

CHAPTER XXVII - THE BRIDE AT HOME

LEFT alone with the woman whose charm still held him to her, cruelly as she had tried his devotion by her marriage, Mountjoy found the fluent amiability of the husband imitated by the wife. She, too, when the door had hardly closed on Lord Harry, was bent on persuading Hugh that her marriage had been the happiest event of her life.

"Will you think the worse of me," she began, "if I own that I had little expectation of seeing you again?"

"Certainly not, Iris."

"Consider my situation," she went on. "When I remember how you tried (oh, conscientiously tried!) to prevent my marriage--how you predicted the miserable results that would follow, if Harry's life and my life became one--could I venture to hope that you would come here, and judge for yourself? Dear and good friend, I have nothing to fear from the result; your presence was never more welcome to me than it is now!"

Whether it was attributable to prejudice on Mountjoy's part, or to keen and just observation, he detected something artificial in the ring of her enthusiasm; there was not the steady light of truth in her eyes, which he remembered in the past and better days of their companionship. He was a little--just a little--irritated. The temptation to remind her that his distrust of Lord Harry had once been her distrust too, proved to be more than his frailty could resist.

"Your memory is generally exact," he said; "but it hardly serves you now as well as usual."

"What have I forgotten?"

"You have forgotten the time, my dear, when your opinion was almost as strongly against a marriage with Lord Harry as mine."

Her answer was ready on the instant: "Ah, I didn't know him then as well as I know him now!"

Some men, in Mountjoy's position, might have been provoked into hinting that there were sides to her husband's character which she had probably

not discovered yet. But Hugh's gentle temper--ruffled for a moment only--had recovered its serenity. Her friend was her true friend still; he said no more on the subject of her marriage.

"Old habits are not easily set aside," he reminded her. "I have been so long accustomed to advise you and help you, that I find myself hoping there may be some need for my services still. Is there no way in which I might relieve you of the hateful presence of Mr. Vimpany?"

"My dear Hugh, I wish you had not mentioned Mr. Vimpany."

Mountjoy concluded that the subject was disagreeable to her. "After the opinion of him which you expressed in your letter to me," he said, "I ought not to have spoken of the doctor. Pray forgive me."

Iris looked distressed. "Oh, you are quite mistaken! The poor doctor has been sadly misjudged; and I"--she shook her head, and sighed penitently--"and, I," she resumed, "am one among other people who have ignorantly wronged him. Pray consult my husband. Hear what he can tell you--and you will pity Mr. Vimpany. The newspaper makes such large demands on our means that we can do little to help him. With your recommendation he might find some employment."

"He has already asked me to assist him, Iris; and I have refused. I can't agree with your change of opinion about Mr. Vimpany."

"Why not? Is it because he has separated from his wife?"

"That is one reason, among many others," Mountjoy replied.

"Indeed, indeed you are wrong! Lord Harry has known Mrs. Vimpany for years, and he says--I am truly sorry to hear it--that the separation is her fault."

Hugh changed the subject again. The purpose which had mainly induced him to leave England had not been mentioned yet.

Alluding to the newspaper, and to the heavy pecuniary demands made by the preliminary expenses of the new journal, he reminded Iris that their long and intimate friendship permitted him to feel some interest in her affairs. "I won't venture to express an opinion," he added; "let me only ask if Lord Harry's investments in this speculation have compelled him to make some use of your little fortune?"

"My husband refused to touch my fortune," Iris answered. "But"--She paused, there. "Do you know how honourably, how nobly, he has behaved?" she abruptly resumed. "He has insured his life: he has burdened himself with the payment of a large sum of money every year. And all for me, if I am so unfortunate (which God forbid!) as to survive him. When a large share in the newspaper was for sale, do you think I could be ungrateful enough to let him lose the chance of making our fortune, when the profits begin to come in? I insisted on advancing the money--we almost quarrelled about it--but, you know how sweet he is. I said: 'Don't distress me'; and the dearest of men let me have my own way."

Mountjoy listened in silence. To have expressed what he felt would have been only to mortify and offend Iris. Old habit (as he had said) had made the idea of devoting himself to her interests the uppermost idea in his mind. He asked if the money had all been spent. Hearing that some of it was still left, he resolved on making the attempt to secure the remains of her fortune to herself.

