

CHAPTER XX - FIRST SUSPICIONS OF IRIS

FROM the last memorable day, on which Iris had declared to him that he might always count on her as his friend, but never as his wife, Hugh had resolved to subject his feelings to a rigorous control. As to conquering his hopeless love, he knew but too well that it would conquer him, on any future occasion when he and Iris happened to meet.

He had been true to his resolution, at what cost of suffering he, and he alone knew. Sincerely, unaffectedly, he had tried to remain her friend. But the nature of the truest and the firmest man has its weak place, where the subtle influence of a woman is concerned. Deeply latent, beyond the reach of his own power of sounding, there was jealousy of the Irish lord lurking in Mountjoy, and secretly leading his mind when he hesitated in those emergencies of his life which were connected with Iris. Ignorant of the influence which was really directing him, he viewed with contempt Mr. Henley's suspicions of a secret understanding between his daughter and the man who was, by her own acknowledgment, unworthy of the love with which it had been her misfortune to regard him. At the same time, Hugh's mind was reluctantly in search of an explanation, which might account (without degrading Iris) for her having been traced to the doctor's house. In his recollection of events at the old country town, he found a motive for her renewal of intercourse with such a man as Mr. Vimpany, in the compassionate feeling with which she regarded the doctor's unhappy wife. There might well be some humiliating circumstance, recently added to the other trials of Mrs. Vimpany's married life, which had appealed to all that was generous and forgiving in the nature of Iris. Knowing nothing of the resolution to live apart which had latterly separated the doctor and his wife, Mountjoy decided on putting his idea to the test by applying for information to Mrs. Vimpany at her husband's house.

In the nature of a sensitive man the bare idea of delay, under these circumstances, was unendurable. Hugh called the first cab that passed him, and drove to Hampstead.

Careful--morbidly careful, perhaps--not to attract attention needlessly to himself, he stopped the cab at the entrance to Redburn Road, and approached Number Five on foot. A servant-girl answered the door. Mountjoy asked if Mrs. Vimpany was at home.

The girl made no immediate reply. She seemed to be puzzled by Mountjoy's

simple question. Her familiar manner, with its vulgar assumption of equality in the presence of a stranger, revealed the London-bred maid-servant of modern times. "Did you say Mrs. Vimpany?" she inquired sharply.

"Yes."

"There's no such person here."

It was Mountjoy's turn to be puzzled. "Is this Mr. Vimpany's house?" he said.

"Yes, to be sure it is."

"And yet Mrs. Vimpany doesn't live here?"

"No Mrs. Vimpany has darkened these doors," the girl declared positively.

"Are you sure you are not making a mistake?"

"Quite sure. I have been in the doctor's service since he first took the house."

Determined to solve the mystery, if it could be done, Mountjoy asked if he could see the doctor. No: Mr. Vimpany had gone out.

"There's a young person comes to us," the servant continued. "I wonder whether you mean her, when you ask for Mrs. Vimpany? The name she gives is Henley."

"Is Miss Henley here, now?"

"You can't see her--she's engaged."

She was not engaged with Mrs. Vimpany, for no such person was known in the house. She was not engaged with the doctor, for the doctor had gone out. Mountjoy looked at the hat-stand in the passage, and discovered a man's hat and a man's greatcoat. To whom did they belong? Certainly not to Mr. Vimpany, who had gone out. Repellent as it was, Mr. Henley's idea that the explanation of his daughter's conduct was to be found in the renewed influence over her of the Irish lord, now presented itself to Hugh's mind under a new point of view. He tried in vain to resist the impression that had been produced on him. A sense of injury, which he was unable to justify to himself, took possession of him. Come what might of it, he determined to set at rest the doubts of which he was ashamed, by communicating with Iris.

His card-case proved to be empty when he opened it; but there were letters in his pocket, addressed to him at his hotel in London. Removing the envelope from one of these, he handed it to the servant: "Take that to Miss Henley, and ask when I can see her."

The girl left him in the passage, and went upstairs to the drawing-room.

In the flimsily-built little house, he could hear the heavy step of a man, crossing the room above, and then the resonant tones of a man's voice raised as if in anger. Had she given him already the right to be angry with her? He thought of the time, when the betrayal of Lord Harry's vindictive purpose in leaving England had frightened her--when he had set aside his own sense of what was due to him, for her sake--and had helped her to communicate, by letter, with the man whose fatal ascendancy over Iris had saddened his life. Was what he heard, now, the return that he had deserved?

After a short absence, the servant came back with a message.

"Miss Henley begs you will excuse her. She will write to you."

Would this promised letter be like the other letters which he had received from her in Scotland? Mountjoy's gentler nature reminded him that he owed it to his remembrance of happier days, and truer friendship, to wait and see.

He was just getting into the cab, on his return to London, when a closed carriage, with one person in it, passed him on its way to Redburn Road. In that person he recognised Mr. Henley. As the cab-driver mounted to his seat, Hugh saw the carriage stop at Number Five.