

CHAPTER XXVI - LONDON AND PARIS

INFORMED of all that Hugh could tell her relating to his interview with her husband, Mrs. Vimpany understood and appreciated his fears for the future. She failed, however, to agree with him that he would do well to take the journey to France, under present circumstances.

"Wait a little longer in London," she said. "If Iris doesn't write to me in the next few days there will be a reason for her silence; and in that case (as I have already told you) I shall hear from Fanny Mere. You shall see me when I get a letter from Paris."

On the last morning in the week, Mrs. Vimpany was announced. The letter that she brought with her had been written by Fanny Mere. With the pen in her hand, the maid's remarkable character expressed itself as strongly as ever:--

"Madam,--I said I would let you know what goes on here, when I thought there was need of it. There seems to be need now. Mr. Vimpany came to us yesterday. He has the spare bedroom. My mistress says nothing, and writes nothing. For that reason, I send you the present writing.--Your humble servant, F."

Mountjoy was perplexed by this letter, plain as it was.

"It seems strange," he said, "that Iris herself has not written to you. She has never hitherto concealed her opinion of Mr. Vimpany."

"She is concealing it now," Mr. Vimpany's wife replied gravely.

"Do you know why?"

"I am afraid I do. Iris will not hesitate at any sacrifice of herself to please Lord Harry. She will give him her money when he wants it. If he tells her to alter her opinion of my husband, she will obey him. He can shake her confidence in me, whenever he pleases; and he has very likely done it already."

"Surely it is time for me to go to her now?" Hugh said.

"Full time," Mrs. Vimpany admitted--"if you can feel sure of yourself. In the

interests of Iris, can you undertake to be cool and careful?"

"In the interests of Iris, I can undertake anything."

"One word more," Mrs. Vimpany continued, "before you take your departure. No matter whether appearances are for him, or against him, be always on your guard with my husband. Let me hear from you while you are away; and don't forget that there is an obstacle between you and Iris, which will put even your patience and devotion to a hard trial."

"You mean her husband?"

"I do."

There was no more to be said, Hugh set forth on his journey to Paris.

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On the morning after his arrival in the French capital, Mountjoy had two alternatives to consider. He might either write to Iris, and ask when it would be convenient to her to receive him--or he might present himself unexpectedly in the cottage at Passy. Reflection convinced him that his best chance of placing an obstacle in the way of deception would be to adopt the second alternative, and to take Lord Harry and the doctor by surprise.

He went to Passy. The lively French taste had brightened the cottage with colour: the fair white window curtains were tied with rose-coloured ribbons, the blinds were gaily painted, the chimneys were ornamental, the small garden was a paradise of flowers. When Mountjoy rang the bell, the gate was opened by Fanny Mere. She looked at him in grave astonishment.

"Do they expect you?" she asked.

"Never mind that," Hugh answered. "Are they at home?"

"They have just finished breakfast, sir."

"Do you remember my name?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then show me in."

Fanny opened the door of a room on the ground floor, and announced: "Mr. Mountjoy."

The two men were smoking; Iris was watering some flowers in the window. Her colour instantly faded when Hugh entered the room. In doubt and alarm, her eyes questioned Lord Harry. He was in his sweetest state of good-humour. Urged by the genial impulse of the moment, he set the example of a cordial reception. "This is an agreeable surprise, indeed," he said, shaking hands with Mountjoy in his easy amiable way. "It's kind of you to come and see us." Relieved of anxiety (evidently when she had not expected it), Iris eagerly followed her husband's example: her face recovered its colour, and brightened with its prettiest smile. Mr. Vimpany stood in a corner; his cigar went out: his own wife would hardly have known him again--he actually presented an appearance of embarrassment! Lord Harry burst out laughing: "Look at him Iris! The doctor is shy for the first time in his life." The Irish good-humour was irresistible. The young wife merrily echoed her husband's laugh. Mr. Vimpany, observing the friendly reception offered to Hugh, felt the necessity of adapting himself to circumstances. He came out of his corner with an apology: "Sorry I misbehaved myself, Mr. Mountjoy, when I called on you in London. Shake hands. No offence--eh?" Iris, in feverish high spirits, mimicked the doctor's coarse tones when he repeated his favourite form of excuse. Lord Harry clapped his hands, delighted with his wife's clever raillery: "Ha! Mr. Mountjoy, you don't find that her married life has affected her spirits! May I hope that you have come here to breakfast? The table is ready as you see"----

"And I have been taking lessons, Hugh, in French ways of cooking eggs," Iris added; "pray let me show you what I can do." The doctor chimed in facetiously: "I'm Lady Harry's medical referee; you'll find her French delicacies half digested for you, sir, before you can open your mouth: signed, Clarence Vimpany, member of the College of Surgeons." Remembering Mrs. Vimpany's caution, Hugh concealed his distrust of this outbreak of hospitable gaiety, and made his excuses. Lord Harry followed, with more excuses, on his part. He deplored it--but he was obliged to go out. Had Mr. Mountjoy met with the new paper which was to beat "Galiguani" out of the field? The "Continental Herald" --there was the title. "Forty thousand copies of the first number have just flown all over Europe; we have our agencies in every town of importance, at every point of the compass; and, one of the great proprietors, my dear sir, is the humble individual who now addresses you." His bright eyes sparkled with boyish pleasure, as he made that announcement of his own importance. If Mr. Mountjoy would kindly excuse him, he had an appointment at the office that morning. "Get your hat, Vimpany. The fact is our friend here carries a case of consumption in his

pocket; consumption of the purse, you understand. I am going to enrol him among the contributors to the newspaper. A series of articles (between ourselves) exposing the humbug of physicians, and asserting with fine satirical emphasis the overstocked state of the medical profession. Ah, well! you'll be glad (won't you?) to talk over old times with Iris. My angel, show our good friend the 'Continental Herald,' and mind you keep him here till we get back. Doctor, look alive! Mr. Mountjoy, au revoir." They shook hands again heartily. As Mrs. Vimpany had confessed, there was no resisting the Irish lord.

But Hugh's strange experience of that morning was not at an end, yet.