

CHAPTER XXII - THE FATAL WORDS

WHEN Mountjoy had rung for the servant, and the bedroom door had been unlocked, it was too late to follow the fugitive. Her cab was waiting for her outside; and the attention of the porter had been distracted, at the same time, by a new arrival of travellers at the hotel.

It is more or less in the nature of all men who are worthy of the name, to take refuge from distress in action. Hugh decided on writing to Iris, and on making his appeal to her father, that evening. He abstained from alluding, in his letter, to the manner in which she had left him; it was her right, it was even her duty to spare herself. All that he asked was to be informed of her present place of residence, so that he might communicate the result--in writing only if she preferred it--of his contemplated interview with her father. He addressed his letter to the care of Mr. Vimpany, to be forwarded, and posted it himself.

This done, he went on at once to Mr. Henley's house.

The servant who opened the door had evidently received his orders. Mr. Henley was "not at home." Mountjoy was in no humour to be trifled with. He pushed the man out of his way, and made straight for the dining-room. There, as his previous experience of the habits of the household had led him to anticipate, was the man whom he was determined to see. The table was laid for Mr. Henley's late dinner.

Hugh's well-meant attempt to plead the daughter's cause with the father ended as Iris had said it would end.

After hotly resenting the intrusion on him that had been committed, Mr. Henley declared that a codicil to his will, depriving his daughter absolutely of all interest in his property, had been legally executed that day. For a time, Mountjoy's self-control had resisted the most merciless provocation. All that it was possible to effect, by patient entreaty and respectful remonstrance, he had tried again and again, and invariably in vain. At last, Mr. Henley's unbridled insolence triumphed. Hugh lost his temper--and, in leaving the heartless old man, used language which he afterwards remembered with regret.

To feel that he had attempted to assert the interests of Iris, and that he had failed, was, in Hugh's heated state of mind, an irresistible stimulant to

further exertion. It was perhaps not too late yet to make another attempt to delay (if not to prevent) the marriage.

In sheer desperation, Mountjoy resolved to inform Lord Harry that his union with Miss Henley would be followed by the utter ruin of her expectations from her father. Whether the wild lord only considered his own interests, or whether he was loyally devoted to the interests of the woman whom he loved, in either case the penalty to be paid for the marriage was formidable enough to make him hesitate.

The lights in the lower window, and in the passage, told Hugh that he had arrived in good time at Redburn Road.

He found Mr. Vimpany and the young Irishman sitting together, in the friendliest manner, under the composing influence of tobacco. Primed, as he would have said himself, with only a third glass of grog, the hospitable side of the doctor's character was displayed to view. He at once accepted Mountjoy's visit as offering a renewal of friendly relations between them.

"Forgive and forget," he said, "there's the way to settle that little misunderstanding, after our dinner at the inn. You know Mr. Mountjoy, my lord? That's right. Draw in your chair, Mountjoy. My professional prospects threaten me with ruin--but while I have a roof over my head, there's always a welcome for a friend. My dear fellow, I have every reason to believe that the doctor who sold me this practice was a swindler. The money is gone, and the patients don't come. Well! I am not quite bankrupt yet; I can offer you a glass of grog. Mix for yourself--we'll make a night of it."

Hugh explained (with the necessary excuses) that his object was to say a few words to Lord Harry in private. The change visible in the doctor's manner, when he had been made acquainted with this circumstance, was not amiably expressed; he had the air of a man who suspected that an unfair advantage had been taken of him. Lord Harry, on his side, appeared to feel some hesitation in granting a private interview to Mr. Mountjoy.

"Is it about Miss Henley?" he asked.

Hugh admitted that it was. Lord Harry thereupon suggested that they might be acting wisely if they avoided the subject. Mountjoy answered that there were, on the contrary, reasons for approaching the subject sufficiently important to have induced him to leave London for Hampstead at a late hour of the night.

Hearing this, Lord Harry rose to lead the way to another room. Excluded from his visitor's confidence, Mr. Vimpany could at least remind Mountjoy that he exercised authority as master of the house. "Oh, take him upstairs, my lord," said the doctor; "you are at home under my humble roof!"

The two young men faced each other in the barely-furnished drawing-room; both sufficiently doubtful of the friendly result of the conference to abstain from seating themselves. Hugh came to the point, without wasting time in preparatory words. Admitting that he had heard of Miss Henley's engagement, he asked if Lord Harry was aware of the disastrous consequences to the young lady which would follow her marriage. The reply to this was frankly expressed. The Irish lord knew nothing of the consequences to which Mr. Mountjoy had alluded. Hugh at once enlightened him, and evidently took him completely by surprise.

