

CHAPTER XXXVIII - ICI ON PARLE FRANCAIS

THE doctor arrived in good time for dinner, and shook hands with the Irish lord in excellent spirits.

He looked round the room, and asked where my lady was. Lord Harry's reply suggested the presence of a cloud on the domestic horizon. He had been taking a long ride, and had only returned a few minutes since; Iris would (as he supposed) join them immediately.

The maid put the soup on the table, and delivered a message. Her mistress was suffering from a headache, and was not well enough to dine with the gentlemen.

As an old married man, Mr. Vimpany knew what this meant; he begged leave to send a comforting message to the suffering lady of the house. Would Fanny be good enough to say that he had made inquiries on the subject of Mr. Mountjoy's health, before he left London. The report was still favourable; there was nothing to complain of but the after-weakness which had followed the fever. On that account only, the attendance of the nurse was still a matter of necessity. "With my respects to Lady Harry," he called after Fanny, as she went out in dogged silence.

"I have begun by making myself agreeable to your wife," the doctor remarked with a self-approving grin. "Perhaps she will dine with us to-morrow. Pass the sherry."

The remembrance of what had happened at the breakfast-table, that morning, seemed to be dwelling disagreeably on Lord Harry's mind. He said but little--and that little related to the subject on which he had already written, at full length, to his medical friend.

In an interval, when the service of the table required the attendance of Fanny in the kitchen, Mr. Vimpany took the opportunity of saying a few cheering words. He had come (he remarked) prepared with the right sort of remedy for an ailing state of mind, and he would explain himself at a fitter opportunity. Lord Harry impatiently asked why the explanation was deferred. If the presence of the maid was the obstacle which caused delay, it would be easy to tell her that she was not wanted to wait.

The wary doctor positively forbade this.

He had observed Fanny, during his previous visit, and had discovered that she seemed to distrust him. The woman was sly and suspicious. Since they had sat down to dinner, it was easy to see that she was lingering in the room to listen to the conversation, on one pretence or another. If she was told not to wait, there could be no doubt of her next proceeding: she would listen outside the door. "Take my word for it," the doctor concluded, "there are all the materials for a spy in Fanny Mere."

But Lord Harry was obstinate. Chafing under the sense of his helpless pecuniary position, he was determined to hear, at once, what remedy for it Vimpany had discovered.

"We can set that woman's curiosity at defiance," he said.

"How?"

"When you were learning your profession, you lived in Paris for some years, didn't you?"

"All right!"

"Well, then, you can't have entirely forgotten your French?"

The doctor at once understood what this meant, and answered significantly by a wink. He had found an opportunity (he said) of testing his memory, not very long since. Time had undoubtedly deprived him of his early mastery over the French language; but he could still (allowing for a few mistakes) make a shift to understand it and speak it. There was one thing, however, that he wanted to know first. Could they be sure that my lady's maid had not picked up French enough to use her ears to some purpose? Lord Harry easily disposed of this doubt. So entirely ignorant was the maid of the language of the place in which she was living, that she was not able to ask the tradespeople for the simplest article of household use, unless it was written for her in French before she was sent on an errand.

This was conclusive. When Fanny returned to the dining-room, she found a surprise waiting for her. The two gentlemen had taken leave of their nationality, and were talking the language of foreigners.

An hour later, when the dinner-table had been cleared, the maid's domestic duties took her to Lady Harry's room to make tea. She noticed the sad careworn look on her mistress's face, and spoke of it at once in her own

downright way.

"I thought it was only an excuse," she said, "when you gave me that message to the gentlemen, at dinner-time. Are you really ill, my lady?"

"I am a little out of spirits," Iris replied.

Fanny made the tea. "I can understand that," she said to herself, as she moved away to leave the room; "I'm out of spirits myself."

