

## **CHAPTER XLV - FACT: RELATED BY FANNY**

THE person who now entered the room was Fanny Mere.

But one interest was stirring in the mind of Iris now. "Do you know where your master is?" she asked.

"I saw him go out," the maid replied. "Which way I didn't particularly notice--" She was on the point of adding, "and I didn't particularly care," when she checked herself. "Yesterday and to-day, my lady, things have come to my knowledge which I must not keep to myself," the resolute woman continued. "If a servant may say such a thing without offence, I have never been so truly my mistress's friend as I am now. I beg you to forgive my boldness; there is a reason for it."

So she spoke, with no presumption in her looks, with no familiarity in her manner. The eyes of her friendless mistress filled with tears, the offered hand of her friendless mistress answered in silence. Fanny took that kind hand, and pressed it respectfully--a more demonstrative woman than herself might perhaps have kissed it. She only said, "Thank you, my lady," and went on with what she felt it her duty to relate.

As carefully as usual, as quietly as usual, she repeated the conversation, at Lord Harry's table; describing also the manner in which Mr. Vimpany had discovered her as a person who understood the French language, and who had cunningly kept it a secret. In this serious state of things, the doctor--yes, the doctor himself!--had interfered to protect her from the anger of her master, and, more wonderful still, for a reason which it seemed impossible to dispute. He wanted a nurse for the foreigner whose arrival was expected on that evening, and he had offered the place to Fanny. "Your ladyship will, I hope, excuse me; I have taken the place."

This amazing end to the strange events which had just been narrated proved to be more than Iris was immediately capable of understanding. "I am in the dark," she confessed. "Is Mr. Vimpany a bolder villain even than I have supposed him to be?"

"That he most certainly is!" Fanny said with strong conviction. "As to what he really had in his wicked head when he engaged me, I shall find that out in time. Anyway, I am the nurse who is to help him. When I disobeyed you this morning, my lady, it was to go to the hospital with Mr. Vimpany. I was

taken to see the person whose nurse I am to be. A poor, feeble, polite creature, who looked as if he couldn't hurt a fly---and yet I promise you he startled me! I saw a likeness, the moment I looked at him."

"A likeness to anybody whom I know?" Iris asked.

"To the person in all the world, my lady, whom you know most nearly--a likeness to my master."

"What!"

"Oh, it's no fancy; I am sure of what I say. To my mind, that Danish man's likeness to my lord is (if you will excuse my language) a nasty circumstance. I don't know why or wherefore--all I can say is, I don't like it; and I shan't rest until I have found out what it means. Besides this, my lady, I must know the reason why they want to get you out of their way. Please to keep up your heart; I shall warn you in time, when I am sure of the danger."

Iris refused to sanction the risk involved in this desperate design. "It's you who will be in danger!" she exclaimed.

In her coolest state of obstinacy, Fanny answered: "That's in your ladyship's service--and that doesn't reckon."

Feeling gratefully this simple and sincere expression of attachment, Iris held to her own opinion, nevertheless.

"You are in my service," she said; "I won't let you go to Mr. Vimpany. Give it up, Fanny! Give it up!"

"I'll give it up, my lady, when I know what the doctor means to do--not before."

The assertion of authority having failed, Iris tried persuasion next.

"As your mistress, it is my duty to set you an example," she resumed. "One of us must be considerate and gentle in a dispute--let me try to be that one. There can be no harm, and there may be some good, in consulting the opinion of a friend; some person in whose discretion we can trust."

"Am I acquainted with the person your ladyship is thinking of?" Fanny inquired. "In that case, a friend will know what we want of her by to-morrow morning. I have written to Mrs. Vimpany."

"The very person I had in my mind, Fanny! When may we expect to hear from her?"

"If Mrs. Vimpany can put what she has to say to us into few words," Fanny replied, "we shall hear from her to-morrow by telegraph."

As she answered her mistress in those cheering words, they were startled by a heavy knock at the door of the room. Under similar circumstances, Lord Harry's delicate hand would have been just loud enough to be heard, and no more. Iris called out suspiciously: "Who's there?"

The doctor's gross voice answered: "Can I say a word, if you please, to Fanny Mere?"

The maid opened the door. Mr. Vimpany's heavy hand laid bold of her arm, pulled her over the threshold, and closed the door behind her. After a brief absence, Fanny returned with news of my lord.

A commissioner had arrived with a message for the doctor; and Fanny was charged to repeat it or not, just as she thought right under the circumstances. Lord Harry was in Paris. He had been invited to go to the theatre with some friends, and to return with them to supper. If he was late in getting home, he was anxious that my lady should not be made uneasy. After having authorised Mr. Vimpany's interference in the garden, the husband evidently had his motives for avoiding another interview with the wife. Iris was left alone, to think over that discovery. Fanny had received orders to prepare the bedroom for the doctor's patient.