

CHAPTER XXVIII - THE MAID AND THE KEYHOLE

DEEPLY as she had grieved him, keenly as he felt that his worst fears for her threatened already to be realised, it was characteristic of Mountjoy that he still refused to despair of Iris--even with the husband's influence against him.

The moral deterioration of her, revealed in the false words that she had spoken, and in the deceptions that she had attempted, would have justified the saddest misgivings, but for the voluntary confession which had followed, and the signs which it had shown of the better nature still struggling to assert itself. How could Hugh hope to encourage that effort of resistance to the evil influences that were threatening her--first and foremost, among them, being the arrival of Vimpany at the cottage? His presence kept her in a state of perpetual contention, between her own wise instincts which distrusted him, and her husband's authoritative assertions which recommended him to her confidence. No greater service could be rendered to Iris than the removal of this man--but how could it be accomplished, without giving offence to her husband? Mountjoy's mind was still in search of a means of overcoming the obstacle thus presented, when he heard the door open. Had Iris recovered herself? or had Lord Harry and his friend returned?

The person who now entered the room was the strange and silent maid, Fanny Mere.

"Can I speak to you, sir?"

"Certainly. What is it?"

"Please give me your address."

"For your mistress?"

"Yes."

"Does she wish to write to me?"

"Yes."

Hugh gave the strange creature the address of his hotel in Paris. For a

moment, her eyes rested on him with an expression of steady scrutiny. She opened the door to go out---stopped--considered--came back again.

"I want to speak for myself," she said. "Do you care to hear what a servant has to say?"

Mountjoy replied that he was ready to hear what she had to say. She at once stepped up to him, and addressed him in these words:

"I think you are fond of my mistress?"

An ordinary man might have resented the familiar manner in which she had expressed herself. Mountjoy waited for what was still to come. Fanny Mere abruptly went on, with a nearer approach to agitation in her manner than she had shown yet:

"My mistress took me into her service; she trusted me when other ladies would have shown me the door. When she sent for me to see her, my character was lost; I had nobody to feel for me, nobody to help me. She is the one friend who held out a hand to me. I hate the men; I don't care for the women. Except one. Being a servant I mustn't say I love that one. If I was a lady, I don't know that I should say it. Love is cant; love is rubbish. Tell me one thing. Is the doctor a friend of yours?"

"The doctor is nothing of the kind."

"Perhaps he is your enemy?"

"I can hardly say that."

She looked at Hugh discontentedly. "I want to get at it," she said. "Why can't we understand each other? Will you laugh at me, if I say the first thing that comes into my head? Are you a good swimmer?"

An extraordinary question, even from Fanny Mere. It was put seriously--and seriously Mountjoy answered it. He said that he was considered to be a good swimmer.

"Perhaps," she continued, "you have saved people's lives."

"I have twice been so fortunate as to save lives," he replied.

"If you saw the doctor drowning, would you save him? I wouldn't!"

"Do you hate him as bitterly as that?" Hugh asked.

She passed the question over without notice. "I wish you would help me to get at it," she persisted. "Suppose you could rid my mistress of that man by giving him a kick, would you up with your foot and do it?"

"Yes--with pleasure."

"Thank you, sir. Now I've got it. Mr. Mountjoy, the doctor is the curse of my mistress's life. I can't bear to see it. If we are not relieved of him somehow, I shall do something wrong. When I wait at table, and see him using his knife, I want to snatch it out of his hand, and stick it into him. I had a hope that my lord might turn him out of the house when they quarrelled. My lord is too wicked himself to do it. For the love of God, sir, help my mistress--or show me the way how!"

Mountjoy began to be interested. "How do you know," he asked, "that Lord Harry and the doctor have quarrelled?"

Without the slightest appearance of embarrassment, Fanny Mere informed him that she had listened at the door, while her master and his friend were talking of their secrets. She had also taken an opportunity of looking through the keyhole. "I suppose, sir," said this curious woman, still speaking quite respectfully, "you have never tried that way yourself?"

"Certainly not!"

"Wouldn't you do it to serve my mistress?"

"No."

"And yet, you're fond of her! You are a merciful one--the only merciful one, so far as I know--among men. Perhaps, if you were frightened about her, you might be more ready with your help. I wonder whether I can frighten you? Will you let me try?"

The woman's faithful attachment to Iris pleaded for her with Hugh. "Try, if you like," he said kindly.

Speaking as seriously as ever, Fanny proceeded to describe her experience at the keyhole. What she had seen was not worth relating. What she had heard proved to be more important.

The talk between my lord and the doctor had been about raising money. They had different notions of how to do that. My lord's plan was to borrow what was wanted, on his life-insurance. The doctor told him he couldn't do that, till his insurance had been going on for three or four years at least. "I have something better and bolder to propose," says Mr. Vimpany. It must have been also something wicked--for he whispered it in the master's ear. My lord didn't take to it kindly. "How do you think I could face my wife," he says, "if she discovered me?" The doctor says: "Don't be afraid of your wife; Lady Harry will get used to many things which she little thought of before she married you." Says my lord to that: "I have done my best, Vimpany, to improve my wife's opinion of you. If you say much more, I shall come round to her way of thinking. Drop it!"--"All right," says the doctor, "I'll drop it now, and wait to pick it up again till you come to your last bank note." There the talk ended for that day---and Fanny would be glad to know what Mr. Mountjoy thought of it.

"I think you have done me a service," Hugh replied.

"Tell me how, sir."

"I can only tell you this, Fanny. You have shown me how to relieve your mistress of the doctor."

For the first time, the maid's impenetrable composure completely failed her. The smouldering fire in Fanny Mere flamed up. She impulsively kissed Mountjoy's hand. The moment her lips touched it she shrank back: the natural pallor of her face became whiter than ever. Startled by the sudden change, Hugh asked if she was ill.

She shook her head.

"It isn't that. Yours is the first man's hand I have kissed, since--" She checked herself. "I beg you won't ask me about it. I only meant to thank you, sir; I do thank you with all my heart--I mustn't stay here any longer."

As she spoke the sound of a key was heard, opening the lock of the cottage-door. Lord Harry had returned.