Iris called her back: "I heard you say just now, Fanny, that you were out of spirits yourself. If you were speaking of some troubles of your own, I am sorry for you, and I won't say any more. But if you know what my anxieties are, and share them--"

"Mine is the biggest share of the two," Fanny broke out abruptly. "It goes against the grain with me to distress you, my lady; but we are beginning badly, and you ought to know it. The doctor has beaten me already."

"Beaten you already?" Iris repeated. "Tell me plainly what you mean?"

"Here it is, if you please, as plainly as words can say it. Mr. Vimpany has something--something wicked, of course--to say to my master; and he won't let it pass his lips here, in the cottage."

"Why not?"

"Because he suspects me of listening at the door, and looking through the keyhole. I don't know, my lady, that he doesn't even suspect You. 'I've learnt something in the course of my life,' he says to my master; 'and it's a rule with me to be careful of what I talk about indoors, when there are women in the house. What are you going to do to-morrow?' he says. My lord told him there was to be a meeting at the newspaper office. The doctor says: 'I'll go to Paris with you. The newspaper office isn't far from the Luxembourg Gardens. When you have done your business, you will find me waiting at the gate. What I have to tell you, you shall hear out of doors in the Gardens--and in an open part of them, too, where there are no lurking-places among the trees.' My master seemed to get angry at being put off in this way. 'What is it you have got to tell me?' he says. 'Is it anything like the proposal you made, when you were on your last visit here?' The doctor laughed. 'To-morrow won't be long in coming,' he says. 'Patience, my lord--patience.' There was no getting him to say a word more. Now, what am I to do? How am I to get a chance of listening to him, out in an open garden, without

being seen? There's what I mean when I say he has beaten me. It's you, my lady--it's you who will suffer in the end."

"You don't know that, Fanny."

"No, my lady--but I'm certain of it. And here I am, as helpless as yourself! My temper has been quiet, since my misfortune; it would be quiet still, but for this." The one animating motive, the one exasperating influence, in that sad and secret life was still the mistress's welfare--still the safety of the generous woman who had befriended and forgiven her. She turned aside from the table, to hide her ghastly face.

"Pray try to control yourself." As Iris spoke, she pointed kindly to a chair. "There is something that I want to say when you are composed again. I won't hurry you; I won't look at you. Sit down, Fanny."

She appeared to shrink from being seated in her mistress's presence. "Please to let me go to the window," she said; "the air will help me."

To the window she went, and struggled with the passionate self so steadily kept under at other times; so obstinately conquered now. "What did you wish to say to me?" she asked.

"You have surprised--you have perplexed me," Iris said. "I am at a loss to understand how you discovered what seems to have passed between your master and Mr. Vimpany. You don't surely mean to tell me that they talked of their private affairs while you were waiting at table?"

"I don't tell lies, my lady," Fanny declared impulsively. "They talked of nothing else all through the dinner."

"Before you!" Iris exclaimed.

There was a pause. Fear and shame confessed themselves furtively on the maid's colourless face. Silently, swiftly, she turned to the door. Had a slip of the tongue hurried her into the betrayal of something which it was her interest to conceal? "Don't be alarmed," Iris said compassionately; "I have no wish to intrude on your secrets."

With her hand on the door, Fanny Mere closed it again, and came back.

"I am not so ungrateful," she said, "as to have any secrets from You. It's hard to confess what may lower me in your good opinion, but it must be

done. I have deceived your ladyship--and I am ashamed of it. I have deceived the doctor--and I glory in it. My master and Mr. Vimpany thought they were safe in speaking French, while I was waiting on them. I know French as well as they do."

Iris could hardly believe what she heard. "Do you really mean what you say?" she asked.

"There's that much good in me," Fanny replied; "I always mean what I say."

"Why did you deceive me? Why have you been acting the part of an ignorant woman?"

"The deceit has been useful in your service," the obstinate maid declared. "Perhaps it may be useful again."

"Was that what you were thinking of," Iris said, "when you allowed me to translate English into French for you, and never told me the truth?"

