

CHAPTER XLIII - FICTION: ATTEMPTED BY MY LORD

THE day on which the doctor took his newly-appointed nurse with him to the hospital became an occasion associated with distressing recollections in the memory of Iris.

In the morning, Fanny Mere had asked for leave to go out. For some time past this request had been so frequently granted, with such poor results so far as the maid's own designs were concerned, that Lady Harry decided on administering a tacit reproof, by means of a refusal. Fanny made no attempt at remonstrance; she left the room in silence.

Half an hour later, Iris had occasion to ring for her attendant. The bell was answered by the cook--who announced, in explanation of her appearance, that Fanny Mere had gone out. More distressed than displeased by this reckless disregard of her authority, on the part of a woman who had hitherto expressed the most grateful sense of her kindness, Iris only said: "Send Fanny to me as soon as she comes back."

Two hours passed before the truant maid returned.

"I refused to let you go out this morning," Lady Harry said; "and you have taken the liberty of leaving the house for two hours. You might have made me understand, in a more becoming manner, that you intended to leave my service."

Steadily respectful, Fanny answered: "I don't wish to leave your ladyship's service."

"Then what does your conduct mean?"

"It means, if you please, that I had a duty to do--and did it."

"A duty to yourself?" Iris asked.

"No, my lady; a duty to you."

As she made that strange reply the door was opened, and Lord Harry entered the room. When he saw Fanny Mere he turned away again, in a hurry, to go out. "I didn't know your maid was with you," he said. "Another time will do."

His permitting a servant to be an obstacle in his way, when he wished to speak to his wife, was a concession so entirely unbecoming in the master of the house, and so strangely contrary to his customary sense of what was due to himself, that Iris called him back in astonishment. She looked at her maid, who at once understood her, and withdrew. "What can you possibly be thinking of?" she said to her husband, when they were alone. Putting that question, she noticed an embarrassment in his manner, and an appearance of confusion in his face, which alarmed her. "Has something happened?" she asked; "and is it so serious that you hesitate to mention it to me?"

He sat down by her and took her hand. The loving look in his eyes, which she knew so well, was not in them now; they expressed doubt, and something with it which suggested an effort at conciliation.

"I am fearing I shall surprise you," he said.

"Don't keep me in suspense!" she returned. "What is it?"

He smiled uneasily: "It's something about Vimpany."

Having got as far as that, he stopped. She drew her hand away from him. "I understand now," she said; "I must endeavour to control myself--you have something to tell me which will try my temper."

He held up his hands in humorous protest: "Ah, my darling, here's your vivid imagination again, making mountains out of molehills, as they say! It's nothing half so serious as you seem to think; I have only to tell you of a little change."

"A little change?" she repeated. "What change?"

"Well, my dear, you see--" He hesitated and recovered himself. "I mean, you must know that Vimpany's plans are altered. He won't any longer occupy his bedroom in the cottage here."

Iris looked inexpressibly relieved. "Going away, at last!" she exclaimed. "Oh, Harry, if you have been mystifying me, I hope you will never do it again. It isn't like you; it's cruel to alarm me about nothing. Mr. Vimpany's empty bedroom will be the most interesting room in the house, when I look into it to-night."

Lord Harry got up, and walked to the window. As a sign of trouble in his

mind, and of an instinctive effort to relieve it, the object of this movement was well-known to Iris. She followed him and stood by his side. It was now plain to her that there was something more to be told--and that he was hesitating how to confide it to his wife.

"Go on," she said resignedly.

He had expected her to take his arm, or perhaps to caress him, or at least to encourage him by her gentlest words and her prettiest smiles. The steady self-restraint which she now manifested was a sign, as he interpreted it, of suppressed resentment. Shrinking, honestly shrinking, from the bare possibility of another quarrel, he confronted the hard necessities of further confession.

"Well, now," he said, "it's only this--you mustn't look into the empty bedroom to-night."

"Why not?"

"Ah, for the best of all good reasons! Because you might find somebody in there."

This reply excited her curiosity: her eyes rested on him eagerly. "Some friend of yours?" she asked.

He persisted in an assumption of good-humour, which betrayed itself as mere artifice in the clumsiest manner: "I declare I feel as if I were in a court of justice, being cross-examined by a lawyer of skill and dexterity! Well, my sweet counsellor, no--not exactly a friend of mine."

She reflected for a moment. "You don't surely mean one of Mr. Vimpany's friends?" she said.

