

CHAPTER XLVII - THE PATIENT AND MY LORD

THERE now remained but one other person in Lord Harry's household whose presence on the scene was an obstacle to be removed.

This person was the cook. On condition of her immediate departure (excused by alleged motives of economy), she received a month's wages from her master, in advance of the sum due to her, and a written character which did ample justice to her many good qualities. The poor woman left her employment with the heartiest expressions of gratitude. To the end of her days, she declared the Irish lord to be a nobleman by nature. Republican principles, inherited from her excellent parents, disinclined her to recognise him as a nobleman by birth.

But another sweet and simple creature was still left to brighten the sinister gloom in the cottage.

The good Dane sorely tried the patience of Fanny Mere. This countryman of Hamlet, as he liked to call himself, was a living protest against the sentiments of inveterate contempt and hatred, with which his nurse was accustomed to regard the men. When pain spared him at intervals, Mr. Oxbye presented the bright blue eyes and the winning smile which suggested the resemblance to the Irish lord. His beardless face, thin towards the lower extremities, completed the likeness in some degree only. The daring expression of Lord Harry, in certain emergencies, never appeared. Nursing him carefully, on the severest principles of duty as distinguished from inclination, Fanny found herself in the presence of a male human being, who in the painless intervals of his malady, wrote little poems in her praise; asked for a few flowers from the garden, and made prettily arranged nosegays of them devoted to herself; cried, when she told him he was a fool, and kissed her hand five minutes afterwards, when she administered his medicine, and gave him no pleasant sweet thing to take the disagreeable taste out of his mouth. This gentle patient loved Lord Harry, loved Mr. Vimpany, loved the furious Fanny, resist it as she might. On her obstinate refusal to confide to him the story of her life--after he had himself set her the example at great length--he persisted in discovering for himself that "this interesting woman was a victim of sorrows of the heart." In another state of existence, he was offensively certain that she would be living with him. "You are frightfully pale, you will soon die; I shall break a blood-vessel, and follow you; we shall sit side by side on clouds, and sing together everlastingly to accompaniment of celestial harps. Oh, what a treat!" Like a child, he

screamed when he was in pain; and, like a child, he laughed when the pain had gone away. When she was angry enough with him to say, "If I had known what sort of man you were, I would never have undertaken to nurse you," he only answered, "my dear, let us thank God together that you did not know." There was no temper in him to be roused; and, worse still, on buoyant days, when his spirits were lively, there was no persuading him that he might not live long enough to marry his nurse, if he only put the question to her often enough. What was to be done with such a man as this? Fanny believed that she despised her feeble patient. At the same time, the food that nourished him was prepared by her own hands--while the other inhabitants of the cottage were left (in the absence of the cook) to the tough mercies of a neighbouring restaurant. First and foremost among the many good deeds by which the conduct of women claims the gratitude of the other sex, is surely the manner in which they let an unfortunate man master them, without an unworthy suspicion of that circumstance to trouble the charitable serenity of their minds.

Carefully on the look-out for any discoveries which might enlighten her, Fanny noticed with ever-increasing interest the effect which the harmless Dane seemed to produce on my lord and the doctor.

Every morning, after breakfast, Lord Harry presented himself in the bedroom. Every morning, his courteous interest in his guest expressed itself mechanically in the same form of words:

"Mr. Oxbye, how do you find yourself to-day?"

Sometimes the answer would be: "Gracious lord, I am suffering pain." Sometimes it was: "Dear and admirable patron, I feel as if I might get well again." On either occasion, Lord Harry listened without looking at Mr. Oxbye--said he was sorry to hear a bad account or glad to hear a good account, without looking at Mr. Oxbye--made a remark on the weather, and took his leave, without looking at Mr. Oxbye. Nothing could be more plain than that his polite inquiries (once a day) were unwillingly made, and that it was always a relief to him to get out of the room. So strongly was Fanny's curiosity excited by this strange behaviour, that she ventured one day to speak to her master.

"I am afraid, my lord, you are not hopeful of Mr. Oxbye's recovering?"

"Mind your own business," was the savage answer that she received.

Fanny never again took the liberty of speaking to him; but she watched him

more closely than ever. He was perpetually restless. Now he wandered from one room to another, and walked round and round the garden, smoking incessantly. Now he went out riding, or took the railway to Paris and disappeared for the day. On the rare occasions when he was in a state of repose, he always appeared to have taken refuge in his wife's room; Fanny's keyhole-observation discovered him, thinking miserably, seated in his wife's chair. It seemed to be possible that he was fretting after Lady Harry. But what did his conduct to Mr. Oxbye mean? What was the motive which made him persist, without an attempt at concealment, in keeping out of Mr. Vimpany's way? And, treated in this rude manner, how was it that his wicked friend seemed to be always amused, never offended?

As for the doctor's behaviour to his patient, it was, in Fanny's estimation, worthy of a savage.

He appeared to feel no sort of interest in the man who had been sent to him from the hospital at his own request, and whose malady it was supposed to be the height of his ambition to cure. When Mr. Oxbye described his symptoms, Mr. Vimpany hardly even made a pretence at listening. With a frowning face he applied the stethoscope, felt the pulse, looked at the tongue--and drew his own conclusions in sullen silence. If the nurse had a favourable report to make, he brutally turned his back on her. If discouraging results of the medical treatment made their appearance at night, and she felt it a duty to mention them, he sneered as if he doubted whether she was speaking the truth. Mr. Oxbye's inexhaustible patience and amiability made endless allowances for his medical advisor. "It is my misfortune to keep my devoted doctor in a state of perpetual anxiety," he used to say; "and we all know what a trial to the temper is the consequence of unrelieved suspense. I believe in Mr. Vimpany." Fanny was careful not to betray her own opinion by making any reply; her doubts of the doctor had, by this time, become terrifying doubts even to herself. Whenever an opportunity favoured her, she vigilantly watched him. One of his ways of finding amusement, in his leisure hours, was in the use of a photographic apparatus. He took little pictures of the rooms in the cottage, which were followed by views in the garden. Those having come to an end, he completed the mystification of the nurse by producing a portrait of the Dane, while he lay asleep one day after he had been improving in health for some little time past. Fanny asked leave to look at the likeness when it had been "printed" from the negative, in the garden. He first examined it himself--and then deliberately tore it up and let the fragments fly away in the wind. "I am not satisfied with it," was all the explanation he offered. One of the garden chairs happened to be near him; he sat down, and looked like a man in a state of torment under his own angry thoughts.

If the patient's health had altered for the worse, and if the tendency to relapse had proved to be noticeable after medicine had been administered, Fanny's first suspicions might have taken a very serious turn. But the change in Oxbye--sleeping in purer air and sustained by better food than he could obtain at the hospital--pointed more and more visibly to a decided gain of vital strength. His hollow checks were filling out, and colour was beginning to appear again on the pallor of his skin. Strange as the conduct of Lord Harry and Mr. Vimpany might be, there was no possibility, thus far, of connecting it with the position occupied by the Danish guest. Nobody who had seen his face, when he was first brought to the cottage, could have looked at him again, after the lapse of a fortnight, and have failed to discover the signs which promise recovery of health.