

## **CHAPTER XXIV - LORD HARRY'S HONEYMOON**

THE next day, Hugh received a visit from the last person in the little world of his acquaintance whom he expected to see. The lost Mrs. Vimpany presented herself at the hotel.

She looked unnaturally older since Mountjoy had last seen her. Her artificial complexion was gone. The discarded rouge that had once overlaid her cheeks, through a long succession of years, had left the texture of the skin coarse, and had turned the colour of it to a dull yellowish tinge. Her hair, once so skilfully darkened, was now permitted to tell the truth, and revealed the sober colouring of age, in gray. The lower face had fallen away in substance; and even the penetrating brightness of her large dark eyes was a little dimmed. All that had been left in her of the attractions of past days, owed its vital preservation to her stage training. Her suave grace of movement, and the deep elocutionary melody of her voice, still identified Mrs. Vimpany--disguised as she was in a dress of dull brown, shorn without mercy of the milliner's hideous improvements to the figure. "Will you shake hands with me, Mr. Mountjoy?" Those were the first words she said to him, in a sad subdued manner, on entering the room.

"Why not?" Hugh asked, giving her his hand.

"You can have no very favourable remembrance of me," she answered. "But I hope to produce a better impression--if you can spare me a little of your time. You may, or may not, have heard of my separation from my husband. Anyway, it is needless to trouble you on the subject; you know Mr. Vimpany; you can guess what I have suffered, and why I have left him. If he comes to you, I hope you will not tell him where Lady Harry is."--

Hugh interposed: "Pray don't speak of her by that name! Call her 'Iris,' as I do."

A faint reflection of the old stage-smile trembled on Mrs. Vimpany's worn and weary face.

"Ah, Mr. Mountjoy, I know whom she ought to have married! The worst enemy of women is their ignorance of men--and they only learn to know better, when it is too late. I try to be hopeful for Iris, in the time to come, but my fears conquer me."

She paused, sighed, and pressed her open hand on her bosom; unconsciously betraying in that action some of the ineradicable training of the theatre.

"I am almost afraid to say that I love Iris," she resumed; "but this I know; if I am not so bad as I once was, I owe it to that dearest and sweetest of women! But for the days that I passed in her company, I might never have tried to atone for my past life by works of mercy. When other people take the way of amendment, I wonder whether they find it as hard to follow, at first, as I did?"

"There is no doubt of it, Mrs. Vimpany--if people are sincere. Beware of the sinners who talk of sudden conversion and perfect happiness. May I ask how you began your new life?"

"I began unhappily, Mr. Mountjoy--I joined a nursing Sisterhood. Before long, a dispute broke out among them. Think of women who call themselves Christians, quarrelling about churches and church services--priest's vestments and attitudes, and candles and incense! I left them, and went to a hospital, and found the doctors better Christians than the Sisters. I am not talking about my own poor self (as you will soon see) without a reason. My experience in the hospital led to other things. I nursed a lady through a tedious illness, and was trusted to take her to some friends in the south of France. On my return, I thought of staying for a few days in Paris--it was an opportunity of seeing how the nurses did their work in the French hospitals. And, oh, it was far more than that! In Paris, I found Iris again."

"By accident?" Hugh asked.

"I am not sure," Mrs. Vimpany answered, "that there are such things as meetings by accident. She and her husband were among the crowds of people on the Boulevards, who sit taking their coffee in view of the other crowds, passing along the street. I went by, without noticing them. She saw me, and sent Lord Harry to bring me back. I have been with them every day, at her invitation, from that time to this; and I have seen their life."

She stopped, noticing that Hugh grew restless. "I am in doubt," she said, "whether you wish to hear more of their life in Paris."

Mountjoy at once controlled himself.

"Go on," he said quietly.

"Even if I tell you that Iris is perfectly happy?"

"Go on," Hugh repeated.

"May I confess," she resumed, "that her husband is irresistible--not only to his wife, but even to an old woman like me? After having known him for years at his worst, as well as at his best, I am still foolish enough to feel the charm of his high spirits and his delightful good-humour. Sober English people, if they saw him now, would almost think him a fit subject to be placed under restraint. One of his wild Irish ideas of expressing devotion to his wife is, that they shall forget they are married, and live the life of lovers. When they dine at a restaurant, he insists on having a private room. He takes her to public balls, and engages her to dance with him for the whole evening. When she stays at home and is a little fatigued, he sends me to the piano, and whirls her round the room in a waltz. 'Nothing revives a woman,' he says, 'like dancing with the man she loves.' When she is out of breath, and I shut up the piano, do you know what he does? He actually kisses Me--and says he is expressing his wife's feeling for me when she is not able to do it herself! He sometimes dines out with men, and comes back all on fire with the good wine, and more amiable than ever. On these occasions his pockets are full of sweetmeats, stolen for 'his angel' from the dessert. 'Am I a little tipsy?' he asks. 'Oh, don't be angry; it's all for love of you. I have been in the highest society, my darling; proposing your health over and over and over again, and drinking to you deeper than all the rest of the company. You don't blame me? Ah, but I blame myself. I was wrong to leave you, and dine with men. What do I want with the society of men, when I have your society? Drinking your health is a lame excuse. I will refuse all invitations for the future that don't include my wife.' And--mind!--he really means it, at the time. Two or three days later, he forgets his good resolutions, and dines with the men again, and comes home with more charming excuses, and stolen sweetmeats, and good resolutions. I am afraid I weary you, Mr. Mountjoy?"

"You surprise me," Hugh replied. "Why do I hear all this of Lord Harry?"

Mrs. Vimpany left her chair. The stage directions of other days had accustomed her to rise, when the character she played had anything serious to say. Her own character still felt the animating influence of dramatic habit: she rose now, and laid her hand impressively on Mountjoy's shoulder.

"I have not thoughtlessly tried your patience," she said. "Now that I am away from the influence of Lord Harry, I can recall my former experience of him: and I am afraid I can see the end that is coming. He will drift into bad company; he will listen to bad advice; and he will do things in the future

which he might shrink from doing now. When that time comes, I fear him! I fear him!"

"When that time comes," Hugh repeated, "if I have any influence left over his wife, he shall find her capable of protecting herself. Will you give me her address in Paris?"

"Willingly--if you will promise not to go to her till she really needs you?"

"Who is to decide when she needs me?"

"I am to decide," Mrs. Vimpany answered; "Iris writes to me confidentially. If anything happens which she may be unwilling to trust to a letter, I believe I shall hear of it from her maid."

"Are you sure the maid is to be relied on?" Mountjoy interposed.

"She is a silent creature, so far as I know anything of her," Mrs. Vimpany admitted; "and her manner doesn't invite confidence. But I have spoken with Fanny Mere; I am satisfied that she is true to her mistress and grateful to her mistress in her own strange way. If Iris is in any danger, I shall not be left in ignorance of it. Does this incline you to consult with me, before you decide on going to Paris? Don't stand on ceremony; say honestly, Yes or No."

Honestly, Hugh said Yes.

He was at once trusted with the address of Iris. At the same time, Mrs. Vimpany undertook that he should know what news she received from Paris as soon as she knew it herself. On that understanding they parted, for the time being.