

## **CHAPTER XLI - THE MAN IS FOUND.**

THE unworthy scheme, by means of which Lord Harry had proposed to extricate himself from his pecuniary responsibilities, had led to serious consequences. It had produced a state of deliberate estrangement between man and wife.

Iris secluded herself in her own room. Her husband passed the hours of every day away from the cottage; sometimes in the company of the doctor, sometimes among his friends in Paris. His wife suffered acutely under the self-imposed state of separation, to which wounded pride and keenly felt resentment compelled her to submit. No friend was near her, in whose compassionate advice she might have token refuge. Not even the sympathy of her maid was offered to the lonely wife.

With the welfare of Iris as her one end in view, Fanny Mere honestly believed that it would be better and safer for Lady Harry if she and her husband finally decided on living separate lives. The longer my lord persisted in keeping the doctor with him as his guest, the more perilously he was associated with a merciless wretch, who would be capable of plotting the ruin of anyone--man or woman, high person or low person--who might happen to be an obstacle in his way. So far as a person in her situation could venture on taking the liberty, the maid did her best to widen the breach between her master and her mistress.

While Fanny was making the attempt to influence Lady Harry, and only producing irritation as the result, Vimpany was exerting stronger powers of persuasion in the effort to prejudice the Irish lord against any proposal for reconciliation which might reach him through his wife.

"I find an unforgiving temper in your charming lady," the doctor declared. "It doesn't show itself on the surface, my dear fellow, but there it is. Take a wise advantage of circumstances--say you will raise no inconvenient objections, if she wants a separation by mutual consent. Now don't misunderstand me. I only recommend the sort of separation which will suit our convenience. You know as well as I do that you can whistle your wife back again--"

Mr. Vimpany's friend was rude enough to interrupt him, there.

"I call that a coarse way of putting it," Lord Harry interposed.

"Put it how you like for yourself," the doctor rejoined. "Lady Harry may be persuaded to come back to you, when we want her for our grand project. In the meantime (for I am always a considerate man where women are concerned) we act delicately towards my lady, in sparing her the discovery of--what shall I call our coming enterprise?--venturesome villainy, which might ruin you in your wife's estimation. Do you see our situation now, as it really is? Very well. Pass the bottle, and drop the subject for the present."

The next morning brought with it an event, which demolished the doctor's ingenious arrangement for the dismissal of Iris from the scene of action. Lord and Lady Harry encountered each other accidentally on the stairs.

Distrusting herself if she ventured to look at him, Iris turned her eyes away from her husband. He misinterpreted the action as an expression of contempt. Anger at once inclined him to follow Mr. Vimpany's advice.

He opened the door of the dining-room, empty at that moment, and told Iris that he wished to speak with her. What his villainous friend had suggested that he should say, on the subject of a separation, he now repeated with a repellent firmness which he was far from really feeling. The acting was bad, but the effect was produced. For the first time, his wife spoke to him.

"Do you really mean it?" she asked,

The tone in which she said those words, sadly and regretfully telling its tale of uncontrollable surprise; the tender remembrance of past happy days in her eyes; the quivering pain, expressive of wounded love, that parted her lips in the effort to breathe freely, touched his heart, try as he might in the wretched pride of the moment to conceal it. He was silent.

"If you are weary of our married life," she continued, "say so, and let us part. I will go away, without entreaties and without reproaches. Whatever pain I may feel, you shall not see it!" A passing flush crossed her face, and left it pale again. She trembled under the consciousness of returning love--the blind love that had so cruelly misled her! At a moment when she most needed firmness, her heart was sinking; she resisted, struggled, recovered herself. Quietly, and even firmly, she claimed his decision. "Does your silence mean," she asked, "that you wish me to leave you?"

No man who had loved her as tenderly as her husband had loved her, could have resisted that touching self-control. He answered his wife without uttering a word--he held out his arms to her. The fatal reconciliation was

accomplished in silence.

At dinner on that day Mr. Vimpany's bold eyes saw a new sight, and Mr. Vimpany's rascally lips indulged in an impudent smile. My lady appeared again in her place at the dinner-table. At the customary time, the two men were left alone over their wine. The reckless Irish lord, rejoicing in the recovery of his wife's tender regard, drank freely. Understanding and despising him, the doctor's devilish gaiety indulged in facetious reminiscences of his own married life.

