

CHAPTER XXXIII - THE DECREE OF FATE

ON his arrival in London, Mountjoy went to the Nurses' Institute to inquire for Mrs. Vimpany.

She was again absent, in attendance on another patient. The address of the house (known only to the matron) was, on this occasion, not to be communicated to any friend who might make inquiries. A bad case of scarlet fever had been placed under the nurse's care, and the danger of contagion was too serious to be trifled with.

The events which had led to Mrs. Vimpany's present employment had not occurred in the customary course.

A nurse who had recently joined the Institute had been first engaged to undertake the case, at the express request of the suffering person--who was said to be distantly related to the young woman. On the morning when she was about to proceed to the scene of her labours, news had reached her of the dangerous illness of her mother. Mrs. Vimpany, who was free at the time, and who felt a friendly interest in her young colleague, volunteered to take her place. Upon this, a strange request had been addressed to the matron, on behalf of the sick man. He desired to be "informed of it, if the new nurse was an Irishwoman." Hearing that she was an Englishwoman, he at once accepted her services, being himself (as an additional element of mystery in the matter) an Irishman!

The matron's English prejudices at once assumed that there had been some discreditable event in the man's life, which might be made a subject of scandalous exposure if he was attended by one of his own countrypeople. She advised Mrs. Vimpany to have nothing to do with the afflicted stranger. The nurse answered that she had promised to attend on him--and she kept her promise.

Mountjoy left the Institute, after vainly attempting to obtain Mrs. Vimpany's address. The one concession which the matron offered to make was to direct his letter, and send it to the post, if he would be content with that form of communication.

On reflection, he decided to write the letter.

Prompt employment of time might be of importance, if it was possible to

prevent any further communication with Lord Larry on the part of his Irish correspondent. Using the name with which Iris had provided him, Hugh wrote to inquire if it was familiar to Mrs. Vimpany, as the name of a person with whom she had been, at any time, acquainted. In this event, he assured her that an immediate consultation between them was absolutely necessary in the interests of Iris. He added, in a postscript, that he was in perfect health, and that he had no fear of infection--and sent his letter to the matron to be forwarded.

The reply reached him late in the evening. It was in the handwriting of a stranger, and was to this effect:

"Dear Mr. Mountjoy,--It is impossible that I can allow you to run the risk of seeing me while I am in my present situation. So serious is the danger of contagion in scarlet fever, that I dare not even write to you with my own hand on note-paper which has been used in the sick room. This is no mere fancy of mine; the doctor in attendance here knows of a case in which a small piece of infected flannel communicated the disease after an interval of no less than a year. I must trust to your own good sense to see the necessity of waiting, until I can receive you without any fear of consequences to yourself. In the meantime, I may answer your inquiry relating to the name communicated in your letter. I first knew the gentleman you mention some years since; we were introduced to each other by Lord Harry; and I saw him afterwards on more than one occasion."

Mountjoy read this wise and considerate reply to his letter with indignation.

Here was the good fortune for which he had not dared to hope, declaring itself in favour of Iris. Here (if Mrs. Vimpany could be persuaded to write to her friend) was the opportunity offered of keeping the hot-tempered Irish husband passive and harmless, by keeping him without further news of the assassin of Arthur Mountjoy. Under these encouraging circumstances the proposed consultation which might have produced such excellent results had been rejected; thanks to a contemptible fear of infection, excited by a story of a trumpety piece of flannel!

Hugh snatched up the unfortunate letter (cast away on the floor) to tear it in pieces and throw it into the waste-paper basket--and checked himself. His angry hand had seized on it with the blank leaf of the note-paper uppermost.

On that leaf he discovered two little lines of print, presenting, in the customary form, the address of the house at which the letter had been

written! The writer, in taking the sheet of paper from the case, must have accidentally turned it wrong side uppermost on the desk, and had not cared to re-copy the letter, or had not discovered the mistake. Restored to his best good-humour, Hugh resolved to surprise Mrs. Vimpany by a visit, on the next day, which would set the theory of contagion at defiance, and render valuable service to Iris at a crisis in her life.

Having time before him for reflection, in the course of the evening, he was at no loss to discover a formidable obstacle in the way of his design.

Whether he gave his name or concealed his name, when he asked for Mrs. Vimpany at the house-door, she would in either case refuse to see him. The one accessible person whom he could consult in this difficulty was his faithful old servant.

That experienced man--formerly employed, at various times, in the army, in the police, and in service at a public school--obtained leave to make some preliminary investigations on the next morning.

