

CHAPTER XXXV - MY LADY'S MIND

"ENTREAT Lady Harry not to write to me. She will be tempted to do so, when she hears that there is good hope of Mr. Mountjoy's recovery. But, even from that loving and generous heart, I must not accept expressions of gratitude which would only embarrass me. All that I have done, as a nurse, and all that I may yet hope to do, is no more than an effort to make amends for my past life. Iris has my heart's truest wishes for her happiness. Until I can myself write to her without danger, let this be enough."

In those terms, dearest of women, your friend has sent your message to me. My love respects as well as admires you; your wishes are commands to me. At the same time, I may find some relief from the fears of the future that oppress me, if I can confide them to friendly ears. May I not harmlessly write to you, if I only write of my own poor self?

Try, dear, to remember those pleasant days when you were staying with us, in our honeymoon time, at Paris.

You warned me, one evening when we were alone, to be on my guard against any circumstances which might excite my husband's jealousy. Since then, the trouble that you foresaw has fallen on me; mainly, I am afraid, through my own want of self-control. It is so hard for a woman, when she really loves a man, to understand a state of mind which can make him doubt her.

I have discovered that jealousy varies. Let me tell you what I mean.

Lord Harry was silent and sullen (ah, how well I knew what that meant!) while the life of our poor Hugh was in jeopardy. When I read the good news which told me that he was no longer in danger, I don't know whether there was any change worth remarking in myself--but, there was a change in my husband, delightful to see. His face showed such sweet sympathy when he looked at me, he spoke so kindly and nicely of Hugh, that I could only express my pleasure by kissing him. You will hardly believe me, when I tell you that his hateful jealousy appeared again, at that moment. He looked surprised, he looked suspicious--he looked, I declare, as if he doubted whether I meant it with all my heart when I kissed him! What incomprehensible creatures men are! We read in novels of women who are able to manage their masters. I wish I knew how to manage mine.

We have been getting into debt. For some weeks past, this sad state of

things has been a burden on my mind. Day after day I have been expecting him to speak of our situation, and have found him obstinately silent. Is his mind entirely occupied with other things? Or is he unwilling to speak of our anxieties because the subject humiliates him? Yesterday, I could bear it no longer.

"Our debts are increasing," I said. "Have you thought of any way of paying them?"

I had feared that my question might irritate him. To my relief, he seemed to be diverted by it.

"The payment of debts," he replied, "is a problem that I am too poor to solve. Perhaps I got near to it the other day."

I asked how.

"Well," he said, "I found myself wishing I had some rich friends. By-the-bye, how is your rich friend? What have you heard lately of Mr. Mountjoy?"

"I have heard that he is steadily advancing towards recovery."

"Likely, I dare say, to return to France when he feels equal to it," my husband remarked. "He is a good-natured creature. If he finds himself in Paris again, I wonder whether he will pay us another visit?"

He said this quite seriously. On my side, I was too much as astonished to utter a word. My bewilderment seemed to amuse him. In his own pleasant way he explained himself:

"I ought to have told you, my dear, that I was in Mr. Mountjoy's company the night before he returned to England. We had said some disagreeable things to each other here in the cottage, while you were away in your room. My tongue got the better of my judgment. In short, I spoke rudely to our guest. Thinking over it afterwards, I felt that I ought to make an apology. He received my sincere excuses with an amiability of manner, and a grace of language, which raised him greatly in my estimation."

There you have Lord Harry's own words! Who would suppose that he had ever been jealous of the man whom he spoke of in this way?

I explain it to myself, partly by the charm in Hugh's look and manner, which everybody feels; partly by the readiness with which my husband's variable

nature receives new impressions. I hope you agree with me. In any case, pray let Hugh see what I have written to you in this place, and ask him what he thinks of it.*

*Note by Mrs. Vimpany.--I shall certainly not be foolish enough to show what she has written to Mr. Mountjoy. Poor deluded Iris! Miserable fatal marriage!

Encouraged, as you will easily understand, by the delightful prospect of a reconciliation between them, I was eager to take my first opportunity of speaking freely of Hugh. Up to that time, it had been a hard trial to keep to myself so much that was deeply interesting in my thoughts and hopes. But my hours of disappointment were not at an end yet. We were interrupted.

A letter was brought to us--one of many, already received!--insisting on immediate payment of a debt that had been too long unsettled. The detestable subject of our poverty insisted on claiming attention when there was a messenger outside, waiting for my poor Harry's last French bank note.

"What is to be done?" I said, when we were left by ourselves again.

My husband's composure was something wonderful. He laughed and lit a cigar.

"We have got to the crisis," he said. "The question of money has driven us into a corner at last. My darling, have you ever heard of such a thing as a promissory note?"

I was not quite so ignorant as he supposed me to be; I said I had heard my father speak of promissory notes.

This seemed to fail in convincing him. "Your father," he remarked, "used to pay his notes when they fell due."

I betrayed my ignorance, after all. "Doesn't everybody do the same?" I asked.

He burst out laughing. "We will send the maid to get a bit of stamped paper," he said; "I'll write the message for her, this time."

