

CHAPTER XXIX - THE CONQUEST OF MR. VIMPANY

THE Irish lord came in--with his medical friend sulkily in attendance on him. He looked at Fanny, and asked where her mistress was.

"My lady is in her room, sir."

Hearing this, he turned sharply to Mountjoy. On the point of speaking, he seemed to think better of it, and went to his wife's room. The maid followed. "Get rid of him now," she whispered to Hugh, glancing at the doctor. Mr. Vimpany was in no very approachable humour--standing at the window, with his hands in his empty pockets, gloomily looking out. But Hugh was not disposed to neglect the opportunity; he ventured to say: "You don't seem to be in such good spirits as usual."

The doctor gruffly expressed his opinion that Mr. Mountjoy would not be particularly cheerful, in his place. My lord had taken him to the office, on the distinct understanding that he was to earn a little pocket-money by becoming one of the contributors to the newspaper. And how had it ended? The editor had declared that his list of writers was full, and begged leave to suggest that Mr. Vimpany should wait for the next vacancy. A most impertinent proposal! Had Lord Harry--a proprietor, remember--exerted his authority? Not he! His lordship had dropped the doctor "like a hot potato," and had meanly submitted to his own servant. What did Mr. Mountjoy think of such conduct as that?

Hugh answered the question, with his own end in view. Paving the way for Mr. Vimpany's departure from the cottage at Passy, he made a polite offer of his services.

"Can't I help you out of your difficulty?" he said.

"You!" cried the doctor. "Have you forgotten how you received me, sir, when I asked for a loan at your hotel in London?"

Hugh admitted that he might have spoken hastily. "You took me by surprise," he said, "and (perhaps I was mistaken, on my side) I thought you were, to say the least of it, not particularly civil. You did certainly use threatening language when you left me. No man likes to be treated in that way."

Mr. Vimpany's big bold eyes stared at Mountjoy in a state of bewilderment. "Are you trying to make a fool of me?" he asked.

"I am incapable, Mr. Vimpany, of an act of rudeness towards anybody."

"If you come to that," the doctor stoutly declared, "I am incapable too. It's plain to me that we have been misunderstanding each other. Wait a bit; I want to go back for a moment to that threatening language which you complained of just now. I was sorry for what I had said as soon as your door was shut on me. On my way downstairs I did think of turning back and making a friendly apology before I gave you up. Suppose I had done that?" Mr. Vimpany asked, wondering internally whether Mountjoy was foolish enough to believe him.

Hugh advanced a little nearer to the design that he had in view.

"You might have found me more kindly disposed towards you," he said, "than you had anticipated."

This encouraging reply cost him an effort. He had stooped to the unworthy practice of perverting what he had said and done on a former occasion, to serve a present interest. Remind himself as he might of the end which, in the interests of Iris, did really appear to justify the means, he still sank to a place in his own estimation which he was honestly ashamed to occupy.

Under other circumstances his hesitation, slight as it was, might have excited suspicion. As things were, Mr. Vimpany could only discover golden possibilities that dazzled his eyes. "I wonder whether you're in the humour," he said, "to be kindly disposed towards me now?"

It was needless to be careful of the feelings of such man as this. "Suppose you had the money you want in your pocket," Hugh suggested, "what would you do with it?"

"Go back to London, to be sure, and publish the first number of that work of mine I told you of."

"And leave your friend, Lord Harry?"

"What good is my friend to me? He's nearly as poor as I am--he sent for me to advise him--I put him up to a way of filling both our pockets, and he wouldn't hear of it. What sort of a friend do you call that?"

Pay him and get rid of him. There was the course of proceeding suggested by the private counsellor in Mountjoy's bosom.

"Have you got the publisher's estimate of expenses?" he asked.

The doctor instantly produced the document.

To a rich man the sum required was, after all, trifling enough. Mountjoy sat down at the writing-table. As he took up a pen, Mr. Vimpany's protuberant eyes looked as if they would fly out of his head.

"If I lend you the money--" Hugh began.

"Yes? Yes?" cried the doctor.

"I do so on condition that nobody is to know of the loan but ourselves."

"Oh, sir, on my sacred word of honour--" An order on Mountjoy's bankers in Paris for the necessary amount, with something added for travelling expenses, checked Mr. Vimpany in full career of protestation. He tried to begin again: "My friend! my benefactor--"

He was stopped once more. His friend and benefactor pointed to the clock.

"If you want the money to-day, you have just time to get to Paris before the bank closes."

Mr. Vimpany did want the money--always wanted the money; his gratitude burst out for the third time: "God bless you!"

The object of that highly original form of benediction pointed through the window in the direction of the railway station. Mr. Vimpany struggled no longer to express his feelings--he had made his last sacrifice to appearances--he caught the train.

The door of the room had been left open. A voice outside said: "Has he gone?"

"Come in, Fanny," said Mountjoy. "He will return to London either to-night or to-morrow morning."

The strange maid put her head in at the door. "I'll be at the terminus," she said, "and make sure of him."

Her head suddenly disappeared, before it was possible to speak to her again. "Was there some other person outside? The other person entered the room; it was Lord Harry. He spoke without his customary smile.

"I want a word with you, Mr. Mountjoy."

"About what, my lord?"

That direct question seemed to confuse the Irishman. He hesitated.

"About you," he said, and stopped to consider. "And another person," he added mysteriously.

Hugh was constitutionally a hater of mysteries. He felt the need of a more definite reply, and asked for it plainly:

"Does your lordship associate that other person with me?"

"Yes, I do."

"Who is the person?"

"My wife."