

## **CHAPTER XXV - THE DOCTOR IN DIFFICULTIES**

SLOWLY the weeks passed. Strictly Mrs. Vimpany kept her promise.

When she heard from Iris the letter was always sent to Hugh, to be returned after he had read it. Events in the lives of the newly-married pair, many of which pointed to the end that Mrs. Vimpany saw and dreaded, were lightly, sometimes jestingly, related by the young wife. Her blind belief in her husband, sincerely asserted in the earlier part of the correspondence, began to betray, in her later letters, signs of self delusion. It was sad indeed to see that bright intelligence rendered incapable of conceiving suspicions, which might have occurred to the mind of a child.

When the latest news from Paris followed, in due course, Mountjoy was informed of it by a note from Mrs. Vimpany expressed in these terms:

"My last letter from Iris is really no letter at all. It simply encloses a circular, with her love, and asks me to send it on to you. If it is in your power to make inquiries in the right quarter, I am sure you will not hesitate to take the trouble. There can be little doubt, as I think, that Lord Harry is engaged in a hazardous speculation, more deeply than his wife is willing to acknowledge."

The circular announced the contemplated publication of a weekly newspaper, printed partly in English, and partly in French, having its chief office in Paris, and being intended to dispute the advantages of a European circulation with the well-known Continental journal called "Galignani's Messenger." A first list of contributors included names of some notoriety in the literature of England and the literature of France. Speculators who wished to know, in the first place, on what security they might reckon, were referred to the managing committee, represented by persons of importance in the financial worlds of London and Paris.

Being in a position to make the inquiries which Mrs. Vimpany had suggested, Hugh received information which verified the statements contained in the circular, and vouched for the good faith of those persons who were concerned in directing the speculation. So far, so good.

But, when the question of success was next discussed, the authorities consulted shook their wise heads. It was impossible to say what losses might not be suffered, and what sums of money might not be required,

before the circulation of the new journal would justify the hope of success. This opinion Hugh communicated to Mrs. Vimpany; Iris was informed of it by that day's post.

A longer time than usual elapsed before any further news of Lord Harry and his wife was received by Mountjoy. When he did at last hear again from Mrs. Vimpany, she forwarded a letter from Iris dated from a new address, in the suburb of Paris called Passy.

From motives of economy (Iris wrote) her husband had decided on a change of residence. They were just established in their new abode, with the advantages of a saving in rent, a pretty little garden to cultivate, and purer air to breathe than the air of Paris. There the letter ended, without the slightest allusion to the forthcoming newspaper, or to the opinion that had been pronounced on the prospects of success.

In forwarding this letter, Mrs. Vimpany wrote on the blank page as follows: "I am sorry to add that some disquieting news of my husband has reached me. For the present, I will say no more. It is at least possible that the report may not be worthy of belief."

A few days later the report was confirmed, under circumstances which had certainly not been foreseen. Mr. Vimpany himself arrived at the hotel, on a visit to Mountjoy.

Always more or less superior to the amiable weakness of modesty, the doctor seemed to have risen higher than ever in his own estimation, since Hugh had last seen him. He strutted; he stared confidently at persons and things; authority was in his voice when he spoke, and lofty indulgence distinguished his manner when he listened.

"How are you?" he cried with a grand gaiety, as he entered the room. "Fine weather, isn't it, for the time of year? You don't look well. I wonder whether you notice any change in me?"

"You seem to be in good spirits," Hugh replied, not very cordially.

"Do I carry my head high?" Mr. Vimpany went on. "When calamity strikes at a man, don't let him cringe and cry for pity--let him hit back again! Those are my principles. Look at me. Now do look at me. Here I am, a cultivated person, a member of an honourable profession, a man of art and accomplishment--stripped of every blessed thing belonging to me but the clothes I stand up in. Give me your hand, Mountjoy. It's the hand, sir, of a

bankrupt."

"You don't seem to mind it much," Mountjoy remarked.

"Why should I mind it?" asked the doctor. "There isn't a medical man in England who has less reason to reproach himself than I have. Have I wasted money in rash speculations? Not a farthing. Have I been fool enough to bet at horse races? My worst enemy daren't say it of me. What have I done then? I have toiled after virtue--that's what I have done. Oh, there's nothing to laugh at! When a doctor tries to be the medical friend of humanity; when he only asks leave to cure disease, to soothe pain, to preserve life--isn't that virtue? And what is my reward? I sit at home, waiting for my suffering fellow-creatures; and the only fellow-creatures who come to me are too poor to pay. I have gone my rounds, calling on the rich patients whom I bought when I bought the practice. Not one of them wanted me. Men, women, and children, were all inexcusably healthy--devil take them! Is it wonderful if a man becomes bankrupt, in such a situation as mine? By Jupiter, I go farther than that! I say, a man owes it to himself (as a protest against undeserved neglect) to become a bankrupt. If you will allow me, I'll take a chair."

He sat down with an air of impudent independence and looked round the room. A little cabinet, containing liqueurs, stood open on the sideboard. Mr. Vimpany got up again. "May I take a friendly liberty?" he said--and helped himself, without waiting for permission.

