

CHAPTER XXXI - THE SCHOOL FOR HUSBANDS

ON the next day Mountjoy heard news of Iris, which was not of a nature to relieve his anxieties. He received a visit from Fanny Mere.

The leave-taking of Mr. Vimpany, on the previous evening, was the first event which the maid had to relate. She had been present when the doctor said good-bye to the master and mistress. Business in London was the reason he gave for going away. The master had taken the excuse as if he really believed in it, and seemed to be glad to get rid of his friend. The mistress expressed her opinion that Mr. Vimpany's return to London must have been brought about by an act of liberality on the part of the most generous of living men. "Your friend has, as I believe, got some money from my friend," she said to her husband. My lord had looked at her very strangely when she spoke of Mr. Mountjoy in that way, and had walked out of the room. As soon as his back was turned, Fanny had obtained leave of absence. She had carried out her intention of watching the terminus, and had seen Mr. Vimpany take his place among the passengers to London by the mail train.

Returning to the cottage, it was Fanny's duty to ascertain if her services were required in her mistress's room.

On reaching the door, she had heard the voices of my lord and my lady, and (as Mr. Mountjoy would perhaps be pleased to know) had been too honourable to listen outside, on this occasion. She had at once gone away, and had waited until she should be sent for. After a long interval, the bell that summoned her had been rung. She had found the mistress in a state of agitation, partly angry, and partly distressed; and had ventured to ask if anything unpleasant had happened. No reply was made to that inquiry. Fanny had silently performed the customary duties of the night-toilet, in getting my lady ready for bed; they had said good-night to each other and had said no more.

In the morning (that present morning), being again in attendance as usual, the maid had found Lady Harry in a more indulgent frame of mind; still troubled by anxieties, but willing to speak of them now.

She had begun by talking of Mr. Mountjoy:

"I think you like him, Fanny: everybody likes him. You will be sorry to hear

that we have no prospect of seeing him again at the cottage." There she had stopped; something that she had not said, yet, seemed to be in her mind, and to trouble her. She was near to crying, poor soul, but struggled against it. "I have no sister," she said, "and no friend who might be like a sister to me. It isn't perhaps quite right to speak of my sorrow to my maid. Still, there is something hard to bear in having no kind heart near one--I mean, no other woman to speak to who knows what women feel. It is so lonely here--oh, so lonely! I wonder whether you understand me and pity me?" Never forgetting all that she owed to her mistress--if she might say so without seeming to praise herself--Fanny was truly sorry. It would have been a relief to her, if she could have freely expressed her opinion that my lord must be to blame, when my lady was in trouble. Being a man, he was by nature cruel to women; the wisest thing his poor wife could do would be to expect nothing from him. The maid was sorely tempted to offer a little good advice to this effect; but she was afraid of her own remembrances, if she encouraged them by speaking out boldly. It would be better to wait for what the mistress might say next.

Lord Harry's conduct was the first subject that presented itself when the conversation was resumed.

My lady mentioned that she had noticed how he looked, and how he left the room, when she had spoken in praise of Mr. Mountjoy. She had pressed him to explain himself--and she had made a discovery which proved to be the bitterest disappointment of her life. Her husband suspected her! Her husband was jealous of her! It was too cruel; it was an insult beyond endurance, an insult to Mr. Mountjoy as well as to herself. If that best and dearest of good friends was to be forbidden the house, if he was to go away and never to see her or speak to her again, of one thing she was determined--he should not leave her without a kind word of farewell; he should hear how truly she valued him; yes, and how she admired and felt for him! Would Fanny not do the same thing, in her place? And Fanny had remembered the time when she might have done it for such a man as Mr. Mountjoy. "Mind you stay indoors this evening, sir," the maid continued, looking and speaking so excitedly that Hugh hardly knew her again. "My mistress is coming to see you, and I shall come with her."

Such an act of imprudence was incredible. "You must be out of your senses!" Mountjoy exclaimed.

"I'm out of myself sir, if that's what you mean," Fanny answered. "I do so enjoy treating a man in that way! The master's going out to dinner--he'll know nothing about it--and," cried the cool cold woman of other times, "he

richly deserves it."

Hugh reasoned and remonstrated, and failed to produce the slightest effect.

His next effort was to write a few lines to Lady Harry, entreating her to remember that a jealous man is sometimes capable of acts of the meanest duplicity, and that she might be watched. When he gave the note to Fanny to deliver, she informed him respectfully that he had better not trust her. A person sometimes meant to do right (she reminded him), and sometimes ended in doing wrong. Rather than disappoint her mistress, she was quite capable of tearing up the letter, on her way home, and saying nothing about it. Hugh tried a threat next: "Your mistress will not find me, if she comes here; I shall go out to-night." The impenetrable maid looked at him with a pitying smile, and answered:

"Not you!"

It was a humiliating reflection--but Fanny Mere understood him better than he understood himself.

All that Mountjoy had said and done in the way of protest, had been really dictated by consideration for the young wife. If he questioned his conscience, selfish delight in the happy prospect of seeing Iris again asserted itself, as the only view with which he looked forward to the end of the day. When the evening approached, he took the precaution of having his own discreet and faithful servant in attendance, to receive Lady Harry at the door of the hotel, before the ringing of the bell could summon the porter from his lodge. On calm consideration, the chances seemed to be in favour of her escaping detection by Lord Harry. The jealous husband of the stage, who sooner (or later) discovers the innocent (or guilty) couple, as the case may be, is not always the husband of the world outside the theatre. With this fragment of experience present in his mind, Hugh saw the door of his sitting-room cautiously opened, at an earlier hour than he had anticipated. His trustworthy representative introduced a lady, closely veiled--and that lady was Iris.