

CHAPTER XXXII - GOOD-BYE TO IRIS

LADY HARRY lifted her veil, and looked at Mountjoy with sad entreaty in her eyes. "Are you angry with me?" she asked.

"I ought to be angry with you," he said. "This is a very imprudent, Iris."

"It's worse than that," she confessed. "It's reckless and desperate. Don't say I ought to have controlled myself. I can't control the shame I feel when I think of what has happened. Can I let you go--oh, what a return for your kindness!--without taking your hand at parting? Come and sit by me on the sofa. After my poor husband's conduct, you and I are not likely to meet again. I don't expect you to lament it as I do. Even your sweetness and your patience--so often tried--must be weary of me now."

"If you thought that possible, my dear, you would not have come here to-night," Hugh reminded her. "While we live, we have the hope of meeting again. Nothing in this world lasts, Iris--not even jealousy. Lord Harry himself told me that he was a variable man. Sooner or later he will come to his senses."

Those words seemed to startle Iris. "I hope you don't think that my husband is brutal to me!" she exclaimed, still resenting even the appearance of a reflection on her marriage, and still forgetting what she herself had said which justified a doubt of her happiness. "Have you formed a wrong impression?" she went on. "Has Fanny Mere innocently--?"

Mountjoy noticed, for the first time, the absence of the maid. It was a circumstance which justified him in interrupting Iris--for it might seriously affect her if her visit to the hotel happened to be discovered.

"I understood," he said, "that Fanny was to come here with you."

"Yes! yes! She is waiting in the carriage. We are careful not to excite attention at the door of the hotel; the coachman will drive up and down the street till I want him again. Never mind that! I have something to say to you about Fanny. She thinks of her own troubles, poor soul, when she talks to me, and exaggerates a little without meaning it. I hope she has not misled you in speaking of her master. It is base and bad of him, unworthy of a gentleman, to be jealous--and he has wounded me deeply. But dear Hugh, his jealousy is a gentle jealousy. I have heard of other men who watch their

wives--who have lost all confidence in them--who would even have taken away from me such a trifle as this." She smiled, and showed to Mountjoy her duplicate key of the cottage door. "Ah, Harry is above such degrading distrust as that! There are times when he is as heartily ashamed of his own weakness as I could wish him to be. I have seen him on his knees before me, shocked at his conduct. He is no hypocrite. Indeed, his repentance is sincere, while it lasts--only it doesn't last! His jealousy rises and falls, like the wind. He said last night (when the wind was high): 'If you wish to make me the happiest creature on the face of the earth, don't encourage Mr. Mountjoy to remain in Paris!' Try to make allowances for him!"

"I would rather make allowances, Iris, for you. Do you, too wish me to leave Paris?"

Sitting very near to him--nearer than her husband might have liked to see-- Iris drew away a little. "Did you mean to be cruel in saying that?" she asked. "I don't deserve it."

"It was kindly meant," Hugh assured her. "If I can make your position more endurable by going away, I will leave Paris to-morrow."

Iris moved back again to the place which she had already occupied. She was eager to thank him (for a reason not yet mentioned) as she had never thanked him yet. Silently and softly she offered her gratitude to Hugh, by offering her cheek. The irritating influence of Lord Harry's jealousy was felt by both of them at that moment. He kissed her cheek--and lingered over it. She was the first to recover herself.

"When you spoke just now of my position with my husband," she said, "you reminded me of anxieties, Hugh, in which you once shared, and of services which I can never forget."

Preparing him in those words for the disclosure which she had now to make, Iris alluded to the vagabond life of adventure which Lord Harry had led. The restlessness in his nature which that life implied, had latterly shown itself again; and his wife had traced the cause to a letter from Ireland, communicating a report that the assassin of Arthur Mountjoy had been seen in London, and was supposed to be passing under the name of Carrigeen. Hugh would understand that the desperate resolution to revenge the murder of his friend, with which Lord Harry had left England in the past time, had been urged into action once more. He had not concealed from Iris that she must be resigned to his leaving her for awhile, if the report which had reached him from Ireland proved to be true. It would be useless, and worse

than useless, to remind this reckless man of the danger that threatened him from the Invincibles, if he returned to England. In using her power of influencing the husband who still loved her, Iris could only hope to exercise a salutary restraint in her own domestic interests, appealing to him for indulgence by careful submission to any exactions on which his capricious jealousy might insist. Would sad necessity excuse her, if she accepted Mountjoy's offer to leave Paris, for the one reason that her husband had asked it of her as a favour?

