

## CHAPTER XLVIII - "THE MISTRESS AND THE MAID"

IN the correspondence secretly carried on between the mistress in London and the maid at Passy, it was Fanny Mere's turn to write next. She decided on delaying her reply until she had once more given careful consideration to the first letter received from Lady Harry, announcing her arrival in England, and a strange discovery that had attended it.

Before leaving Paris, Iris had telegraphed instructions to Mrs. Vimpany to meet her at the terminus in London. Her first inquiries were for her father. The answer given, with an appearance of confusion and even of shame, was that there was no need to feel anxiety on the subject of Mr. Henley's illness. Relieved on hearing this good news, Iris naturally expressed some surprise at her father's rapid recovery. She asked if the doctors had misunderstood his malady when they believed him to be in danger. To this question Mrs. Vimpany had replied by making an unexpected confession.

She owned that Mr. Henley's illness had been at no time of any serious importance. A paragraph in a newspaper had informed her that he was suffering from nothing worse than an attack of gout. It was a wicked act to have exaggerated this report, and to have alarmed Lady Harry on the subject of her father's health. Mrs. Vimpany had but one excuse to offer. Fanny's letter had filled her with such unendurable doubts and forebodings that she had taken the one way of inducing Lady Harry to secure her own safety by at once leaving Passy--the way by a false alarm. Deceit, so sincerely repented, so resolutely resisted, had tried its power of temptation again, and had prevailed.

"When I thought of you at the mercy of my vile husband," Mrs. Vimpany said, "with your husband but too surely gained as an accomplice, my good resolutions failed me. Is it only in books that a true repentance never stumbles again? Or am I the one fallible mortal creature in the world? I am ashamed of myself. But, oh, Lady Harry, I was so frightened for you! Try to forgive me; I am so fond of you, and so glad to see you here in safety. Don't go back! For God's sake, don't go back!"

Iris had no intention of returning, while the doctor and his patient were still at Passy; and she found in Mrs. Vimpany's compassion good reason to forgive an offence committed through devotion to herself, and atoned for by sincere regret.

Fanny looked carefully over the next page of the letter, which described Lady Harry's first interview with Mr. Mountjoy since his illness. The expressions of happiness on renewing her relations with her old and dear friend confirmed the maid in her first impression that there was no fear of a premature return to Passy, with the wish to see Lord Harry again as the motive. She looked over the later letters next--and still the good influence of Mr. Mountjoy seemed to be in time ascendant. There was anxiety felt for Fanny's safety, and curiosity expressed to hear what discoveries she might have made; but the only allusions to my lord contained ordinary inquiries relating to the state of his health, and, on one occasion, there was a wish expressed to know whether he was still on friendly terms with Mr. Vimpany. There seemed to be no fear of tempting her mistress to undervalue the danger of returning to the cottage, if she mentioned the cheering improvement now visible in Mr. Oxbye. And yet Fanny still hesitated to trust her first impressions, even after they had been confirmed. Her own sad experience reminded her of the fatal influence which an unscrupulous man can exercise over the woman who loves him. It was always possible that Lady Harry might not choose to confide the state of her feelings towards her husband to a person who, after all, only occupied the position of her maid. The absence, in her letters, of any expressions of affectionate regret was no proof that she was not thinking of my lord. So far as he was personally concerned, the Dane's prospects of recovery would appear to justify the action of the doctor and his accomplice. Distrusting them both as resolutely as ever, and determined to keep Lady Harry as long as possible at the safe distance of London, Fanny Mere, in writing her reply, preserved a discreet silence on the subject of Mr. Oxbye's health.

[At this point Wilkie Collins' health prevented his finishing the novel.]