"Tell me," he said, "have you ever heard of such a thing as buying an annuity?"

She knew nothing about it. He carefully explained the method by which a moderate sum of money might be made to purchase a sufficient income for life. She offered no objection, when he proposed to write to his lawyer in London for the necessary particulars. But when he asked her to tell him what the sum was of which she might be still able to dispose, Iris hesitated, and made no reply.

This time, Hugh arrived at the right conclusion.

It was only too plain to him that what remained of her money represented an amount so trifling that she was ashamed to mention it. Of the need for helping her, there could be no doubt now; and, as for the means, no difficulties presented themselves to Mountjoy--always excepting the one obstacle likely to be offered by the woman herself. Experience warned him to approach her delicately, by the indirect way.

"You know me well enough," he said, "to feel sure that I am incapable of saying anything which can embarrass you, or cause a moment's misunderstanding between two old friends. Won't you look at me, Iris, when I am speaking to you?"

She still looked away from him. "I am afraid of what you are going to say to me," she answered coldly.

"Then let me say it at once. In one of your letters, written long since--I don't suppose you remember it--you told me that I was an obstinate man when I once took a thing into my head. You were quite right. My dear, I have taken it into my head that you will be as ready as ever to accept my advice, and will leave me (as your man of business) to buy the annuity"--

She stopped him.

"No," she cried, "I won't hear a word more! Do you think I am insensible to years of kindness that I have never deserved? Do you think I forget how nobly you have forgiven me for those cruel refusals which have saddened your life? Is it possible that you expect me to borrow money of You?" She started wildly to her feet. "I declare, as God hears me, I would rather die than take that base, that shameful advantage of all your goodness to me. The woman never lived who owed so much to a man, as I owe to you--but not money! Oh, my dear, not money! not money!"

He was too deeply touched to be able to speak to her--and she saw it. "What a wretch I am," she said to herself; "I have made his heart ache!"

He heard those words. Still feeling for her--never, never for himself!--he tried to soothe her. In the passion of her self-reproach, she refused to hear him. Pacing the room from end to end, she fanned the fiery emotion that was consuming her. Now, she reviled herself in language that broke through the restraints by which good breeding sets its seal on a woman's social rank. And now, again, she lost herself more miserably still, and yielded with hysteric recklessness to a bitter outburst of gaiety.

"If you wish to be married happily," she cried, "never be as fond of any other woman as you have been of me. We are none of us worth it. Laugh at us, Hugh--do anything but believe in us. We all lie, my friend. And I have been lying--shamelessly! shamelessly!"

He tried to check her. "Don't talk in that way, Iris," he said sternly.

She laughed at him. "Talk?" she repeated. "It isn't that; it's a confession."

"I don't desire to hear your confession."

"You must hear it--you have drawn it out of me. Come! we'll enjoy my

humiliation together. Contradict every word I said to you about that brute and blackguard, the doctor--and you will have the truth. What horrid inconsistency, isn't it? I can't help myself; I am a wretched, unreasonable creature; I don't know my own mind for two days together, and all through my husband--I am so fond of him; Harry is delightfully innocent; he's like a nice boy; he never seemed to think of Mr. Vimpany, till it was settled between them that the doctor was to come and stay here----and then he persuaded me--oh, I don't know how!--to see his friend in quite a new light. I believed him--and I believe him still--I mean I would believe him, but for you. Will you do me a favour? I wish you wouldn't look at me with those eyes that won't lie; I wish you wouldn't speak to me with that voice which finds things out. Oh, good Heavens, do you suppose I would let you think that my husband is a bad man, and my marriage an unhappy one? Never! If it turns my blood to sit and eat at the same table with Mr. Vimpany, I'm not cruel enough to blame the dear doctor. It's my wickedness that's to blame. We shall quarrel, if you tell me that Harry is capable of letting a rascal be his friend. I'm happy; I'm happy; I'm happy!--do you understand that? Oh, Hugh, I wish you had never come to see me!"

She burst into a passionate fit of weeping, broken down at last under the terrible strain laid on her. "Let me hide myself!" was all that Iris could say to her old friend--before she ran out of the room, and left him.