"If I could claim a sovereign," he said, "for every quarrel between Mrs. Vimpany and myself, I put it at a low average when I declare that I should be worth a thousand pounds. How does your lordship stand in that matter? Shall we say a dozen breaches of the marriage agreement up to the present time?"

"Say two--and no more to come!" his friend answered cheerfully.

"No more to come!" the doctor repeated. "My experience says plenty more to come; I never saw two people less likely to submit to a peaceable married life than you and my lady. Ha! you laugh at that? It's a habit of mine to back my opinion. I'll bet you a dozen of champagne there will be a quarrel which parts you two, for good and all, before the year is out. Do you take the bet?"

"Done!" cried Lord Harry. "I propose my wife's good health, Vimpany, in a bumper. She shall drink confusion to all false prophets in the first glass of your champagne!"

The post of the next morning brought with it two letters.

One of them bore the postmark of London, and was addressed to Lady Harry Norland. It was written by Mrs. Vimpany, and it contained a few lines added by Hugh Mountjoy. "My strength is slow in returning to me" (he wrote); "but my kind and devoted nurse says that all danger of infection is at an end. You may write again to your old friend if Lord Harry sees no objection, as harmlessly as in the happy past time. My weak hand begins to tremble already. How glad I shall be to hear from you, it is, happily for me, quite needless to add."

In her delight at receiving this good news Iris impulsively assumed that her husband would give it a kindly welcome on his side; she insisted on reading the letter to him. He said coldly, "I am glad to hear of Mr. Mountjoy's recovery"--and took up the newspaper. Was this unworthy jealousy still

strong enough to master him, even at that moment? His wife had forgotten it. Why had he not forgotten it too?

On the same day Iris replied to Hugh, with the confidence and affection of the bygone time before her marriage. After closing and addressing the envelope, she found that her small store of postage stamps was exhausted, and sent for her maid. Mr. Vimpany happened to pass the open door of her room, while she was asking for a stamp; he heard Fanny say that she was not able to accommodate her mistress. "Allow me to make myself useful," the polite doctor suggested. He produced a stamp, and fixed it himself on the envelope. When he had proceeded on his way downstairs, Fanny's distrust of him insisted on expressing itself. "He wanted to find out what person you have written to," she said. "Let me make your letter safe in the post." In five minutes more it was in the box at the office.

While these trifling events were in course of progress, Mr. Vimpany had gone into the garden to read the second of the two letters, delivered that morning, addressed to himself. On her return from the post-office, Fanny had opportunities of observing him while she was in the greenhouse, trying to revive the perishing flowers--neglected in the past days of domestic trouble.

Noticing her, after he had read his letter over for the second time, Mr. Vimpany sent the maid into the cottage to say that he wished to speak with her master. Lord Harry joined him in the garden--looked at the letter--and, handing it back, turned away. The doctor followed him, and said something which seemed to be received with objection. Mr. Vimpany persisted nevertheless, and apparently carried his point. The two gentlemen consulted the railway time-table, and hurried away together, to catch the train to Paris.

Fanny Mere returned to the conservatory, and absently resumed her employment among the flowers. On what evil errand had the doctor left the cottage? And, why, on this occasion, had he taken the master with him?

The time had been when Fanny might have tried to set these questions at rest by boldly following the two gentlemen to Paris; trusting to her veil, to her luck, and to the choice of a separate carriage in the train, to escape notice. But, although her ill-judged interference with the domestic affairs of Lady Harry had been forgiven, she had not been received again into favour unreservedly. Conditions were imposed, which forbade her to express any opinion on her master's conduct, and which imperatively ordered her to leave the protection of her mistress--if protection was really needed--in his lordship's competent hands. "I gratefully appreciate your kind intentions,"

Iris had said, with her customary tenderness of regard for the feelings of others; "but I never wish to hear again of Mr. Vimpany, or of the strange suspicions which he seems to excite in your mind." Still as gratefully devoted to Iris as ever, Fanny viewed the change in my lady's way of thinking as one of the deplorable results of her return to her husband, and waited resignedly for the coming time when her wise distrust of two unscrupulous men would be justified.

