

THIRD PERIOD

CHAPTER XXIII - NEWS OF IRIS

AFTER his interview with the Irish lord, Mountjoy waited for two days, in the expectation of hearing from Iris. No reply arrived. Had Mr. Vimpany failed to forward the letter that had been entrusted to him?

On the third day, Hugh wrote to make inquiries.

The doctor returned the letter that had been confided to his care, and complained in his reply of the ungrateful manner in which he had been treated. Miss Henley had not trusted him with her new address in London; and Lord Harry had suddenly left Redburn Road; bidding his host goodbye in a few lines of commonplace apology, and nothing more. Mr. Vimpany did not deny that he had been paid for his medical services; but, he would ask, was nothing due to friendship? Was one man justified in enjoying another man's hospitality, and then treating him like a stranger? "I have done with them both--and I recommend you, my dear sir, to follow my example." In those terms the angry (and sober) doctor expressed his sentiments, and offered his advice.

Mountjoy laid down the letter in despair.

His last poor chance of preventing the marriage depended on his being still able to communicate with Iris--and she was as completely lost to him as if she had taken flight to the other end of the world. It might have been possible to discover her by following the movements of Lord Harry, but he too had disappeared without leaving a trace behind him. The precious hours and days were passing--and Hugh was absolutely helpless.

Tortured by anxiety and suspense, he still lingered at the hotel in London. More than once, he decided on giving up the struggle, and returning to his pretty cottage in Scotland. More than once, he deferred taking the journey. At one time, he dreaded to hear that Iris was married, if she wrote to him. At another time, he felt mortified and disappointed by the neglect which her silence implied. Was she near him, or far from him? In England, or out of England? Who could say!

After more weary days of waiting and suffering a letter arrived, addressed to Mountjoy in a strange handwriting, and bearing the post-mark of Paris. The signature revealed that his correspondent was Lord Harry.

His first impulse was to throw the letter into the fire, unread. There could be little doubt, after the time that had passed, of the information that it would contain. Could he endure to be told of the marriage of Iris, by the man who was her husband? Never! There was something humiliating in the very idea of it. He arrived at that conclusion--and what did he do in spite of it? He read the letter.

Lord Harry wrote with scrupulous politeness of expression. He regretted that circumstances had prevented him from calling on Mr. Mountjoy, before he left England. After the conversation that had taken place at Mr. Vimpany's house, he felt it his duty to inform Mr. Mountjoy that he had insured his life--and, he would add, for a sum of money amply, and more than amply, sufficient to provide for his wife in the event of her surviving him. Lady Harry desired her kind regards, and would write immediately to her old and valued friend. In the meantime, he would conclude by repeating the expression of his sense of obligation to Mr. Mountjoy.

Hugh looked back at the first page of the letter, in search of the writer's address. It was simply, "Paris." The intention to prevent any further correspondence, or any personal communication, could hardly have been more plainly implied. In another moment, the letter was in the fire.

In two days more, Hugh heard from Iris.

She, too, wrote regretfully of the sudden departure from England; adding, however, that it was her own doing. A slip of the tongue, on Lord Harry's part, in the course of conversation, had led her to fear that he was still in danger from political conspirators with whom he had imprudently connected himself. She had accordingly persuaded him to tell her the whole truth, and had thereupon insisted on an immediate departure for the Continent. She and her husband were now living in Paris; Lord Harry having friends in that city whose influence might prove to be of great importance to his pecuniary prospects. Some sentences followed, expressing the writer's grateful remembrance of all that she had owed to Hugh in past days, and her earnest desire that they might still hear of each other, from time to time, by correspondence. She could not venture to anticipate the pleasure of receiving a visit from him, under present circumstances. But, she hoped that he would not object to write to her, addressing his letters, for the present, to post-restante.

In a postscript a few words were added, alluding to Mr. Vimpany. Hugh was requested not to answer any inquiries which that bad man might venture to make, relating to her husband or to herself. In the bygone days, she had been thankful to the doctor for the care which he had taken, medically speaking, of Rhoda Bonnet. But, since that time, his behaviour to his wife, and the opinions which he had expressed in familiar conversation with Lord Harry, had convinced her that he was an unprincipled person. All further communication with him (if her influence could prevent it) must come to an end.

Still as far as ever from feeling reconciled to the marriage, Mountjoy read this letter with a feeling of resentment which disinclined him to answer it.

He believed (quite erroneously) that Iris had written to him under the superintendence of her husband. There were certain phrases which had been, as he chose to suspect, dictated by Lord Harry's distrust--jealous distrust, perhaps--of his wife's friend. Mountjoy would wait to reply, until, as he bitterly expressed it, Iris was able to write to him without the assistance of her master.

Again he thought of returning to Scotland--and, again, he hesitated.

On this occasion, he discovered objections to the cottage which had not occurred to him while Iris was a single woman. The situation was solitary; his nearest neighbours were fishermen. Here and there, at some little distance, there were only a few scattered houses inhabited by retired tradesmen. Further away yet, there was the country-seat of an absent person of distinction, whose health suffered in the climate of Scotland. The lonely life in prospect, on the shores of the Solway, now daunted Mountjoy for the first time.

He decided on trying what society in London would do to divert his mind from the burdens and anxieties that weighed on it. Acquaintances whom he had neglected were pleasantly surprised by visits from their rich and agreeable young friend. He attended dinner parties; he roused hope in mothers and daughters by accepting invitations to balls; he reappeared at his club. Was there any relief to his mind in this? was there even amusement? No; he was acting a part, and he found it a hard task to keep up appearances. After a brief and brilliant interval, society knew him no more.

Left by himself again, he enjoyed one happy evening in London. It was the

evening on which he relented, in spite of himself, and wrote to Iris.