

CHAPTER XXXVI - THE DOCTOR MEANS MISCHIEF

ON the day after Lord Harry's description of the state of his mind reached London, a gentleman presented himself at the publishing office of Messrs. Boldside Brothers, and asked for the senior partner, Mr. Peter Boldside. When he sent in his card, it bore the name of "Mr. Vimpany."

"To what fortunate circumstance am I indebted, sir, for the honour of your visit?" the senior partner inquired. His ingratiating manners, his genial smile, his roundly resonant voice, were personal advantages of which he made a merciless use. The literary customer who entered the office, hesitating before the question of publishing a work at his own expense, generally decided to pay the penalty when he encountered Mr. Peter Boldside.

"I want to inquire about the sale of my work," Mr. Vimpany replied.

"Ah, doctor, you have come to the wrong man. You must go to my brother."

Mr. Vimpany protested. "You mentioned the terms when I first applied to you," he said, "and you signed the agreement."

"That is in my department," the senior partner gently explained. "And I shall write the cheque when, as we both hope, your large profits shall fall due. But our sales of works are in the department of my brother, Mr. Paul Boldside." He rang a bell; a clerk appeared, and received his instructions: "Mr. Paul. Good-morning, doctor."

Mr. Paul was, personally speaking, his brother repeated--without the deep voice, and without the genial smile. Conducted to the office of the junior partner, Mr. Vimpany found himself in the presence of a stranger, occupied in turning over the pages of a newspaper. When his name was announced, the publisher started, and handed his newspaper to the doctor.

"This is a coincidence," he said. "I was looking, sir, for your name in the pages which I have just put into your hand. Surely the editor can't have refused to publish your letter?"

Mr. Vimpany was sober, and therefore sad, and therefore (again) not to be trifled with by a mystifying reception. "I don't understand you," he answered gruffly. "What do you mean?"

"Is it possible that you have not seen last week's number of the paper?" Mr. Paul asked. "And you a literary man!" He forthwith produced the last week's number, and opened it at the right place. "Read that, sir," he said, with something in his manner which looked like virtuous indignation.

Mr. Vimpany found himself confronted by a letter addressed to the editor. It was signed by an eminent physician, whose portrait had appeared in the first serial part of the new work--accompanied by a brief memoir of his life, which purported to be written by himself. Not one line of the autobiography (this celebrated person declared) had proceeded from his pen. Mr. Vimpany had impudently published an imaginary memoir, full of false reports and scandalous inventions--and this after he had been referred to a trustworthy source for the necessary particulars. Stating these facts, the indignant physician cautioned readers to beware of purchasing a work which, so far as he was concerned, was nothing less than a fraud on the public.

"If you can answer that letter, sir," Mr. Paul Boldside resumed, "the better it will be, I can tell you, for the sale of your publication."

Mr. Vimpany made a reckless reply: "I want to know how the thing sells. Never mind the letter."

"Never mind the letter?" the junior partner repeated. "A positive charge of fraud is advanced by a man at the head of his profession against a work which we have published--and you say, Never mind the letter."

The rough customer of the Boldsides struck his fist on the table. "Bother the letter! I insist on knowing what the sale is."

Still preserving his dignity, Mr. Paul (like Mr. Peter) rang for the clerk, and briefly gave an order. "Mr. Vimpany's account," he said--and proceeded to admonish Mr. Vimpany himself.

"You appear, sir, to have no defence of your conduct to offer. Our firm has a reputation to preserve. When I have consulted with my brother, we shall be under the disagreeable necessity--"

Here (as he afterwards told his brother) the publisher was brutally interrupted by the author:

"If you will have it," said this rude man, "here it is in two words. The doctor's portrait is the likeness of an ass. As he couldn't do it himself, I wanted

materials for writing his life. He referred me to the year of his birth, the year of his marriage, the year of this, that, and the other. Who cares about dates? The public likes to be tickled by personal statements. Very well--I tickled the public. There you have it in a nutshell."

The clerk appeared at that auspicious moment, with the author's account neatly exhibited under two sides: a Debtor side, which represented the expenditure of Hugh Mountjoy's money; and a Creditor side, which represented (so far) Mr. Vimpany's profits. Amount of these last: 3l. 14s. 10d.

Mr. Vimpany tore up the account, threw the pieces in the face of Mr. Paul, and expressed his sentiments in one opprobrious word: "Swindlers!"

The publisher said: "You shall hear of us, sir, through our lawyer."

And the author answered: "Go to the devil!"

Once out in the streets again, the first open door at which Mr. Vimpany stopped was the door of a tavern. He ordered a glass of brandy and water, and a cigar.

It was then the hour of the afternoon, between the time of luncheon and the time of dinner, when the business of a tavern is generally in a state of suspense. The dining-room was empty when Mr. Vimpany entered it: and the waiter's unoccupied attention was in want of an object. Having nothing else to notice, he looked at the person who had just come in. The deluded stranger was drinking fiery potato-brandy, and smoking (at the foreign price) an English cigar. Would his taste tell him the melancholy truth? No: it seemed to matter nothing to him what he was drinking or what he was smoking. Now he looked angry, and now he looked puzzled; and now he took a long letter from his pocket, and read it in places, and marked the places with a pencil. "Up to some mischief," was the waiter's interpretation of these signs. The stranger ordered a second glass of grog, and drank it in gulps, and fell into such deep thought that he let his cigar go out. Evidently, a man in search of an idea. And, to all appearance, he found what he wanted on a sudden. In a hurry he paid his reckoning, and left his small change and his unfinished cigar on the table, and was off before the waiter could say, "Thank you."

The next place at which he stopped was a fine house in a spacious square. A carriage was waiting at the door. The servant who opened the door knew him.

"Sir James is going out again, sir, in two minutes," the man said. Mr. Vimpany answered: "I won't keep him two minutes."

A bell rang from the room on the ground floor; and a gentleman came out, as Mr. Vimpany was shown in. Sir James's stethoscope was still in his hand; his latest medical fee lay on the table. "Some other day, Vimpany," the great surgeon said; "I have no time to give you now."

"Will you give me a minute?" the humble doctor asked.

"Very well. What is it?"

"I am down in the world now, Sir James, as you know--and I am trying to pick myself up again."

"Very creditable, my good fellow. How can I help you? Come, come--out with it. You want something?"

"I want your great name to do me a great service. I am going to France. A letter of introduction, from you, will open doors which might be closed to an unknown man like myself."

"What doors do you mean?" Sir James asked.

"The doors of the hospitals in Paris."

"Wait a minute, Vimpany. Have you any particular object in view?"

"A professional object, of course," the ready doctor answered. "I have got an idea for a new treatment of diseases of the lungs; and I want to see if the French have made any recent discoveries in that direction."

Sir James took up his pen--and hesitated. His ill-starred medical colleague had been his fellow-student and his friend, in the days when they were both young men. They had seen but little of each other since they had gone their different ways--one of them, on the high road which leads to success, the other down the byways which end in failure. The famous surgeon felt a passing doubt of the use which his needy and vagabond inferior might make of his name. For a moment his pen was held suspended over the paper. But the man of great reputation was also a man of great heart. Old associations pleaded with him, and won their cause. His companion of former times left the house provided with a letter of introduction to the chief surgeon at the

Hotel Dieu, in Paris.

Mr. Vimpany's next, and last, proceeding for that day, was to stop at a telegraph-office, and to communicate economically with Lord Harry in three words:

"Expect me to-morrow."