

CHAPTER XXI - THE PARTING SCENE

THE evening had advanced, and the candles had just been lit in Mountjoy's sitting-room at the hotel.

His anxiety to hear from Iris had been doubled and trebled, since he had made the discovery of her father's visit to the doctor's house, at a time when it was impossible to doubt that Lord Harry was with her. Hugh's jealous sense of wrong was now mastered by the nobler emotions which filled him with pity and alarm, when he thought of Iris placed between the contending claims of two such men as the heartless Mr. Henley and the reckless Irish lord. He had remained at the hotel, through the long afternoon, on the chance that she might write to him speedily by the hand of a messenger--and no letter had arrived. He was still in expectation of news which might reach him by the evening post, when the waiter knocked at the door.

"A letter?" Mountjoy asked.

"No, sir," the man answered; "a lady."

Before she could raise her veil, Hugh had recognised Iris. Her manner was subdued; her face was haggard; her hand lay cold and passive in his hand, when he advanced to bid her welcome. He placed a chair for her by the fire. She thanked him and declined to take it. With the air of a woman conscious of committing an intrusion, she seated herself apart in a corner of the room.

"I have tried to write to you, and I have not been able to do it." She said that with a dogged resignation of tone and manner, so unlike herself that Mountjoy looked at her in dismay. "My friend," she went on, "your pity is all I may hope for; I am no longer worthy of the interest you once felt in me."

Hugh saw that it would be useless to remonstrate. He asked if it had been his misfortune to offend her.

"No," she said, "you have not offended me."

"Then what in Heaven's name does this change in you mean?"

"It means," she said, as coldly as ever, "that I have lost my self-respect; it means that my father has renounced me, and that you will do well to follow his example. Have I not led you to believe that I could never be the wife of

Lord Harry? Well, I have deceived you---I am going to marry him."

"I can't believe it, Iris! I won't believe it!"

She handed him the letter, in which the Irishman had declared his resolution to destroy himself. Hugh read it with contempt. "Did my lord's heart fail him?" he asked scornfully.

"He would have died by his own hand, Mr. Mountjoy----"

"Oh, Iris--'Mr.!'"

"I will say 'Hugh,' if you prefer it--but the days of our familiar friendship are none the less at an end. I found Lord Harry bleeding to death from a wound in his throat. It was in a lonely place on Hampstead Heath; I was the one person who happened to pass by it. For the third time, you see, it has been my destiny to save him. How can I forget that? My mind will dwell on it. I try to find happiness--oh, only happiness enough for me--in cheering my poor Irishman, on his way back to the life that I have preserved. There is my motive, if I have a motive. Day after day I have helped to nurse him. Day after day I have heard him say things to me--what is the use of repeating them? After years of resistance I have given way; let that be enough. My one act of discretion has been to prevent a quarrel between my father and Harry. I beg your pardon, I ought to have said Lord Harry. When my father came to the house, I insisted on speaking with him alone. I told him what I have just told you. He said: 'Think again before you make your choice between that man and me. If you decide to marry him, you will live and die without one farthing of my money to help you.' He put his watch on the table between us, and gave me five minutes to make up my mind. It was a long five minutes, but it ended at last. He asked me which he was to do--leave his will as it was, or go to his lawyer and make another. I said, 'You will do as you please, sir.' No; it was not a hasty reply--you can't make that excuse for me. I knew what I was saying; and I saw the future I was preparing for myself, as plainly as you see it--"

Hugh could endure no longer the reckless expression of her despair.

"No!" he cried, "you don't see your future as I see it. Will you hear what I have to say, before it is too late?"

"It is too late already. But I will listen to you if you wish it."

"And, while you listen," Mountjoy added, "you will acquit me of being

influenced by a selfish motive. I have loved you dearly. Perhaps, in secret, I love you still. But, this I know: if you were to remain a single woman for the rest of your life, there would be no hope for Me. Do you believe that I am speaking the truth?"

"You always speak the truth."

