

CHAPTER XXXVII - THE FIRST QUARREL

EARLY in the morning of the next day, Lord Harry received the doctor's telegram. Iris not having risen at the time, he sent for Fanny Mere, and ordered her to get the spare room ready for a guest. The maid's busy suspicion tempted her to put a venturesome question. She asked if the person expected was a lady or a gentleman.

"What business is it of yours who the visitor is?" her master asked sharply. Always easy and good-humoured with his inferiors in general, Lord Harry had taken a dislike to his wife's maid, from the moment when he had first seen her. His Irish feeling for beauty and brightness was especially offended by the unhealthy pallor of the woman's complexion, and the sullen self-suppression of her manner. All that his native ingenuity had been able to do was to make her a means of paying a compliment to his wife. "Your maid has one merit in my eyes," he said; "she is a living proof of the sweetness of your temper."

Iris joined her husband at the breakfast-table with an appearance of disturbance in her face, seldom seen, during the dull days of her life at Passy. "I hear of somebody coming to stay with us," she said. "Not Mr. Vimpany again, I hope and trust?"

Lord Harry was careful to give his customary morning kiss, before he replied. "Why shouldn't my faithful old friend come and see me again?" he asked, with his winning smile.

"Pray don't speak of that hateful man," she answered, "as your faithful old friend! He is nothing of the kind. What did you tell me when he took leave of us after his last visit, and I owned I was glad that he had gone? You said: 'Faith, my dear, I'm as glad as you are.'"

Her good-natured husband laughed at this little picture of himself. "Ah, my darling, how many more times am I to make the same confession to my pretty priest? Try to remember, without more telling, that it's one of my misfortunes to be a man of many tempers. There are times when I get tired to death of Mr. Vimpany; and there are times when the cheery old devil exercises fascinations over me. I declare you're spoiling the eyebrows that I admire by letting them twist themselves into a frown! After the trouble I have taken to clear your mind of prejudice against an unfortunate man, it's disheartening to find you so hard on the poor fellow's faults and so blind to

his virtues."

The time had been when this remonstrance might have influenced his wife's opinion. She passed it over without notice now.

"Does he come here by your invitation?" she asked.

"How else should he come here, my dear?"

She looked at her husband with doubt too plainly visible in her eyes. "I wonder what your motive is for sending for him," she said.

He was just lifting his teacup to his lips--he put it down again when he heard those words.

"Are you ill this morning?" he asked.

"No."

"Have I said anything that has offended you?"

"Certainly not."

"Then I must tell you this, Iris; I don't approve of what you have just said. It sounds, to my mind, unpleasantly like suspicion of me and suspicion of my friend. I see your face confessing it, my lady, at this moment."

"You are half right, Harry, and no more. What you see in my face is suspicion of your friend."

"Founded on what, if you please?"

"Founded on what I have seen of him, and on what I know of him. When you tried to alter my opinion of Mr. Vimpany some time since, I did my best to make my view your view. I deceived myself, for your sake; I put the best construction on what he said and did, when he was staying here. It was well meant, but it was of no use. In a thousand different ways, while he was doing his best to win my favour, his true self was telling tales of him under the fair surface. Mr. Vimpany is a bad man. He is the very worst friend you could have about you at any time--and especially at a time when your patience is tried by needy circumstances."

"One word, Iris. The more eloquent you are, the more I admire you. Only,

don't mention my needy circumstances again."

She passed over the interruption as she had already passed over the remonstrance, without taking notice of it.

"Dearest, you are always good to me," she continued gently. "Am I wrong in thinking that love gives me some little influence over you still? Women are vain--are they not?--and I am no better than the rest of them. Flatter your wife's vanity, Harry, by attaching some importance to her opinion. Is there time enough, yet, to telegraph to Mr. Vimpany? Quite out of the question, is it? Well, then, if he must come here, do--pray, pray do consider Me. Don't let him stay in the house! I'll find a good excuse, and take a bedroom for him in the neighbourhood. Anywhere else, so long as he is not here. He turns me cold when I think of him, sleeping under the same roof with ourselves. Not with us! oh, Harry, not with us!"

Her eyes eagerly searched her husband's face; she looked there for indulgence, she looked for conviction. No! he was still admiring her.

"On my word of honour," he burst out, "you fascinate me. What an imagination you have got! One of these days, Iris, I shall be prouder of you than ever; I shall find you a famous literary character. I don't mean writing a novel; women who can't even hem a handkerchief can write a novel. It's poetry I'm thinking of. Irish melodies by Lady Harry that beat Tom Moore. What a gift! And there are fortunes made, as I have heard, by people who spoil fair white paper to some purpose. I wish I was one of them."

"Have you no more to say to me?" she asked.

"What more should there be? You wouldn't have me take you seriously, in what you have just said of Vimpany?"

"Why not?"

"Oh, come, come, my darling! Just consider. With a bedroom empty and waiting, upstairs, is my old Vimpany to be sent to quarters for the night among strangers? I wouldn't speak harshly to you, Iris, for the whole world; and I don't deny that the convivial doctor may be sometimes a little too fond of his drop of grog. You will tell me, maybe, that he hasn't got on nicely with his wife; and I grant it. There are not many people who set such a pretty example of matrimony as we do. Poor humanity--there's all that's to be said about it. But when you tell me that Vimpany is a bad man, and the worst friend I could possibly have, and so forth--what better can I do than set it

down to your imagination? I've a pretty fancy, myself; and I think I see my angel inventing poetical characters, up among congenial clouds. What's the matter? Surely, you haven't done breakfast yet?"

"Yes."

"Are you going to leave me?"

"I am going to my room."

"You're in a mighty hurry to get away. I never meant to vex you, Iris. Ah, well, if you must leave the table, I'll have the honour of opening the door for you, at any rate. I wonder what you're going to do?"

"To cultivate my imagination," she answered, with the first outbreak of bitterness that had escaped her yet.

His face hardened. "There seems to be something like bearing malice in this," he said. "Are you treating me, for the first time, to an exhibition of enmity? What am I to call it, if it's not that?"

"Call it disappointment," she suggested quietly, and left him.

Lord Harry went back to his breakfast. His jealousy was up in arms again. "She's comparing me with her absent friend," he said to himself, "and wishing she had married the amiable Mountjoy instead of me."

So the first quarrel ended--and Mr. Vimpany had been the cause of it.