimpany wanted no further explanation. "Yes, yes; I know. You may be easy about that. There's been no mischief done, either one way or the other.

The man he was after, when he landed in South Africa (he told me so himself) has escaped him."

With that reply, the doctor got up in a hurry to bring his visit to an end. He proposed to take to flight, he remarked facetiously, before Miss Henley wheedled him into saying anything more.

After opening the door, however, he suddenly returned to Iris, and added a last word in the strictest confidence.

"If you won't forget to recommend me to your friends," he said, "I'll trust you with another secret. You will see his lordship in a day or two, when he returns from the races. Good-bye."

The races! What was Lord Harry doing at the races?