Hugh bore with this, mindful of the mistake that he had committed in consenting to receive the doctor. At the same time, he was sufficiently irritated to take a friendly liberty on his side. He crossed the room to the sideboard, and locked up the liqueurs. Mr. Vimpany's brazen face flushed deeply (not with shame); he opened his lips to say something worthy of himself, controlled the impulse, and burst into a boisterous laugh. He had evidently some favour still to ask.

"Devilish good!" he broke out cheerfully. "Do you remember the landlady's claret? Ha! you don't want to tempt me this time. Well! well! to return to my bankruptcy."

Hugh had heard enough of his visitor's bankruptcy. "I am not one of your creditors," he said.

Mr. Vimpany made a smart reply: "Don't you be too sure of that. Wait a little."

"Do you mean," Mountjoy asked, "that you have come here to borrow money of me?"

"Time---give me time," the doctor pleaded: "this is not a matter to be dispatched in a hurry; this is a matter of business. You will hardly believe it," he resumed, "but I have actually been in my present position, once before." He looked towards the cabinet of liqueurs. "If I had the key," he said, "I should like to try a drop more of your good Curacoa. You don't see it?"

"I am waiting to hear what your business is," Hugh replied.

Mr. Vimpany's pliable temper submitted with perfect amiability. "Quite right," he said; "let us return to business. I am a man who possesses great fertility of resource. On the last occasion when my creditors pounced on my property, do you think I was discouraged? Nothing of the sort! My regular medical practice had broken down under me. Very well--I tried my luck as a quack. In plain English, I invented a patent medicine. The one thing wanting was money enough to advertise it. False friends buttoned up their pockets. You see?"

"Oh, yes; I see."

"In that case," Mr. Vimpany continued, "you will not be surprised to hear that I draw on my resources again. You have no doubt noticed that we live in an age of amateurs. Amateurs write, paint, compose music, perform on the stage. I, too, am one of the accomplished persons who have taken possession of the field of Art. Did you observe the photographic portraits on the walls of my dining-room? They are of my doing, sir--whether you observed them or not I am one of the handy medical men, who can use the photograph. Not that I mention it generally; the public have got a narrow-minded notion that a doctor ought to be nothing but a doctor. My name won't appear in a new work that I am contemplating. Of course, you want to know what my new work is. I'll tell you, in the strictest confidence. Imagine (if you can) a series of superb photographs of the most eminent doctors in England, with memoirs of their lives written by themselves; published once a month, price half-a-crown. If there isn't money in that idea, there is no money in anything. Exert yourself, my good friend. Tell me what you think of it?"

"I don't understand the subject," Mountjoy replied. "May I ask why you take me into your confidence?"

"Because I look upon you as my best friend."

"You are very good. But surely, Mr. Vimpany, you have older friends in your circle of acquaintance than I am."

"Not one," the doctor answered promptly, "whom I trust as I trust you. Let me give you a proof of it."

"Is the proof in any way connected with money?" Hugh inquired.

"I call that hard on me," Mr. Vimpany protested. "No unfriendly interruptions, Mountjoy! I offer a proof of kindly feeling. Do you mean to hurt me?"

"Certainly not. Go on."

"Thank you; a little encouragement goes a long way with me. I have found a bookseller, who will publish my contemplated work, on commission. Not a soul has yet seen the estimate of expenses. I propose to show it to You."

"Quite needless, Mr. Vimpany."

"Why quite needless?"

"Because I decline lending you the money."

"No, no, Mountjoy! You can't really mean that?"

"I do mean it."

"No!"

"Yes!"

The doctor's face showed a sudden change of expression---a sinister and threatening change. "Don't drive me into a corner," he said. "Think of it again."

Hugh's capacity for controlling himself gave way at last.

"Do you presume to threaten me?" he said. "Understand, if you please, that my mind is made up, and that nothing you can say or do will alter it."

With that declaration he rose from his chair, and waited for Mr. Vimpany's departure.

The doctor put on his hat. His eyes rested on Hugh, with a look of diabolical malice: "The time is not far off, Mr. Mountjoy, when you may be sorry you refused me." He said those words deliberately--and took his leave.

Released from the man's presence, Hugh found himself strangely associating the interests of Iris with the language--otherwise beneath notice--which Mr. Vimpany had used on leaving the room.

In desperate straits for want of money, how would the audacious bankrupt next attempt to fill his empty purse? If he had, by any chance, renewed his relations with his Irish friend--and such an event was at least possible--his next experiment in the art of raising a loan might take him to Paris. Lord Harry had already ventured on a speculation which called for an immediate outlay of money, and which was only expected to put a profit into his pocket at some future period. In the meanwhile, his resources in money had their limits; and his current expenses would make imperative demands on an ill-filled purse. If the temptation to fail in his resolution to respect his wife's fortune was already trying his fortitude, what better excuse could be offered for yielding than the necessities of an old friend in a state of pecuniary distress?

Looking at the position of Iris, and at the complications which threatened it, from this point of view, Mountjoy left the hotel to consult with Mrs. Vimpany. It rested with her to decide whether the circumstances justified his departure for Paris.