Those last words alluded to Fanny's ignorance of the French language, which made it necessary to provide her with written instructions, when she was sent on an errand. In our domestic affairs, I was able to do this; but, in the present case, I only handed the message to her. When she returned with

a slip of stamped paper, Harry called to me to come to the writing-table.

"Now, my sweet," he said, "see how easily money is to be got with a scratch of the pen."

I looked, over his shoulder. In less than a minute it was done; and he had produced ten thousand francs on paper--in English money (as he told me), four hundred pounds. This seemed to be a large loan; I asked how he proposed to pay it back. He kindly reminded me that he was a newspaper proprietor, and, as such, possessed of the means of inspiring confidence in persons with money to spare. They could afford, it seems, to give him three months in which to arrange for repayment. In that time, as he thought, the profits of the new journal might come pouring in. He knew best, of course.

We took the next train to Paris, and turned our bit of paper into notes and gold. Never was there such a delightful companion as my husband, when he has got money in his pocket. After so much sorrow and anxiety, for weeks past, that memorable afternoon was like a glimpse of Paradise.

On the next morning, there was an end to my short-lived enjoyment of no more than the latter half of a day.

Watching her opportunity, Fanny Mere came to me while I was alone, carrying a thick letter in her hand. She held it before me with the address uppermost.

"Please to look at that," she said.

The letter was directed (in Harry's handwriting) to Mr. Vimpany, at a publishing office in London. Fanny next turned the envelope the other way.

"Look at this side," she resumed.

The envelope was specially protected by a seal; bearing a device of my husband's own invention; that is to say, the initials of his name (Harry Norland) surmounted by a star--his lucky star, as he paid me the compliment of calling it, on the day when he married me. I was thinking of that day now. Fanny saw me looking, with a sad heart, at the impression on the wax. She completely misinterpreted the direction taken by my thoughts.

"Tell me to do it, my lady," she proceeded; "and I'll open the letter."

I looked at her. She showed no confusion. "I can seal it up again," she coolly

explained, "with a bit of fresh wax and my thimble. Perhaps Mr. Vimpany won't be sober enough to notice it."

"Do you know, Fanny, that you are making a dishonourable proposal to me?" I said.

"I know there's nothing I can do to help you that I won't do," she answered; "and you know why. I have made a dishonourable proposal--have I? That comes quite naturally to a lost woman like me. Shall I tell you what Honour means? It means sticking at nothing, in your service. Please tell me to open the letter."

"How did you come by the letter, Fanny?"

"My master gave it to me to put in the post."

"Then, post it."

The strange creature, so full of contraries--so sensitive at one time, so impenetrable at another--pointed again to the address.

"When the master writes to that man," she went on--"a long letter (if you will notice), and a sealed letter--your ladyship ought to see what is inside it. I haven't a doubt myself that there's writing under this seal which bodes trouble to you. The spare bedroom is empty. Do you want to have the doctor for your visitor again? Don't tell me to post the letter, till I've opened it first."

"I do tell you to post the letter."

Fanny submitted, so far. But she had a new form of persuasion to try, before her reserves of resistance were exhausted. "If the doctor comes back," she continued, "will your ladyship give me leave to go out, whenever I ask for it?"

This was surely presuming on my indulgence. "Are you not expecting a little too much?" I suggested--not unkindly.

"If you say that, my lady," she answered, "I shall be obliged to ask you to suit yourself with another maid."

There was a tone of dictation in this, which I found beyond endurance. In my anger, I said: "Leave me whenever you like."

"I shall leave you when I'm dead--not before," was the reply that I received. "But if you won't let me have my liberty without going away from you, for a time, I must go--for your sake."

(For my sake! Pray observe that.)

She went on:

"Try to see it, my lady, as I do! If we have the doctor with us again, I must be able to watch him."

"Why?"

"Because he is your enemy, as I believe."

"How can he hurt me, Fanny?"

"Through your husband, my lady, if he can do it in no other way. Mr. Vimpany shall have a spy at his heels. Dishonourable! oh, dishonourable again! Never mind. I don't pretend to know what that villain means to do, if he and my lord get together again. But this I can tell you, if it's in woman's wit to circumvent him, here I am with my mind made up. With my mind, made up!" she repeated fiercely--and recovered on a sudden her customary character as a quiet well-trained servant, devoted to her duties. "I'll take my master's letter to the post now," she said. "Is there anything your ladyship wants in the town?"

What do you think of Fanny Mere? Ought I to have treated this last offer of her services, as I treated her proposal to open the letter? I was not able to do it.

The truth is, I was so touched by her devotion to me, that I could not prevail on myself to mortify her by a refusal. I believe there may be a good reason for the distrust of the doctor which possesses her so strongly; and I feel the importance of having this faithful and determined woman for an ally. Let me hope that Mr. Vimpany's return (if it is to take place) may be delayed until you can safely write, with your own hand, such a letter of wise advice as I sadly need.

In the meantime, give my love to Hugh, and say to this dear friend all that I might have said for myself, if I had been near him. But take care that his recovery is not retarded by anxiety for me. Pray keep him in ignorance of the doubts and fears with which I am now looking at the future. If I was not so

fond of my husband, I should be easier in my mind. This sounds contradictory, but I believe you will understand it. For a while, my dear, good-bye.