Hugh at once understood her motive, and assured her of his sympathy.

"You may depend upon my returning to London to-morrow," he said. "In the meantime, is there no better way in which I can be of use to you? If your influence fails, do you see any other chance of keeping Lord Harry's desperate purpose under control?"

It had only that day occurred to Iris that there might be some prospect of an encouraging result, if she could obtain the assistance of Mrs. Vimpany.

The doctor's wife was well acquainted with Lord Harry's past life, when he happened to be in Ireland; and she had met many of his countrymen with whom he had associated. If one of those friends happened to be the officious person who had written to him, it was at least possible that Mrs. Vimpany's discreet interference might prevent his mischievous correspondent from writing again. Lord Harry, waiting for more news, would in this event wait in vain. He would not know where to go, or what to do next--and, with such a nature as his, the end of his patience and the end of his resolution were likely to come together.

Hugh handed his pocket-book to Iris. Of the poor chances in her favour, the last was to his mind the least hopeless of the two.

"If you have discovered the name of your husband's correspondent," he said, "write it down for me, and I will ask Mrs. Vimpany if she knows him. I will make your excuses for not having written to her lately; and, in any case, I answer for her being ready to help you."

As Iris thanked him and wrote the name, the clock on the chimneypiece struck the hour.

She rose to say farewell. With a restless hand she half-lowered her veil, and raised it again. "You won't mind my crying," she said faintly, trying to smile through her tears. "This is the saddest parting I have ever known. Dear,

dear Hugh--good-bye!"

Great is the law of Duty; but the elder law of Love claims its higher right. Never, in all the years of their friendship, had they forgotten themselves as they forgot themselves now. For the first time her lips met his lips, in their farewell kiss. In a moment more, they remembered the restraints which honour imposed on them; they were only friends again. Silently she lowered her veil. Silently he took her arm and led her down to the carriage. It was moving away from them at a slow pace, towards the other end of the street. Instead of waiting for its return, they followed and overtook it.

"We shall meet again," he whispered.

She answered sadly: "Don't forget me."

Mountjoy turned back. As he approached the hotel he noticed a tall man crossing from the opposite side of the street. Not two minutes after Iris was on her way home, her jealous husband and her old friend met at the hotel door.

Lord Harry spoke first. "I have been dining out," he said, "and I came here to have a word with you, Mr. Mountjoy, on my road home."

Hugh answered with formal politeness: "Let me show your lordship the way to my rooms."

"Oh, it's needless to trouble you," Lord Harry declared. "I have so little to say--do you mind walking on with me for a few minutes?"

Mountjoy silently complied. He was thinking of what might have happened if Iris had delayed her departure--or if the movement of the carriage had been towards, instead of away from the hotel. In either case it had been a narrow escape for the wife, from a dramatic discovery by the husband.

"We Irishmen," Lord Harry resumed, "are not famous for always obeying the laws; but it is in our natures to respect the law of hospitality. When you were at the cottage yesterday I was inhospitable to my guest. My rude behaviour has weighed on my mind since--and for that reason I have come here to speak to you. It was ill-bred on my part to reproach you with your visit, and to forbid you (oh, quite needlessly, I don't doubt!) to call on me again. If I own that I have no desire to propose a renewal of friendly intercourse between us, you will understand me, I am sure; with my way of thinking, the less we see of each other for the future, the better it may be.

But, for what I said when my temper ran away with me, I ask you to accept my excuses, and the sincere expression of my regret."

"Your excuses are accepted, my lord, as sincerely as you have offered them," Mountjoy answered. "So far as I am concerned, the incident is forgotten from this moment."

Lord Harry expressed his courteous acknowledgments. "Spoken as becomes a gentleman," he said. "I thank you."

There it ended. They saluted each other; they wished each other good-night. "A mere formality!" Hugh thought, when they had parted.

He had wronged the Irish lord in arriving at that conclusion. But time was to pass before events helped him to discover his error.