He pretended not to have heard her, and pointed to the view of the garden from the window. "Isn't it a lovely day? Let's go and look at the flowers," he suggested.

"Did you not hear what I said to you just now?" she persisted.

"I beg your pardon, dear; I was thinking of something else. Suppose we go into the garden?"

When women have a point to gain in which they are interested, how many of

them are capable of deferring it to a better opportunity? One in a thousand, perhaps. Iris kept her place at the window, resolved on getting an answer.

"I asked you, Harry, whether the person who is to occupy our spare bedroom, to-night, was one of Mr. Vimpany's friends?"

"Say one of Mr. Vimpany's patients--and you will be nearer the truth," he answered, with an outburst of impatience.

She could hardly believe him. "Do you mean a person who is really ill?" she said.

"Of course I mean it," he said; irritated into speaking out, at last.

"A man? or a woman?"

"A man."

"May I ask if he comes from England?"

"He comes from one of the French hospitals. Anything more?"

Iris left her husband to recover his good-humour, and went back to her chair. The extraordinary disclosure which she had extracted from him had produced a stupefying effect on her mind. Her customary sympathy with him, her subtle womanly observation of his character, her intimate knowledge of his merits and his defects, failed to find the rational motive which might have explained his conduct. She looked round at him with mingled feelings of perplexity and distrust.

He was still at the window, but he had turned his back on the view of the garden; his eyes were fixed, in furtive expectation, on his wife. Was he waiting to hear her say something more? She ran the risk and said it.

"I don't quite understand the sacrifice you seem to be making to Mr. Vimpany," she confessed. "Will you tell me, dear, what it means?"

Here was the opportunity offered of following the doctor's advice, and putting his wife's credulity to the test. With her knowledge of Vimpany, would she really believe the story which had imposed on the strangers who managed the hospital? Lord Harry made up his mind, to try the experiment. No matter what the result might be, it would bring the responsibilities that were crushing him to an end. He need say no more, if the deception

succeeded. He could do no more, if it failed. Under the influence of this cheering reflection, he recovered his temper; his handsome face brightened again with its genial boyish smile.

"What a wonderful woman you are!" he cried. "Isn't it just the thing that I am here for, to tell you what I mean--and my clever wife sees through and through me, and reminds me of what I must do! Pay my fee beforehand, Iris! Give me a kiss--and my poor meaning shall be offered in return. It will help me if you remember one thing. Vimpany and I are old friends, and there's nothing we won't do to accommodate each other. Mind that!"

Tried fairly on its own merits, the stupid fiction invented by the doctor produced an effect for which Lord Harry was not prepared. The longer Iris listened, the more strangely Iris looked at him. Not a word fell from her lips when he had done. He noticed that she had turned pale: it seemed to be almost possible that he had frightened her!

If his bird-witted brains could have coupled cause and effect, this was exactly the result which he might have anticipated.

She was asked to believe that a new system of medical practice had been invented by such a person as Mr. Vimpany. She was asked to believe that an invalid from a foreign hospital, who was a perfect stranger to Lord Harry, had been willingly made welcome to a bedroom at the cottage. She was asked to believe that this astounding concession had been offered to the doctor as a tribute of friendship, after her husband had himself told her that he regretted having invited Vimpany, for the second time, to become his guest. Here was one improbable circumstance accumulated on another, and a clever woman was expected to accept the monstrous excuses, thus produced, as a trustworthy statement of facts. Irresistibly, the dread of some evil deed in secret contemplation cast its darkening presence on the wife's mind. Lord Harry's observation had not misled him, when he saw Iris turn pale, and when the doubt was forced on him whether he might not have frightened her.

"If my explanation of this little matter has satisfied you," he ventured to resume, "we need say no more about it."

"I agree with you," she answered, "let us say no more about it." Conscious, in spite of the effort to resist it, of a feeling of oppression while she was in the same room with a man who had deliberately lied to her, and that man her husband, she reminded Lord Harry that he had proposed to take a walk in the garden. Out in the pure air, under the bright sky, she might breathe

more freely. "Come to the flowers," she said.

They went to the garden together--the wife fearing the deceitful husband, the husband fearing the quick-witted wife.

Watching each other like two strangers, they walked silently side by side, and looked now and then at the collection of flowers and plants. Iris noticed a delicate fern which had fallen away from the support to which it had been attached. She stopped, and occupied herself in restoring it to its place. When she looked round again, after attending to the plant, her husband had disappeared, and Mr. Vimpany was waiting in his place.