

CHAPTER XVII - ON HAMPSTEAD HEATH

IRIS had only to remember the manner in which she and Mountjoy had disappointed her father, to perceive the serious necessity of preventing Mountjoy's rival from paying a visit at Mr. Henley's house.

She wrote at once to Lord Harry, at the hotel which Mr. Vimpany had mentioned, entreating him not to think of calling on her. Being well aware that he would insist on a meeting, she engaged to write again and propose an appointment. In making this concession, Iris might have found it easier to persuade herself that she was yielding to sheer necessity, if she had not been guiltily conscious of a feeling of pleasure at the prospect of seeing Lord Harry again, returning to her an innocent man. There was some influence, in this train of thought, which led her mind back to Hugh. She regretted his absence--wondered whether he would have proposed throwing her letter to the Irish lord into the fire--sighed, closed the envelope, and sent the letter to the post.

On the next day, she had arranged to drive to Muswell Hill, and to pay the customary visit to Rhoda. Heavy rain obliged her to wait for a fitter opportunity. It was only on the third day that the sky cleared, and the weather was favourable again. On a sunshiny autumn morning, with a fine keen air blowing, she ordered the open carriage. Noticing, while Fanny Mere was helping her to dress, that the girl looked even paler than usual, she said, with her customary kindness to persons dependent on her, "You look as if a drive in the fresh air would do you good--you shall go with me to the farm, and see Rhoda Bennet."

When they stopped at the house, the farmer's wife appeared, attending a gentleman to the door. Iris at once recognised the local medical man. "You're not in attendance, I hope, on Rhoda Bennet?" she said.

The doctor acknowledged that there had been some return of the nervous derangement from which the girl suffered. He depended mainly (he said) on the weather allowing her to be out as much as possible in the fresh air, and on keeping her free from all agitation. Rhoda was so far on the way to recovery, that she was now walking in the garden by his advice. He had no fear of her, provided she was not too readily encouraged, in her present state, to receive visitors. Her mistress would be, of course, an exception to this rule. But even Miss Henley would perhaps do well not to excite the girl by prolonging her visit. There was one other suggestion which he would

venture to make, while he had the opportunity. Rhoda was not, as he thought, warmly enough clothed for the time of year; and a bad cold might be easily caught by a person in her condition.

Iris entered the farm-house; leaving Fanny Mere, after what the doctor had said on the subject of visitors, to wait for her in the carriage.

After an absence of barely ten minutes Miss Henley returned; personally changed, not at all to her own advantage, by the introduction of a novelty in her dress. She had gone into the farmhouse, wearing a handsome mantle of sealskin. When she came out again, the mantle had vanished, and there appeared in its place a common cloak of drab-coloured cloth. Noticing the expression of blank amazement in the maid's face, Iris burst out laughing.

"How do you think I look in my new cloak?" she asked.

Fanny saw nothing to laugh at in the sacrifice of a sealskin mantle. "I must not presume, Miss, to give an opinion," she said gravely.

"At any rate," Iris continued, "you must be more than mortal if my change of costume doesn't excite your curiosity. I found Rhoda Bennet in the garden, exposed to the cold wind in this ugly flimsy thing. After what the doctor had told me, it was high time to assert my authority. I insisted on changing cloaks with Rhoda. She made an attempt, poor dear, to resist; but she knows me of old--and I had my way. I am sorry you have been prevented from seeing her; you shall not miss the opportunity when she is well again. Do you admire a fine view? Very well; we will vary the drive on our return. Go back," she said to the coachman, "by Highgate and Hampstead."

Fanny's eyes rested on the shabby cloak with a well-founded distrust of it as a protection against the autumn weather. She ventured to suggest that her mistress might feel the loss (in an open carriage) of the warm mantle which she had left on Rhoda's shoulders.

Iris made light of the doubt expressed by her maid. But by the time they had passed Highgate, and had approached the beginning of the straight road which crosses the high ridge of Hampstead Heath, she was obliged to acknowledge that she did indeed feel the cold. "You ought to be a good walker," she said, looking at her maid's firm well-knit figure. "Exercise is all I want to warm me. What do you say to going home on foot?" Fanny was ready and willing to accompany her mistress. The carriage was dismissed, and they set forth on their walk.

As they passed the inn called "The Spaniards," two women who were standing at the garden gate stared at Iris, and smiled. A few paces further on, they were met by an errand-boy. He too looked at the young lady, and put his hand derisively to his head, with a shrill whistle expressive of malicious enjoyment. "I appear to amuse these people," Iris said. "What do they see in me?"

Fanny answered with an effort to preserve her gravity, which was not quite successfully disguised: "I beg your pardon, Miss; I think they notice the curious contrast between your beautiful bonnet and your shabby cloak."

Persons of excitable temperament have a sense of ridicule, and a dread of it, unintelligible to their fellow-creatures who are made of coarser material. For the moment, Iris was angry. "Why didn't you tell me of it," she asked sharply, "before I sent away the carriage? How can I walk back, with everybody laughing at me?"

