

CHAPTER XXXIX - THE MYSTERY OF THE HOSPITAL

ON the next morning Lord Harry left the cottage, accompanied by the doctor.

After a long absence, he returned alone. His wife's worst apprehensions, roused by what Fanny had told her, were more than justified, by the change which she now perceived in him. His eyes were bloodshot, his face was haggard, his movements were feeble and slow. He looked like a man exhausted by some internal conflict, which had vibrated between the extremes of anger and alarm. "I'm tired to death," he said; "get me a glass of wine."

She waited on him with eager obedience, and watched anxiously for the reviving effect of the stimulant.

The little irritabilities which degrade humanity only prolong their mischievous existence, while the surface of life stagnates in calm. Their annihilation follows when strong emotion stirs in the depths, and raises the storm. The estrangement of the day before passed as completely from the minds of the husband and wife--both strongly agitated--as if it had never existed. All-mastering fear was busy at their hearts; fear, in the woman, of the unknown temptation which had tried the man; fear, in the man, of the tell-tale disturbance in him, which might excite the woman's suspicion. Without venturing to look at him, Iris said: "I am afraid you have heard bad news?" Without venturing to look at her, Lord Harry answered: "Yes, at the newspaper office." She knew that he was deceiving her; and he felt that she knew it. For awhile, they were both silent.

From time to time, she anxiously stole a look at him.

His mind remained absorbed in thought. There they were, in the same room--seated near each other; united by the most intimate of human relationships--and yet how far, how cruelly far, apart! The slowest of all laggard minutes, the minutes which are reckoned by suspense, followed each other tardily and more tardily, before there appeared the first sign of a change. He lifted his drooping head. Sadly, longingly, he looked at her. The unerring instinct of true love encouraged his wife to speak to him.

"I wish I could relieve your anxieties," she said simply. "Is there nothing I can do to help you?"

"Come here, Iris."

She rose and approached him. In the past days of the honeymoon and its sweet familiarities, he had sometimes taken her on his knee. He took her on his knee now, and put his arm round her. "Kiss me," he said.

With all her heart she kissed him. He sighed heavily; his eyes rested on her with a trustful appealing look which she had never observed in them before.

"Why do you hesitate to confide in me?" she asked. "Dear Harry, do you think I don't see that something troubles you?"

"Yes," he said, "there is something that I regret."

"What is it?"

"Iris," he answered, "I am sorry I asked Vimpany to come back to us."

At that unexpected confession, a bright flush of joy and pride overspread his wife's face. Again, the unerring instinct of love guided her to discovery of the truth. The opinion of his wicked friend must have been accidentally justified, at the secret interview of that day, by the friend himself! In tempting her husband, Vimpany had said something which must have shocked and offended him. The result, as she could hardly doubt, had been the restoration of her domestic influence to its helpful freedom of control--whether for the time only it was not in her nature, at that moment of happiness, to inquire. "After what you have just told me," she ventured to say, "I may own that I am glad to see you come home, alone."

In that indirect manner, she confessed the hope that friendly intercourse between the two men had come to an end. His reply disappointed her.

"Vimpany only remains in Paris," he said, "to present a letter of introduction. He will follow me home."

"Soon?" she asked, piteously.

"In time for dinner, I suppose." She was still sitting on his knee. His arm pressed her gently when he said his next words, "I hope you will dine with us to-day, Iris?"

"Yes--if you wish it."

"I wish it very much. Something in me recoils from being alone with Vimpany. Besides, a dinner at home without you is no dinner at all."

She thanked him for that little compliment by a look. At the same time, her grateful sense of her husband's kindness was embittered by the prospect of the doctor's return. "Is he likely to dine with us often, now?" she was bold enough to say.

"I hope not."

Perhaps he was conscious that he might have made a more positive reply. He certainly took refuge in another subject--more agreeable to himself.

"My dear, you have expressed the wish to relieve my anxieties," he said; "and you can help me, I think, in that way. I have a letter to write--of some importance, Iris, to your interests as well as to mine--which must go to Ireland by to-day's post. You shall read it, and say if you approve of what I have done. Don't let me be disturbed. This letter, I can tell you, will make a hard demand on my poor brains--I must go and write in my own room."

Left alone with the thoughts that now crowded on her mind, Iris found her attention claimed once more by passing events. Fanny Mere arrived, to report herself on her return from Paris.

She had so managed her departure from Passy as to precede Lord Harry and Mr. Vimpany, and to watch for their arrival in Paris by a later train. They had driven from the railway to the newspaper office---with the maid in attendance on them in another cab. When they separated, the doctor proceeded on foot to the Luxembourg Gardens. Wearing a plain black dress, and protected from close observation by her veil, Fanny followed him, cautiously keeping at a sufficient distance, now on one side of the street and now on the other. When my lord joined his friend, she just held them in view, and no more, as they walked up and down in the barest and loneliest part of the Gardens that they could find. Their talk having come to an end, they parted. Her master was the first who came out into the street; walking at a great rate, and looking most desperately upset. Mr. Vimpany next appeared, sauntering along with his hands in his pockets, grinning as if his own villainous thoughts were thoroughly amusing him. Fanny was now more careful than ever not to lose sight of the doctor. The course which he pursued led them to the famous hospital called the Hotel Dieu.

At the entrance she saw him take a letter out of his pocket, and give it to the porter. Soon afterwards, a person appeared who greeted him politely, and

conducted him into the building. For more than an hour, Fanny waited to see Mr. Vimpany come out again, and waited in vain. What could he possibly want in a French hospital? And why had he remained in that foreign institution for so long a time? Baffled by these mysteries, and weary after much walking, Fanny made the best of her way home, and consulted her mistress.

Even if Iris had been capable of enlightening her, the opportunity was wanting. Lord Harry entered the room, with the letter which he had just written, open in his hand, As a matter of course, the maid retired.