

## **CHAPTER XLIV - FICTION: IMPROVED BY THE DOCTOR**

"WHERE is Lord Harry?" Iris asked.

The reply startled her: "Lord Harry leaves me to say to your ladyship, what he has not had resolution enough to say for himself."

"I don't understand you, Mr. Vimpany."

The doctor pointed to the fern which had just been the object of Lady Harry's care.

"You have been helping that sickly plant there to live and thrive," he said, "and I have felt some curiosity in watching you. There is another sickly plant, which I have undertaken to rear if the thing can be done. My gardening is of the medical kind--I can only carry it on indoors--and whatever else it may be, I tell you plainly, like the outspoken sort of fellow I am, it's not likely to prove agreeable to a lady. No offence, I hope? Your humble servant is only trying to produce the right sort of impression--and takes leave to doubt his lordship in one particular."

"In what particular, sir?"

"I'll put it in the form of a question, ma'am. Has my friend persuaded you to make arrangements for leaving the cottage?"

Iris looked at Lord Harry's friend without attempting to conceal her opinion of him.

"I call that an impertinent question," she said. "By what right do you presume to inquire into what my husband and I may, or may not, have said to each other?"

"Will you do me a favour, my lady? Or, if that is asking too much, perhaps you will not object to do justice to yourself. Suppose you try to exercise the virtue of self-control?"

"Quite needless, Mr. Vimpany. Pray understand that you are not capable of making me angry."

"Many thanks, Lady Harry: you encourage me to go on. When I was bold

enough to speak of your leaving the cottage, my motive was to prevent you from being needlessly alarmed."

Did this mean that he was about to take her into his confidence? All her experience of him forbade her to believe it possible. But the doubts and fears occasioned by her interview with her husband had mastered her better sense; and the effort to conceal from the doctor the anxiety under which she suffered was steadily weakening the influence of her self-respect. "Why should I be alarmed?" she asked, in the vain hope of encouraging him to tell the truth.

The doctor arrived at a hasty conclusion, on his side. Believing that he had shaken her resolution, he no longer troubled himself to assume the forms of politeness which he had hitherto, with some difficulty, contrived to observe.

"In this curious little world of ours," he resumed, "we enjoy our lives on infernally hard terms. We live on condition that we die. The man I want to cure may die, in spite of the best I can do for him---he may sink slowly, by what we medical men call a hard death. For example, it wouldn't much surprise me if I found some difficulty in keeping him in his bed. He might roam all over your cottage when my back was turned. Or he might pay the debt of Nature--as somebody calls it--with screaming and swearing. If you were within hearing of him, I'm afraid you might be terrified, and, with the best wish to be useful, I couldn't guarantee (if the worst happened) to keep him quiet. In your place, if you will allow me to advise you--"

Iris interrupted him. Instead of confessing the truth, he was impudently attempting to frighten her. "I don't allow a person in whom I have no confidence to advise me," she said; "I wish to hear no more."

Mr. Vimpany found it desirable to resume the forms of politeness. Either he had failed to shake her resolution, or she was sufficiently in possession of herself to conceal what she felt.

"One last word!" he said. "I won't presume to advise your ladyship; I will merely offer a suggestion. My lord tells me that Hugh Mountjoy is on the way to recovery. You are in communication with him by letter, as I happened to notice when I did you that trifling service of providing a postage-stamp. Why not go to London and cheer your convalescent friend? Harry won't mind it--I beg your pardon, I ought to have said Lord Harry. Come! come! my dear lady; I am a rough fellow, but I mean well. Take a holiday, and come back to us when my lord writes to say that he can have the pleasure of receiving you again." He waited for a moment. "Am I not to

be favoured with an answer?" he asked.

"My husband shall answer you."

With those parting words, Iris turned her back on him.

She entered the cottage. Now in one room, and now in another, she searched for Lord Harry; he was nowhere to be found. Had he purposely gone out to avoid her? Her own remembrance of Vimpany's language and Vimpany's manner told her that so it must be--the two men were in league together. Of all dangers, unknown danger is the most terrible to contemplate. Lady Harry's last resources of resolution failed her. She dropped helplessly into a chair.

After an interval--whether it was a long or a short lapse of time she was unable to decide--someone gently opened the door. Had her husband felt for her? Had he returned? "Come in! she cried eagerly--" come in!