

## **CHAPTER XLVI - MAN AND WIFE**

TOWARDS evening, the Dane was brought to the cottage.

A feeling of pride which forbade any display of curiosity, strengthened perhaps by an irresistible horror of Vimpany, kept Iris in her room. Nothing but the sound of footsteps, outside, told her when the suffering man was taken to his bed-chamber on the same floor. She was, afterwards informed by Fanny that the doctor turned down the lamp in the corridor, before the patient was helped to ascend the stairs, as a means of preventing the mistress of the house from plainly seeing the stranger's face, and recognising the living likeness of her husband.

The hours advanced--the bustle of domestic life sank into silence--everybody but Iris rested quietly in bed.

Through the wakeful night the sense of her situation oppressed her sinking spirits. Mysteries that vaguely threatened danger made their presence felt, and took their dark way through her thoughts. The cottage, in which the first happy days of her marriage had been passed, might ere long be the scene of some evil deed, provoking the lifelong separation of her husband and herself! Were these the exaggerated fears of a woman in a state of hysterical suspicion? It was enough for Iris to remember that Lord Harry and Mr. Vimpany had been alike incapable of telling her the truth. The first had tried to deceive her; the second had done his best to frighten her. Why? If there was really nothing to be afraid of--why? The hours of the early morning came; and still she listened in vain for the sound of my lord's footstep on the stairs; still she failed to hear the cautious opening of his dressing-room door. Leaving her chair, Iris rested on the bed. As time advanced, exhaustion mastered her; she slept.

Awakening at a late hour, she rang for Fanny Mere. The master had just returned. He had missed the latest night-train to Passy; and, rather than waste money on hiring a carriage at that hour, he had accepted the offer of a bed at the house of his friends. He was then below stairs, hoping to see Lady Harry at breakfast.

His wife joined him.

Not even at the time of the honeymoon had the Irish lord been a more irresistibly agreeable man than he was on that memorable morning. His

apologies for having failed to return at the right time were little masterpieces of grace and gaiety. The next best thing to having been present, at the theatrical performance of the previous night, was to hear his satirical summary of the story of the play, contrasting delightfully with his critical approval of the fine art of the actors. The time had been when Iris would have resented such merciless trifling with serious interests as this. In these earlier and better days, she would have reminded him affectionately of her claim to be received into his confidence--she would have tried all that tact and gentleness and patience could do to win his confession of the ascendancy exercised over him by his vile friend--and she would have used the utmost influence of her love and her resolution to disunite the fatal fellowship which was leading him to his ruin.

But Iris Henley was Lady Harry now.

She was sinking--as Mrs. Vimpany had feared, as Mountjoy had foreseen--lower and lower on the descent to her husband's level. With a false appearance of interest in what he was saying she waited for her chance of matching him with his own weapons of audacious deceit. He ignorantly offered her the opportunity--setting the same snare to catch his wife, which she herself had it in contemplation to use for entrapping her husband into a confession of the truth.

"Ah, well--I have said more than enough of my last night's amusement," he confessed. "It's your turn now, my dear. Have you had a look at the poor fellow whom the doctor is going to cure?" he asked abruptly; eager to discover whether she had noticed the likeness between Oxbye and himself.

Her eyes rested on him attentively. "I have not yet seen the person you allude to," she answered. "Is Mr. Vimpany hopeful of his recovery?"

He took out his case, and busied himself in choosing a cigar. In the course of his adventurous life, he had gained some knowledge of the effect of his own impetuous temper on others, and of difficulties which he had experienced when circumstances rendered it necessary to keep his face in a state of discipline.

"Oh, there's no reason for anxiety!" he said, with an over-acted interest in examining his cigar. "Mr. Oxbye is in good hands."

"People do sometimes sink under an illness," she quietly remarked.

Without making any reply he took out his matchbox. His hand trembled a

little; he failed at the first attempt to strike a light.

"And doctors sometimes make mistakes," Iris went on.

He was still silent. At the second attempt, he succeeded with the match, and lit his cigar.

"Suppose Mr. Vimpany made a mistake," she persisted. "In the case of this stranger, it might lead to deplorable results."

Lord Harry lost his temper, and with it his colour.

"What the devil do you mean?" he cried.

"I might ask, in my turn," she said, "what have I done to provoke an outbreak of temper? I only made a remark."

At that critical moment, Fanny Mere entered the room with a telegram in her hand.

"For you, my lady."

Iris opened the telegram. The message was signed by Mrs. Vimpany, and was expressed in these words: "You may feel it your duty to go to your father. He is dangerously ill."

Lord Harry saw a sudden change in his wife's face that roused his guilty suspicions. "Is it anything about me?" he asked.

Iris handed the telegram to him in silence. Having looked at it, he desired to hear what her wishes were.

"The telegram expresses my wishes," she said. "Have you any objection to my leaving you?"

"None whatever," he answered eagerly. "Go, by all means."

If it had still been possible for her to hesitate, that reply would have put an end to all further doubt. She turned away to leave the room. He followed her to the door.

"I hope you don't think there is any want of sympathy on my part," he said. "You are quite right to go to your father. That was all I meant." He was

agitated, honestly agitated, while he spoke. Iris saw it, and felt it gratefully. She was on the point of making a last appeal to his confidence, when he opened the door for her. "Don't let me detain you," he said. His voice faltered; he suddenly turned aside before she could look at him.

Fanny was waiting in the hall, eager to see the telegram. She read it twice and reflected for a moment. "How often do things fit themselves to one's wishes in this convenient way?" she asked herself. "It's lucky," she privately decided--"almost too lucky. Let me pack up your things," she continued, addressing her mistress, "while I have some time to myself. Mr. Oxbye is asleep."

As the day wore on, the noble influences in the nature of Iris, failing fast, yet still at rare intervals struggling to assert themselves, inspired her with the resolution to make a last attempt to give her husband an opportunity of trusting her. He was not in his room, not in any other part of the house, not in the garden. The hours passed--she was left to eat her dinner in solitude. For the second time, he was avoiding her. For the second time, he distrusted the influence of his wife. With a heavy heart she prepared for her departure by the night-mail.

The duties of the new nurse kept her in the cottage. Filled with alarm for the faithful creature whom she was leaving--to what fate, who could say?--Iris kissed her at parting.

Fanny's faint blue eyes filled with tears. She dashed them away, and held her mistress for an instant in her arms. "I know whom you are thinking of," she whispered. "He is not here to bid you good-bye. Let me see what I can find in his room." Iris had already looked round the room, in the vain hope of finding a letter. Fanny rushed up the stairs, determined on a last search--and ran down again with a folded morsel of flimsy foreign notepaper in her hand. "My ugly eyes are quicker than yours," she said. "The air must have come in at the window and blown it off the table." Iris eagerly read the letter:

"I dare not deny that you will be better away from us, but only for a while. Forgive me, dearest; I cannot find the courage to say good-bye." Those few words spoke for him--and no more.

Briefly on her side, but not unkindly, his wife answered him:

"You have spared me a bitter moment. May I hope to find the man whom I have trusted and honoured, when I come back? Good-bye."

When were they to meet again? And how?