Condemned to inaction for the present, Lady Harry's maid walked irritably up and down the conservatory, forgetting the flowers. Through the open back door of the cottage the cheap clock in the hall poured its harsh little volume of sound, striking the hour. "I wonder," she said to herself, "if those two wicked ones have found their way to a hospital yet?" That guess happened to have hit the mark. The two wicked ones were really approaching a hospital, well known to the doctor by more previous visits than one. At the door they were met by a French physician, attached to the institution--the writer of the letter which had reached Mr. Vimpany in the morning.

This gentleman led the way to the official department of the hospital, and introduced the two foreigners to the French authorities assembled for the transaction of business.

As a medical man, Mr. Vimpany's claims to general respect and confidence were carefully presented. He was a member of the English College of Surgeons; he was the friend, as well as the colleague of the famous President of that College, who had introduced him to the chief surgeon of the Hotel Dieu. Other introductions to illustrious medical persons in Paris had naturally followed. Presented under these advantages, Mr. Vimpany announced his discovery of a new system of treatment in diseases of the lungs. Having received his medical education in Paris, he felt bound in gratitude to place himself under the protection of "the princes of science," resident in the brilliant capital of France. In that hospital, after much fruitless investigation in similar institutions, he had found a patient suffering from the form of lung disease, which offered to him the opportunity that he wanted. It was impossible that he could do justice to his new system, unless the circumstances were especially favourable. Air more pure than the air of a great city, and bed-room accommodation not shared by other sick persons, were among the conditions absolutely necessary to the success of the experiment. These, and other advantages, were freely offered to him by his noble friend, who would enter into any explanations which the authorities then present might think it necessary to demand.

The explanations having been offered and approved, there was a general move to the bed occupied by the invalid who was an object of professional interest to the English doctor.

The patient's name was Oxbye. He was a native of Denmark, and had followed in his own country the vocation of a schoolmaster. His knowledge of the English language and the French had offered him the opportunity of migrating to Paris, where he had obtained employment as translator and copyist. Earning his bread, poorly enough in this way, he had been prostrated by the malady which had obliged him to take refuge in the hospital. The French physician, under whose medical care he had been placed, having announced that he had communicated his notes enclosed in a letter to his English colleague, and having frankly acknowledged that the result of the treatment had not as yet sufficiently justified expectation, the officers of the institution spoke next. The Dane was informed of the nature of Mr. Vimpany's interest in him, and of the hospitable assistance offered by Mr. Vimpany's benevolent friend; and the question was then put, whether he preferred to remain where he was, or whether he desired to be removed under the conditions which had just been stated?

Tempted by the prospect of a change, which offered to him a bed-chamber of his own in the house of a person of distinction--with a garden to walk about in, and flowers to gladden his eyes, when he got better--Oxbye eagerly adopted the alternative of leaving the hospital. "Pray let me go," the poor fellow said: "I am sure I shall be the better for it." Without opposing this decision, the responsible directors reminded him that it had been adopted on impulse, and decided that it was their duty to give him a little time for consideration.

In the meanwhile, some of the gentlemen assembled at the bedside, looking at Oxbye and then looking at Lord Harry, had observed a certain accidental likeness between the patient and "Milord, the philanthropist," who was willing to receive him. The restraints of politeness had only permitted them to speak of this curious discovery among themselves. At the later time, however, when the gentlemen had taken leave of each other, Mr. Vimpany--finding himself alone with Lord Harry--had no hesitation in introducing the subject, on which delicacy had prevented the Frenchmen from entering.

"Did you look at the Dane?" he began abruptly.

"Of course I did!"

"And you noticed the likeness?"

"Not I!"

The doctor's uproarious laughter startled the people who were walking near them in the street. "Here's another proof," he burst out, "of the true saying that no man knows himself. You don't deny the likeness, I suppose?"

"Do you yourself see it?" Lord Harry asked.

Mr. Vimpany answered the question scornfully: "Is it likely that I should have submitted to all the trouble I have taken to get possession of that man, if I had not seen a likeness between his face and yours?"

The Irish lord said no more. When his friend asked why he was silent, he gave his reason sharply enough: "I don't like the subject."