

CHAPTER XVIII - PROFESSIONAL ASSISTANCE

NUMBER Five was near the centre of the row of little suburban houses called Redburn Road.

When the cab drew up at the door Mr. Vimpany himself was visible, looking out of the window on the ground floor--and yawning as he looked. Iris beckoned to him impatiently. "Anything wrong?" he asked, as he approached the door of the cab. She drew back, and silently showed him what was wrong. The doctor received the shock with composure. When he happened to be sober and sad, looking for patients and failing to find them, Mr. Vimpany's capacity for feeling sympathy began and ended with himself.

"This is a new scrape, even for Lord Harry," he remarked. "Let's get him into the house."

The insensible man was carried into the nearest room on the ground floor. Pale and trembling, Iris related what had happened, and asked if there was no hope of saving him.

"Patience!" Mr. Vimpany answered; "I'll tell you directly."

He removed the bandages, and examined the wound. "There's been a deal of blood lost," he said; "I'll try and pull him through. While I am about it, Miss, go upstairs, if you please, and find your way to the drawing-room." Iris hesitated. The doctor opened a neat mahogany box. "The tools of my trade," he continued; "I'm going to sew up his lordship's throat." Shuddering as she heard those words, Iris hurried out of the room. Fanny followed her mistress up the stairs. In her own very different way, the maid was as impenetrably composed as Mr. Vimpany himself. "There was a second letter found in the gentleman's pocket, Miss," she said. "Will you excuse my reminding you that you have not read it yet."

Iris read the lines that follow:

"Forgive me, my dear, for the last time. My letter is to say that I shall trouble you no more in this world--and, as for the other world, who knows? I brought some money back with me, from the goldfields. It was not enough to be called a fortune--I mean the sort of fortune which might persuade your father to let you marry me. Well! here in England, I had an opportunity of making ten times more of it on the turf; and, let me add, with private

information of the horses which I might certainly count on to win. I don't stop to ask by what cruel roguery I was tempted to my ruin. My money is lost; and, with it, my last hope of a happy and harmless life with you comes to an end. I die, Iris dear, with the death of that hope. Something in me seems to shrink from suicide in the ugly gloom of great overgrown London. I prefer to make away with myself among the fields, where the green will remind me of dear old Ireland. When you think of me sometimes, say to yourself the poor wretch loved me--and perhaps the earth will lie lighter on Harry for those kind words, and the flowers (if you favour me by planting a few) may grow prettier on my grave."

There it ended.

The heart of Iris sank as she read that melancholy farewell, expressed in language at once wild and childish. If he survived his desperate attempt at self-destruction, to what end would it lead? In silence, the woman who loved him put his letter back in her bosom. Watching her attentively--affected, it was impossible to say how, by that mute distress--Fanny Mere proposed to go downstairs, and ask once more what hope there might be for the wounded man. Iris knew the doctor too well to let the maid leave her on a useless errand.

"Some men might be kindly ready to relieve my suspense," she said; "the man downstairs is not one of them. I must wait till he comes to me, or sends for me. But there is something I wish to say to you, while we are alone. You have been but a short time in my service, Fanny. Is it too soon to ask if you feel some interest in me?"

"If I can comfort you or help you, Miss, be pleased to tell me how." She made that reply respectfully, in her usual quiet manner; her pale cheeks showing no change of colour, her faint blue eyes resting steadily on her mistress's face. Iris went on:

"If I ask you to keep what has happened, on this dreadful day, a secret from everybody, may I trust you--little as you know of me--as I might have trusted Rhoda Bennet?"

"I promise it, Miss." In saying those few words, the undemonstrative woman seemed to think that she had said enough.

Iris had no alternative but to ask another favour.

"And whatever curiosity you may feel, will you be content to do me a

kindness--without wanting an explanation?"

"It is my duty to respect my mistress's secrets; I will do my duty." No sentiment, no offer of respectful sympathy; a positive declaration of fidelity, left impenetrably to speak for itself. Was the girl's heart hardened by the disaster which had darkened her life? Or was she the submissive victim of that inbred reserve, which shrinks from the frank expression of feeling, and lives and dies self-imprisoned in its own secrecy? A third explanation, founded probably on a steadier basis, was suggested by Miss Henley's remembrance of their first interview. Fanny's nature had revealed a sensitive side, when she was first encouraged to hope for a refuge from ruin followed perhaps by starvation and death. Judging so far from experience, a sound conclusion seemed to follow. When circumstances strongly excited the girl, there was a dormant vitality in her that revived. At other times when events failed to agitate her by a direct appeal to personal interests, her constitutional reserve held the rule. She could be impenetrably honest, steadily industrious, truly grateful--but the intuitive expression of feeling, on ordinary occasions, was beyond her reach.

