

## **CHAPTER XIX - MR. HENLEY AT HOME**

FOR a month, Mountjoy remained in his cottage on the shores of the Solway Firth, superintending the repairs.

His correspondence with Iris was regularly continued; and, for the first time in his experience of her, was a cause of disappointment to him.

Her replies revealed an incomprehensible change in her manner of writing, which became more and more marked in each succeeding instance. Notice it as he might in his own letters, no explanation followed on the part of his correspondent. She, who had so frankly confided her joys and sorrows to him in past days, now wrote with a reserve which seemed only to permit the most vague and guarded allusion to herself. The changes in the weather; the alternation of public news that was dull, and public news that was interesting; the absence of her father abroad, occasioned by doubt of the soundness of his investments in foreign securities; vague questions relating to Hugh's new place of abode, which could only have proceeded from a preoccupied mind--these were the topics on which Iris dwelt, in writing to her faithful old friend. It was hardly possible to doubt that something must have happened, which she had reasons--serious reasons, as it seemed only too natural to infer--for keeping concealed from Mountjoy. Try as he might to disguise it from himself, he now knew how dear, how hopelessly dear, she was to him by the anxiety that he suffered, and by the jealous sense of injury which defied his self-command. His immediate superintendence of the workmen at the cottage was no longer necessary. Leaving there a representative whom he could trust, he resolved to answer his last letter, received from Iris, in person.

The next day he was in London.

Calling at the house, he was informed that Miss Henley was not at home, and that it was impossible to say with certainty when she might return. While he was addressing his inquiries to the servant, Mr. Henley opened the library door. "Is that you, Mountjoy?" he asked. "Come in: I want to speak to you."

Short and thick-set, with a thin-lipped mouth, a coarsely-florid complexion, and furtive greenish eyes; hard in his manner, and harsh in his voice; Mr. Henley was one of the few heartless men, who are innocent of deception on the surface: he was externally a person who inspired, at first sight, feelings

of doubt and dislike. His manner failed to show even a pretence of being glad to see Hugh. What he had to say, he said walking up and down the room, and scratching his bristly iron-gray hair from time to time. Those signs of restlessness indicated, to those who knew him well, that he had a selfish use to make of a fellow-creature, and failed to see immediately how to reach the end in view.

"I say, Mountjoy," he began, "have you any idea of what my daughter is about?"

"I don't even understand what you mean," Hugh replied. "For the last month I have been in Scotland."

"You and she write to each other, don't you?"

"Yes."

"Hasn't she told you--"

"Excuse me for interrupting you, Mr. Henley; she has told me nothing."

Mr. Henley stared absently at the superbly-bound books on his library-shelves (never degraded by the familiar act of reading), and scratched his head more restlessly than ever.

"Look here, young man. When you were staying with me in the country, I rather hoped it might end in a marriage engagement. You and Iris disappointed me--not for the first time. But women do change their minds. Suppose she had changed her mind, after having twice refused you? Suppose she had given you an opportunity--"

Hugh interrupted him again. "It's needless to suppose anything of the sort, sir; she would not have given me an opportunity."

"Don't fence with me, Mountjoy! I'll put it in a milder way, if you prefer being humbugged. Do you feel any interest in that perverse girl of mine?"

Hugh answered readily and warmly: "The truest interest!"

Even Mr. Henley was human; his ugly face looked uglier still. It assumed the self-satisfied expression of a man who had carried his point.

"Now I can go on, my friend, with what I had to say to you. I have been

abroad on business, and only came back the other day. The moment I saw Iris I noticed something wrong about her. If I had been a stranger, I should have said: That young woman is not easy in her mind. Perfectly useless to speak to her about it. Quite happy and quite well--there was her own account of herself. I tried her maid next, a white-livered sulky creature, one of the steadiest liars I have ever met with. 'I know of nothing amiss with my mistress, sir.' There was the maid's way of keeping the secret, whatever it may be! I don't know whether you may have noticed it, in the course of your acquaintance with me--I hate to be beaten."

"No, Mr. Henley, I have not noticed it."

"Then you are informed of it now. Have you seen my housekeeper?"

"Once or twice, sir."

"Come! you're improving; we shall make something of you in course of time. Well, the housekeeper was the next person I spoke to about my daughter. Had she seen anything strange in Miss Iris, while I was away from home? There's a dash of malice in my housekeeper's composition; I don't object to a dash of malice. When the old woman is pleased, she shows her yellow fangs. She had something to tell me: 'The servants have been talking, sir, about Miss Iris.' 'Out with it, ma'am! what do they say?' 'They notice, sir, that their young lady has taken to going out in the forenoon, regularly every day: always by herself, and always in the same direction. I don't encourage the servants, Mr. Henley: there was something insolent in the tone of suspicion that they adopted. I told them that Miss Iris was merely taking her walk. They reminded me that it must be a cruelly long walk; Miss Iris being away regularly for four or five hours together, before she came back to the house. After that' (says the housekeeper) 'I thought it best to drop the subject.' What do you think of it yourself, Mountjoy? Do you call my daughter's conduct suspicious?"

"I see nothing suspicious, Mr. Henley. When Iris goes out, she visits a friend."

"And always goes in the same direction, and always visits the same friend," Mr. Henley added. "I felt a curiosity to know who that friend might be; and I made the discovery yesterday. When you were staying in my house in the country, do you remember the man who waited on you?"

Mountjoy began to feel alarmed for Iris; he answered as briefly as possible.

"Your valet," he said.

"That's it! Well, I took my valet into my confidence--not for the first time, I can tell you: an invaluable fellow. When Iris went out yesterday, he tracked her to a wretched little suburban place near Hampstead Heath, called Redburn Road. She rang the bell at Number Five, and was at once let in--evidently well known there. My clever man made inquiries in the neighbourhood. The house belongs to a doctor, who has lately taken it. Name of Vimpany."

Mountjoy was not only startled, but showed it plainly. Mr. Henley, still pacing backwards and forwards, happened by good fortune to have his back turned towards his visitor, at that moment.

"Now I ask you, as a man of the world," Mr. Henley resumed, "what does this mean? If you're too cautious to speak out--and I must say it looks like it--shall I set you the example?"

"Just as you please, sir."

"Very well, then; I'll tell you what I suspect. When Iris is at home, and when there's something amiss in my family, I believe that scoundrel Lord Harry to be at the bottom of it. There's my experience, and there's my explanation. I was on the point of ordering my carriage, to go to the doctor myself, and insist on knowing what the attraction is that takes my daughter to his house, when I heard your voice in the hall. You tell me you are interested in Iris. Very well; you are just the man to help me."

"May I ask how, Mr. Henley?"

"Of course you may. You can find your way to her confidence, if you choose to try; she will trust you, when she won't trust her father. I don't care two straws about her other secrets; but I do want to know whether she is, or is not, plotting to marry the Irish blackguard. Satisfy me about that, and you needn't tell me anything more. May I count on you to find out how the land lies?"

Mountjoy listened, hardly able to credit the evidence of his own senses; he was actually expected to insinuate himself into the confidence of Iris, and then to betray her to her father! He rose, and took his hat--and, without even the formality of a bow, opened the door.

"Does that mean No?" Mr. Henley called after him.

"Most assuredly," Mountjoy answered--and closed the door behind him.