"I speak in your interest, at least. You think you see your future life plainly--you are blind to your future life. You talk as if you were resigned to suffer. Are you resigned to lose your sense of right and wrong? Are you resigned to lead the life of an outlaw, and--worse still--not to feel the disgrace of it?"

"Go on, Hugh."

"You won't answer me?"

"I won't shock you."

"You don't discourage me, my dear; I am still obstinate in the hope of restoring you to your calmer and truer self. Let me do every justice to Lord Harry. I believe, sincerely believe, that his miserable life has not utterly destroyed in him the virtues which distinguish an honourable man. But he has one terrible defect. In his nature, there is the fatal pliability which finds companionable qualities in bad friends. In this aspect of his character, he is a dangerous man--and he may be (forgive me!) a bad husband. It is a thankless task to warn you to any good purpose. A wife--and a loving wife more than another--feels the deteriorating influence of a husband who is not worthy of her. His ways of thinking are apt to become, little by little, her ways of thinking. She makes allowances for him, which he does not deserve; her sense of right and wrong becomes confused; and before she is aware of it herself, she has sunk to his level. Are you angry with me?"

"How can I be angry with you? Perhaps you are right."

"Do you really mean that?"

"Oh, yes."

"Then, for God's sake, reconsider your decision! Let me go to your father."

"Mere waste of time," Iris answered. "Nothing that you can say will have the least effect on him."

"At any rate," Mountjoy persisted, "I mean to try."

Had he touched her? She smiled--how bitterly Hugh failed to perceive.

"Shall I tell you what happened to me when I went home to-day?" she said. "I found my maid waiting in the hall--with everything that belongs to me, packed up for my departure. The girl explained that she had been forced to obey my father's positive orders. I knew what that meant--I had to leave the house, and find a place to live in."

"Not by yourself, Iris?"

"No--with my maid. She is a strange creature; if she feels sympathy, she never expresses it. 'I am your grateful servant, Miss. Where you go, I go.' That was all she said; I was not disappointed--I am getting used to Fanny Mere already. Mine is a lonely lot--isn't it? I have acquaintances among the few ladies who sometimes visit at my father's house, but no friends. My mother's family, as I have always been told, cast her off when she married a man in trade, with a doubtful reputation. I don't even know where my relations live. Isn't Lord Harry good enough for me, as I am now? When I look at my prospects, is it wonderful if I talk like a desperate woman? There is but one encouraging circumstance that I can see. This misplaced love of mine that everybody condemns has, oddly enough, a virtue that everybody must admire. It offers a refuge to a woman who is alone in the world."

Mountjoy denied indignantly that she was alone in the world.

"Is there any protection that a man can offer to a woman," he asked, "which I am not ready and eager to offer to You? Oh, Iris, what have I done to deserve that you should speak of yourself as friendless in my hearing!"

He had touched her at last. Their tender charm showed itself once more in her eyes and in her smile. She rose and approached him.

"What exquisite kindness it must be," she said, "that blinds a clever man like you to obstacles which anyone else can see! Remember, dear Hugh, what the world would say to that protection which your true heart offers to me. Are you my near relation? are you my guardian? are you even an old man? Ah me! you are only an angel of goodness whom I must submit to lose. I shall still count on your kindness when we see each other no more. You will pity me, when you hear that I have fallen lower and lower; you will be sorry for me, when I end in disgracing myself."

"Even then, Iris, we shall not be separated. The loving friend who is near you now, will be your loving friend still."

For the first time in her life, she threw her arms round him. In the agony of that farewell, she held him to her bosom. "Goodbye, dear," she said faintly--and kissed him.

The next moment, a deadly pallor overspread her face. She staggered as she drew back, and dropped into the chair that she had just left. In the fear that she might faint, Mountjoy hurried out in search of a restorative. His bed-chamber was close by, at the end of the corridor; and there were smelling-salts in his dressing-case. As he raised the lid, he heard the door behind him, the one door in the room, locked from the outer side.

He rushed to the door, and called to her. From the farther end of the corridor, her voice reached him for the last time, repeating the last melancholy word: "Good-bye." No renewal of the miserable parting scene: no more of the heartache--Iris had ended it!