She paused--reflected a little--and led the way off the high road, on the right, to the fine clump of fir-trees which commands the famous view in that part of the Heath.

"There's but one thing to be done," she said, recovering her good temper; "we must make my grand bonnet suit itself to my miserable cloak. You will pull out the feather and rip off the lace (and keep them for yourself, if you like), and then I ought to look shabby enough from head to foot, I am sure! No; not here; they may notice us from the road--and what may the fools not do when they see you tearing the ornaments off my bonnet! Come down below the trees, where the ground will hide us."

They had nearly descended the steep slope which leads to the valley, below the clump of firs, when they were stopped by a terrible discovery.

Close at their feet, in a hollow of the ground, was stretched the insensible body of a man. He lay on his side, with his face turned away from them. An open razor had dropped close by him. Iris stooped over the prostrate man, to examine his face. Blood flowing from a frightful wound in his throat, was the first thing that she saw. Her eyes closed instinctively, recoiling from that ghastly sight. The next instant she opened them again, and saw his face.

Dying or dead, it was the face of Lord Harry.

The shriek that burst from her, on making that horrible discovery, was heard by two men who were crossing the lower heath at some distance. They

saw the women, and ran to them. One of the men was a labourer; the other, better dressed, looked like a foreman of works. He was the first who arrived on the spot.

"Enough to frighten you out of your senses, ladies," he said civilly. "It's a case of suicide, I should say, by the look of it."

"For God's sake, let us do something to help him!" Iris burst out. "I know him! I know him!"

Fanny, equal to the emergency, asked Miss Henley for her handkerchief, joined her own handkerchief to it, and began to bandage the wound. "Try if his pulse is beating," she said quietly to her mistress. The foreman made himself useful by examining the suicide's pockets. Iris thought she could detect a faint fluttering in the pulse. "Is there no doctor living near?" she cried. "Is there no carriage to be found in this horrible place?"

The foreman had discovered two letters. Iris read her own name on one of them. The other was addressed "To the person who may find my body." She tore the envelope open. It contained one of Mr. Vimpany's cards, with these desperate words written on it in pencil: "Take me to the doctor's address, and let him bury me, or dissect me, whichever he pleases." Iris showed the card to the foreman. "Is it near here?" she asked. "Yes, Miss; we might get him to that place in no time, if there was a conveyance of any kind to be found." Still preserving her presence of mind, Fanny pointed in the direction of "The Spaniards" inn. "We might get what we want there," she said. "Shall I go?"

Iris signed to her to attend to the wounded man, and ascended the sloping ground. She ran on towards the road. The men, directed by Fanny, raised the body and slowly followed her, diverging to an easier ascent. As Iris reached the road, a four-wheel cab passed her. Without an instant's hesitation, she called to the driver to stop. He pulled up his horse. She confronted a solitary gentleman, staring out of the window of the cab, and looking as if he thought that a lady had taken a liberty with him. Iris allowed the outraged stranger no opportunity of expressing his sentiments. Breathless as she was, she spoke first.

"Pray forgive me--you are alone in the cab--there is room for a gentleman, dangerously wounded--he will bleed to death if we don't find help for him--the place is close by--oh, don't refuse me!" She looked back, holding fast by the cab door, and saw Fanny and the men slowly approaching. "Bring him here!" she cried.

"Do nothing of the sort!" shouted the gentleman in possession of the cab.

But Fanny obeyed her mistress; and the men obeyed Fanny. Iris turned indignantly to the merciless stranger. "I ask you to do an act of Christian kindness," she said. "How can you, how dare you, hesitate?"

"Drive on!" cried the stranger.

"Drive on, at your peril," Iris added, on her side.

The cabman sat, silent and stolid, on the box, waiting for events.

Slowly the men came in view, bearing Lord Harry, still insensible. The handkerchiefs on his throat were saturated with blood. At that sight, the cowardly instincts of the stranger completely mastered him. "Let me out!" he clamoured; "let me out!"

Finding the cab left at her disposal, Iris actually thanked him! He looked at her with an evil eye. "I have my suspicions, I can tell you," he muttered. "If this comes to a trial in a court of law, I'm not going to be mixed up with it. Innocent people have been hanged before now, when appearances were against them."

He walked off; and, by way of completing the revelation of his own meanness, forgot to pay his fare.

On the point of starting the horse to pursue him, the cabman was effectually stopped. Iris showed him a sovereign. Upon this hint (like Othello) he spoke.

"All right, Miss. I see your poor gentleman is a-bleeding. You'll take care--won't you?--that he doesn't spoil my cushions." The driver was not a ill-conditioned man; he put the case of his property indulgently, with a persuasive smile. Iris turned to the two worthy fellows, who had so readily given her their help, and bade them good-bye, with a solid expression of her gratitude which they both remembered for many a long day to come. Fanny was already in the cab supporting Lord Harry's body. Iris joined her. The cabman drove carefully to Mr. Vimpany's new house.