"May I ask, sir," he said, "if you are speaking from your own personal knowledge?"

"I have just come, my lord, from Mr. Henley's house; and what I have told you, I heard from his own lips."

There was a pause. Hugh was already inclined to think that he had raised an obstacle to the immediate celebration of the marriage. A speedy disappointment was in store for him. Lord Harry was too fond of Iris to be influenced, in his relations with her, by mercenary considerations.

"You put it strongly," he said. "But let me tell you, Miss Henley is far from being so dependent on her father--he ought to be ashamed of himself, but that's neither here nor there--I say, she is far from being so dependent on her father as you seem to think. I am not, I beg to inform you, without resources which I shall offer to her with all my heart and soul. Perhaps you wish me to descend to particulars? Oh, it's easily done; I have sold my cottage in Ireland."

"For a large sum--in these times?" Hugh inquired.

"Never mind the sum, Mr. Mountjoy--let the fact be enough for you. And, while we are on the question of money (a disgusting question, with which I refuse to associate the most charming woman in existence), don't forget that Miss Henley has an income of her own; derived, as I understand, from her mother's fortune, You will do me the justice, sir, to believe that I shall not touch a farthing of it."

"Certainly! But her mother's fortune," Mountjoy continued, obstinately presenting the subject on its darkest side, "consists of shares in a Company. Shares rise and fall--and Companies some times fail."

"And a friend's anxiety about Miss Henley's affairs sometimes takes a mighty disagreeable form," the Irishman added, his temper beginning to show itself without disguise. "Let's suppose the worst that can happen, and get all the sooner to the end of a conversation which is far from being agreeable to me. We'll say, if you like, that Miss Henley's shares are waste paper, and her pockets (God bless her!) as empty as pockets can be, does she run any other risk that occurs to your ingenuity in becoming my wife?"

"Yes, she does!" Hugh was provoked into saying. "In the case you have just supposed, she runs the risk of being left a destitute widow--if you die."

He was prepared for an angry reply--for another quarrel added, on that disastrous night, to the quarrel with Mr. Henley. To his astonishment, Lord Harry's brightly-expressive eyes rested on him with a look of mingled distress and alarm. "God forgive me!" he said to himself, "I never thought of that! What am I to do? what am I to do?"

Mountjoy observed that deep discouragement, and failed to understand it.

Here was a desperate adventurer, whose wanderings had over and over again placed his life in jeopardy, now apparently overcome by merely having his thoughts directed to the subject of death! To place on the circumstances such a construction as this was impossible, after a moment's reflection. The other alternative was to assume that there must be some anxiety burdening Lord Harry's mind, which he had motives for keeping concealed--and here indeed the true explanation had been found. The Irish lord had reasons, known only to himself, for recoiling from the contemplation of his own future. After the murder of Arthur Mountjoy, he had severed his connection with the assassinating brotherhood of the Invincibles; and he had then been warned that he took this step at the peril of his life, if he remained in Great Britain after he had made himself an object of distrust to his colleagues. The discovery, by the secret tribunal, of his return from South Africa would be followed inevitably by the sentence of death. Such was the terrible position which Mountjoy's reply had ignorantly forced him to confront. His fate depended on the doubtful security of his refuge in the doctor's house.

While Hugh was still looking at him, in grave doubt, a new idea seemed to spring to life in Lord Harry's mind. He threw off the oppression that had weighed on his spirits in an instant. His manner towards Mountjoy changed,

with the suddenness of a flash of light, from the extreme of coldness to the extreme of cordiality.

"I have got it at last!" he exclaimed. "Let's shake hands. My dear sir, you're the best friend I have ever had!"

The cool Englishman asked: "In what way?"

"In this way, to be sure! You have reminded me that I can provide for Miss Henley--and the sooner the better. There's our friend the doctor down-stairs, ready to be my reference. Don't you see it?"

Obstacles that might prevent the marriage Mountjoy was ready enough to see. Facilities that might hasten the marriage found his mind hard of access to new impressions.

"Are you speaking seriously?" he said.

The Irishman's irritable temper began to show itself again.

"Why do you doubt it?" he asked.

"I fail to understand you," Mountjoy replied.

Never--as events were yet to prove--had words of such serious import fallen from Lord Harry's lips as the words that he spoke next.

"Clear your mind of jealousy," he said, "and you will understand me well enough. I agree with you that I am bound to provide for my widow--and I mean to do it by insuring my life."

THE END OF THE SECOND PERIOD