"At any rate, I will tell you the truth, now. No: I was not thinking of you, when you wrote my errands for me in French--I was thinking again of some advice that was once given to me."

"Was it advice given by a friend?"

"Given by a man, my lady, who was the worst enemy I have ever had."

Her considerate mistress understood the allusion, and forbade her to distress herself by saying more. But Fanny felt that atonement, as well as explanation, was due to her benefactress. Slowly, painfully she described the person to whom she had referred. He was a Frenchman, who had been her music-master during the brief period at which she had attended a school: he had promised her marriage; he had persuaded her to elope with him. The little money that they had to live on was earned by her needle, and by his wages as accompanist at a music-hall. While she was still able to attract him, and to hope for the performance of his promise, he amused himself by teaching her his own language. When he deserted her, his letter of farewell contained, among other things the advice to which she had alluded.

"In your station of life," this man had written, "knowledge of French is still a rare accomplishment. Keep your knowledge to yourself. English people of rank have a way of talking French to each other, when they don't wish to be

understood by their inferiors. In the course of your career, you may surprise secrets which will prove to be a little fortune, if you play your cards properly. Anyhow, it is the only fortune I have to leave to you." Such had been the villain's parting gift to the woman whom he had betrayed.

She had hated him too bitterly to be depraved by his advice.

On the contrary, when the kindness of a friend (now no longer in England) had helped her to obtain her first employment as a domestic servant, she had thought it might be to her interest to mention that she could read, write, and speak French. The result proved to be not only a disappointment, but a warning to her for the future. Such an accomplishment as a knowledge of a foreign language possessed by an Englishwoman, in her humble rank of life, was considered by her mistress to justify suspicion. Questions were asked, which it was impossible for her to answer truthfully. Small scandal drew its own conclusions--her life with the other servants became unendurable--she left her situation.

From that time, until the happy day when she met with Iris, concealment of her knowledge of French became a proceeding forced on her by her own poor interests. Her present mistress would undoubtedly have been taken into her confidence, if the opportunity had offered itself. But Iris had never encouraged her to speak of the one darkest scene in her life; and for that reason, she had kept her own counsel until the date of her mistress's marriage. Distrusting the husband, and the husband's confidential friend--for were they not both men?--she had thought of the vile Frenchman's advice, and had resolved to give it a trial; not with the degrading motive which he had suggested, but with the vague presentiment of making a discovery of wickedness, threatening mischief under a French disguise, which might be of service to her benefactress at some future time.

"And I may still turn it to your advantage, my lady," Fanny ventured to add, "if you will consent to say nothing to anybody of your having a servant who has learnt French."

Iris looked at her coldly and gravely. "Must I remind you," she said, "that you are asking my help in practicing a deception on my husband?"

"I shall be sent away," Fanny answered, "if you tell my master what I have told you."

This was indisputably true. Iris hesitated. In her present situation, the maid was the one friend on whom she could rely. Before her marriage, she would

have recoiled from availing herself, under any circumstances, of such services as Fanny's reckless gratitude had offered to her. But the moral atmosphere in which she was living had begun, as Mrs. Vimpany had foreseen, to exert its baneful influence. The mistress descended to bargaining with the servant.

"Deceive the doctor," she said, "and I well remember that it may be for my good." She stopped, and considered for a moment. Her noble nature rallied its forces, and prompted her next words: "But respect your master, if you wish me to keep your secret. I forbid you to listen to what my lord may say, when he speaks with Mr. Vimpany to-morrow."

"I have already told your ladyship that I shall have no chance of listening to what they say to each other, out of doors," Fanny rejoined. "But I can watch the doctor at any rate. We don't know what he may not do when he is left by himself, while my master is at the meeting. I want to try if I can follow that rogue through the streets, without his finding me out. Please to send me on an errand to Paris to-morrow."

"You will be running a terrible risk," her mistress reminded her, "if Mr. Vimpany discovers you."

"I'll take my chance of that," was the reckless reply.

Iris consented.