

CHAPTER XL - DIRE NECESSITY

THE Irish lord had a word to say to his wife, before he submitted to her the letter which he had just written.

He had been summoned to a meeting of proprietors at the office of the newspaper, convened to settle the terms of a new subscription rendered necessary by unforeseen expenses incurred in the interests of the speculation. The vote that followed, after careful preliminary consultation, authorised a claim on the purses of subscribing proprietors, which sadly reduced the sum obtained by Lord Harry's promissory note. Nor was this inconvenience the only trial of endurance to which the Irish lord was compelled to submit. The hope which he had entertained of assistance from the profits of the new journal, when repayment of the loan that he had raised became due, was now plainly revealed as a delusion. Ruin stared him in the face, unless he could command the means of waiting for the pecuniary success of the newspaper, during an interval variously estimated at six months, or even at a year to come.

"Our case is desperate enough," he said, "to call for a desperate remedy. Keep up your spirits, Iris--I have written to my brother."

Iris looked at him in dismay.

"Surely," she said, "you once told me you had written to your brother, and he answered you in the cruellest manner through his lawyers."

"Quite true, my dear. But, this time, there is one circumstance in our favour--my brother is going to be married. The lady is said to be an heiress; a charming creature, admired and beloved wherever she goes. There must surely be something to soften the hardest heart in that happy prospect. Read what I have written, and tell me what you think of it."

The opinion of the devoted wife encouraged the desperate husband: the letter was dispatched by the post of that day.

If boisterous good spirits can make a man agreeable at the dinner-table, then indeed Mr. Vimpany, on his return to the cottage, played the part of a welcome guest. He was inexhaustible in gallant attentions to his friend's wife; he told his most amusing stories in his happiest way; he gaily drank his host's fine white Burgundy, and praised with thorough knowledge of the

subject the succulent French dishes; he tried Lord Harry with talk on politics, talk on sport, and (wonderful to relate in these days) talk on literature. The preoccupied Irishman was equally inaccessible on all three subjects. When the dessert was placed on the table--still bent on making himself agreeable to Lady Harry--Mr. Vimpany led the conversation to the subject of floriculture. In the interests of her ladyship's pretty little garden, he advocated a complete change in the system of cultivation, and justified his revolutionary views by misquoting the published work of a great authority on gardening with such polite obstinacy that Iris (eager to confute him) went away to fetch the book. The moment he had entrapped her into leaving the room, the doctor turned to Lord Harry with a sudden change to the imperative mood in look and manner.

"What have you been about," he asked, "since we had that talk in the Gardens to-day? Have you looked at your empty purse, and are you wise enough to take my way of filling it?"

"As long as there's the ghost of a chance left to me," Lord Harry replied, "I'll take any way of filling my purse but yours."

"Does that mean you have found a way?"

"Do me a favour, Vimpany. Defer all questions till the end of the week."

"And then I shall have your answer?"

"Without fail, I promise it. Hush!"

Iris returned to the dining-room with her book; and polite Mr. Vimpany owned in the readiest manner that he had been mistaken.

The remaining days of the week followed each other wearily. During the interval, Lord Harry's friend carefully preserved the character of a model guest--he gave as little trouble as possible. Every morning after breakfast the doctor went away by the train. Every morning (with similar regularity) he was followed by the resolute Fanny Mere. Pursuing his way through widely different quarters of Paris, he invariably stopped at a public building, invariably presented a letter at the door, and was invariably asked to walk in. Inquiries, patiently persisted in by the English maid, led in each case to the same result. The different public buildings were devoted to the same benevolent purpose. Like the Hotel Dieu, they were all hospitals; and Mr. Vimpany's object in visiting them remained as profound a mystery as ever.

Early on the last morning of the week the answer from Lord Harry's brother arrived. Hearing of it, Iris ran eagerly into her husband's room. The letter was already scattered in fragments on the floor. What the tone of the Earl's inhuman answer had been in the past time, that it was again now.

Iris put her arms round her husband's neck. "Oh, my poor love, what is to be done?"

He answered in one reckless word: "Nothing!"

"Is there nobody else who can help us?" she asked.

"Ah, well, darling, there's perhaps one other person still left,"

"Who is the person?"

"Who should it be but your own dear self?"

She looked at him in undisguised bewilderment: "Only tell me, Harry, what I can do?"

"Write to Mountjoy, and ask him to lend me the money."

He said it. In those shameless words, he said it. She, who had sacrificed Mountjoy to the man whom she had married, was now asked by that man to use Mountjoy's devotion to her, as a means of paying his debts! Iris drew back from him with a cry of disgust.

"You refuse?" he said.

"Do you insult me by doubting it?" she answered.

He rang the bell furiously, and dashed out of the room. She heard him, on the stairs, ask where Mr. Vimpany was. The servant replied: "In the garden, my lord."

Smoking a cigar luxuriously in the fine morning air, the doctor saw his excitable Irish friend hastening out to meet him.

"Don't hurry," he said, in full possession of his impudent good-humour; "and don't lose your temper. Will you take my way out of your difficulties, or will you not? Which is it--Yes or No?"

"You infernal scoundrel--Yes!"

"My dear lord, I congratulate you."

"On what, sir?"

"On being as great a scoundrel as I am."