

CHAPTER XLII - THE METTLESOME MAID

ON the evening of that day Fanny Mere, entering the dining-room with the coffee, found Lord Harry and Mr. Vimpany alone, and discovered (as soon as she opened the door) that they changed the language in which they were talking from English to French.

She continued to linger in the room, apparently occupied in setting the various objects on the sideboard in order. Her master was speaking at the time; he asked if the doctor had succeeded in finding a bed-room for himself in the neighbourhood. To this Mr. Vimpany replied that he had got the bed-room. Also, that he had provided himself with something else, which it was equally important to have at his disposal. "I mean," he proceeded, in his bad French, "that I have found a photographic apparatus on hire. We are ready now for the appearance of our interesting Danish guest."

"And when the man comes," Lord Harry added, "what am I to say to my wife? How am I to find an excuse, when she hears of a hospital patient who has taken possession of your bed-room at the cottage--and has done it with my permission, and with you to attend on him?"

The doctor sipped his coffee. "We have told a story that has satisfied the authorities," he said coolly. "Repeat the story to your wife."

"She won't believe it," Lord Harry replied.

Mr. Vimpany waited until he had lit another cigar, and had quite satisfied himself that it was worth smoking.

"You have yourself to thank for that obstacle," he resumed. "If you had taken my advice, your wife would have been out of our way by this time. I suppose I must manage it. If you fail, leave her ladyship to me. In the meanwhile, there's a matter of more importance to settle first. We shall want a nurse for our poor dear invalid. Where are we to find her?"

As he stated that difficulty, he finished his coffee, and looked about him for the bottle of brandy which always stood on the dinner-table. In doing this, he happened to notice Fanny. Convinced that her mistress was in danger, after what she had already heard, the maid's anxiety and alarm had so completely absorbed her that she had forgotten to play her part. Instead of still busying herself at the sideboard, she stood with her back to it, palpably

listening. Cunning Mr. Vimpany, possessing himself of the brandy, made a request too entirely appropriate to excite suspicion.

"Some fresh cold water, if you please," was all that he said.

The moment that Fanny left the room, the doctor addressed his friend in English, with his eye on the door: "News for you, my boy! We are in a pretty pickle--Lady Harry's maid understands French."

"Quite impossible," Lord Harry declared.

"We will put that to the test," Mr. Vimpany answered. "Watch her when she comes in again."

"What are you going to do."

"I am going to insult her in French. Observe the result."

In another minute Fanny returned with the fresh water. As she placed the glass jug before Mr. Vimpany he suddenly laid his hand on her arm and looked her straight in the face. "Vous nous avez mis dedans, drolesse!"* he said.

*In English: "You have taken us in, you jade!"

An uncontrollable look of mingled rage and fear made its plain confession in Fanny's face. She had been discovered; she had heard herself called "drolesse;" she stood before the two men self-condemned. Her angry master threatened her with instant dismissal from the house. The doctor interfered.

"No, no," he said; "you mustn't deprive Lady Harry, at a moment's notice, of her maid. Such a clever maid, too," he added with his rascally smile. "An accomplished person, who understands French, and is too modest to own it!"

The doctor had led Fanny through many a weary and unrewarded walk when she had followed him to the hospital; he had now inflicted a deliberate insult by calling her "drolesse" and he had completed the sum of his offences by talking contemptuously of her modesty and her mastery of the French language. The woman's detestation of him, which under ordinary circumstances she might have attempted to conceal, was urged into audaciously asserting itself by the strong excitement that now possessed her. Driven to bay, Fanny had made up her mind to discover the conspiracy

of which Mr. Vimpany was the animating spirit, by a method daring enough to be worthy of the doctor himself.

"My knowledge of French has told me something," she said. "I have just heard, Mr. Vimpany, that you want a nurse for your invalid gentleman. With my lord's permission, suppose you try Me?"

Fanny's audacity was more than her master's patience could endure. He ordered her to leave the room.

The peace-making doctor interfered again: "My dear lord, let me beg you will not be too hard on the young woman." He turned to Fanny, with an effort to look indulgent, which ended in the reappearance of his rascally smile. "Thank you, my dear, for your proposal," he said; "I will let you know if we accept it, to-morrow."

Fanny's unforgiving master pointed to the door; she thanked Mr. Vimpany, and went out. Lord Harry eyed his friend in angry amazement. "Are you mad?" he asked.

"Tell me something first," the doctor rejoined. "Is there any English blood in your family?"

Lord Harry answered with a burst of patriotic feeling: "I regret to say my family is adulterated in that manner. My grandmother was an Englishwoman."

Mr. Vimpany received this extract from the page of family history with a coolness all his own.

"It's a relief to hear that," he said. "You may be capable (by the grandmother's side) of swallowing a dose of sound English sense. I can but try, at any rate. That woman is too bold and too clever to be treated like an ordinary servant--I incline to believe that she is a spy in the employment of your wife. Whether I am right or wrong in this latter case, the one way I can see of paring the cat's claws is to turn her into a nurse. Do you find me mad now?"

"Madder than ever!"

"Ah, you don't take after your grandmother! Now listen to me. Do we run the smallest risk, if Fanny finds it her interest to betray us? Suppose we ask ourselves what she has really found out. She knows we have got a sick man

from a hospital coming here--does she know what we want him for? Not she! Neither you nor I said a word on that subject. But she also heard us agree that your wife was in our way. What does that matter? Did she hear us say what it is that we don't want your wife to discover? Not she, I tell you again! Very well, then--if Fanny acts as Oxbye's nurse, shy as the young woman may be, she innocently associates herself with the end that we have to gain by the Danish gentleman's death! Oh, you needn't look alarmed! I mean his natural death by lung disease--no crime, my noble friend! no crime!"

The Irish lord, sitting near the doctor, drew his chair back in a hurry.

"If there's English blood in my family," he declared, "I'll tell you what, Vimpany, there's devil's blood in yours!"

"Anything you like but Irish blood," the cool scoundrel rejoined.

As he made that insolent reply, Fanny came in again, with a sufficient excuse for her reappearance. She announced that a person from the hospital wished to speak to the English doctor.

The messenger proved to be a young man employed in the secretary's office. Oxbye still persisting in his desire to be placed under Mr. Vimpany's care; one last responsibility rested on the official gentlemen now in charge of him. They could implicitly trust the medical assistance and the gracious hospitality offered to the poor Danish patient; but, before he left them, they must also be satisfied that he would be attended by a competent nurse. If the person whom Mr. Vimpany proposed to employ in this capacity could be brought to the hospital, it would be esteemed a favour; and, if her account of herself satisfied the physician in charge of Oxbye's case, the Dane might be removed to his new quarters on the same day.

The next morning witnessed the first in a series of domestic incidents at the cottage, which no prophetic ingenuity could have foreseen. Mr. Vimpany and Fanny Mere actually left Passy together, on their way to Paris!