After an interval of nearly half an hour, Mr. Vimpany made his appearance. Pausing in the doorway, he consulted his watch, and entered on a calculation which presented him favourably from a professional point of view.

"Allow for time lost in reviving my lord when he fainted, and stringing him up with a drop of brandy, and washing my hands (look how clean they are!), I haven't been more than twenty minutes in mending his throat. Not bad surgery, Miss Henley."

"Is his life safe, Mr. Vimpany?"

"Thanks to his luck--yes."

"His luck?"

"To be sure! In the first place, he owes his life to your finding him when you did; a little later, and it would have been all over with Lord Harry. Second piece of luck: catching the doctor at home, just when he was most wanted. Third piece of luck: our friend didn't know how to cut his own throat properly. You needn't look black at me, Miss; I'm not joking. A suicide with a razor in his hand has generally one chance in his favour--he is ignorant of anatomy. That is my lord's case. He has only cut through the upper fleshy part of his throat, and has missed the larger blood vessels. Take my word for

it, he will do well enough now; thanks to you, thanks to me, and thanks to his own ignorance. What do you say to that way of putting it? Ha! my brains are in good working order to-day; I haven't been drinking any of Mr. Mountjoy's claret--do you take the joke, Miss Henley?"

Chuckling over the recollection of his own drunken audacity, he happened to notice Fanny Mere.

"Hullo! is this another injured person in want of me? You're as white as a sheet, Miss. If you're going to faint, do me a favour--wait till I can get the brandy-bottle. Oh! it's natural to you, is it? I see. A thick skin and a slow circulation; you will live to be an old woman. A friend of yours, Miss Henley?"

Fanny answered composedly for herself: "I am Miss Henley's maid, sir."

"What's become of the other one?" Mr. Vimpany asked. "Aye? aye? Staying at a farm-house for the benefit of her health, is she? If I had been allowed time enough, I would have made a cure of Rhoda Bennet. There isn't a medical man in England who knows more than I do of the nervous maladies of women--and what is my reward? Is my waiting-room crammed with rich people coming to consult me? Do I live in a fashionable Square? Have I even been made a Baronet? Damn it--I beg your pardon, Miss Henley--but it is irritating, to a man of my capacity, to be completely neglected. For the last three days not a creature has darkened the doors of this house. Could I say a word to you?"

He led Iris mysteriously into a corner of the room. "About our friend downstairs?" he began.

"When may we hope that he will be well again, Mr. Vimpany?"

"Maybe in three weeks. In a month at most. I have nobody here but a stupid servant girl. We ought to have a competent nurse. I can get a thoroughly trained person from the hospital; but there's a little difficulty. I am an outspoken man. When I am poor, I own I am poor. My lord must be well fed; the nurse must be well fed. Would you mind advancing a small loan, to provide beforehand for the payment of expenses?"

Iris handed her purse to him, sick of the sight of Mr. Vimpany. "Is that all?" she asked, making for the door.

"Much obliged. That's all."

As they approached the room on the ground floor, Iris stopped: her eyes rested on the doctor. Even to that coarse creature, the eloquent look spoke for her. Fanny noticed it, and suddenly turned her head aside. Over the maid's white face there passed darkly an expression of unutterable contempt. Her mistress's weakness had revealed itself--weakness for one of the betrayers of women; weakness for a man! In the meantime, Mr. Vimpany (having got the money) was ready to humour the enviable young lady with a well-filled purse.

"Do you want to see my lord before you go?" he asked, amused at the idea. "Mind! you mustn't disturb him! No talking, and no crying. Ready? Now look at him."

There he lay on a shabby little sofa, in an ugly little room; his eyes closed; one helpless hand hanging down; a stillness on his ghastly face, horribly suggestive of the stillness of death--there he lay, the reckless victim of his love for the woman who had desperately renounced him again and again, who had now saved him for the third time. Ah, how her treacherous heart pleaded for him! Can you drive him away from you after this? You, who love him, what does your cold-blooded prudence say, when you look at him now?

She felt herself drawn, roughly and suddenly, back into the passage. The door was closed; the doctor was whispering to her. "Hold up, Miss! I expected better things of you. Come! come!--no fainting. You'll find him a different man to-morrow. Pay us a visit, and judge for yourself."

After what she had suffered, Iris hungered for sympathy. "Isn't it pitiable?" she said to her maid as they left the house.

"I don't know, Miss."

"You don't know? Good heavens, are you made of stone? Have you no such thing as a heart in you?"

"Not for the men," Fanny answered. "I keep my pity for the women."

Iris knew what bitter remembrances made their confession in those words. How she missed Rhoda Bennet at that moment!