He achieved two important discoveries. In the first place, Mrs. Vimpany was living in the house in which the letter to his master had been written. In the second place, there was a page attached to the domestic establishment (already under notice to leave his situation), who was accessible to corruption by means of a bribe. The boy would be on the watch for Mr. Mountjoy at two o'clock on that day, and would show him where to find Mrs. Vimpany, in the room near the sick man, in which she was accustomed to take her meals.

Hugh acted on his instructions, and found the page waiting to admit him secretly to the house. Leading the way upstairs, the boy pointed with one hand to a door on the second floor, and held out the other hand to receive his money. While he pocketed the bribe, and disappeared, Mountjoy opened the door.

Mrs. Vimpany was seated at a table waiting for her dinner. When Hugh showed himself she started to her feet with a cry of alarm.

"Are you mad?" she exclaimed. "How did you get here? What do you want here? Don't come near me!"

She attempted to pass Hugh on her way out of the room. He caught her by the arm, led her back to her chair, and forced her to seat herself again. "Iris is in trouble," he pleaded, "and you can help her."

"The fever!" she cried, heedless of what he had said. "Keep back from me--the fever!"

For the second time she tried to get out of the room. For the second time Hugh stopped her.

"Fever or no fever," he persisted, "I have something to say to you. In two minutes I shall have said it, and I will go."

In the fewest possible words he described the situation of Iris with her jealous husband. Mrs. Vimpany indignantly interrupted him.

"Are you running this dreadful risk," she asked, "with nothing to say to me that I don't know already? Her husband jealous of her? Of course he is jealous of her! Leave me--or I will ring for the servant."

"Ring, if you like," Hugh answered; "but hear this first. My letter to you alluded to a consultation between us, which might be necessary in the interests of Iris. Imagine her situation if you can! The assassin of Arthur Mountjoy is reported to be in London; and Lord Harry has heard of it."

Mrs. Vimpany looked at him with horror in her eyes.

"Gracious God!" she cried, "the man is here--under my care. Oh, I am not in the conspiracy to hide the wretch! I knew no more of him than you do when I offered to nurse him. The names that have escaped him, in his delirium, have told me the truth."

As she spoke, a second door in the room was opened. An old woman showed herself for a moment, trembling with terror. "He's breaking out again, nurse! Help me to hold him!"

Mrs. Vimpany instantly followed the woman into the bed-room. "Wait and listen," she said to Mountjoy--and left the door open.

The quick, fierce, muttering tones of a man in delirium were now fearfully audible. His maddened memory was travelling back over his own horrible life. He put questions to himself; he answered himself:

"Who drew the lot to kill the traitor? I did! I did! Who shot him on the road, before he could get to the wood? I did! I did! Arthur Mountjoy, traitor to Ireland. Set that on his tombstone, and disgrace him for ever. Listen, boys--

listen! There is a patriot among you. I am the patriot--preserved by a merciful Providence. Ha, my Lord Harry, search the earth and search the sea, the patriot is out of your reach! Nurse! What's that the doctor said of me? The fever will kill him? Well, what does that matter, as long as Lord Harry doesn't kill me? Open the doors, and let everybody hear of it. I die the death of a saint--the greatest of all saints--the saint who shot Arthur Mountjoy. Oh, the heat, the heat, the burning raging heat!" The tortured creature burst into a dreadful cry of rage and pain. It was more than Hugh's resolution could support. He hurried out of the house.

* * * * *

Ten days passed. A letter, in a strange handwriting, reached Iris at Passy.

The first part of the letter was devoted to the Irish desperado, whom Mrs. Vimpany had attended in his illness.

When she only knew him as a suffering fellow-creature she had promised to be his nurse. Did the discovery that he was an assassin justify desertion, or even excuse neglect? No! the nursing art, like the healing art, is an act of mercy--in itself too essentially noble to inquire whether the misery that it relieves merits help. All that experience, all that intelligence, all that care could offer, the nurse gave to the man whose hand she would have shrunk from touching in friendship, after she had saved his life.

A time had come when the fever threatened to take Lord Harry's vengeance out of his hands. The crisis of the disease declared itself. With the shadow of death on him, the wretch lived through it--saved by his strong constitution, and by the skilled and fearless woman who attended on him. At the period of his convalescence, friends from Ireland (accompanied by a medical man of their own choosing) presented themselves at the house, and asked for him by the name under which he passed--Carrigeen. With every possible care, he was removed; to what destination had never been discovered. From that time, all trace of him had been lost.

Terrible news followed on the next page.

The subtle power of infection had asserted itself against the poor mortal who had defied it. Hugh Mountjoy, stricken by the man who had murdered his brother, lay burning under the scarlet fire of the fever.

But the nurse watched by him, night and day.