

CHAPTER XLIX - THE NURSE IS SENT AWAY

"YOU have repented and changed your mind, Vimpany?" said Lord Harry.

"I repented?" the doctor repeated, with a laugh. "You think me capable of that, do you?"

"The man is growing stronger and better every day. You are going to make him recover, after all. I was afraid"--he corrected himself--"I thought"--the word was the truer--"that you were going to poison him."

"You thought I was going--we were going, my lord--to commit a stupid and a useless crime. And, with our clever nurse present, all the time watching with the suspicions of a cat, and noting every change in the symptoms? No--I confess his case has puzzled me because I did not anticipate this favourable change. Well--it is all for the best. Fanny sees him grow stronger every day--whatever happens she can testify to the care with which the man has been treated. So far she thought she would have us in her power, and we have her."

"You are mighty clever, Vimpany; but sometimes you are too clever for me, and, perhaps, too clever for yourself."

"Let me make myself clearer"--conscious of the nurse's suspicions, he leaned forward and whispered: "Fanny must go. Now is the time. The man is recovering. The man must go: the next patient will be your lordship himself. Now do you understand?"

"Partly."

"Enough. If I am to act it is sufficient for you to understand step by step. Our suspicious nurse is to go. That is the next step. Leave me to act."

Lord Harry walked away. He left the thing to the doctor. It hardly seemed to concern him. A dying man; a conspiracy; a fraud:--yet the guilty knowledge of all this gave him small uneasiness. He carried with him his wife's last note: "May I hope to find on my return the man whom I have trusted and honoured?" His conscience, callous as regards the doctor's scheme, filled him with remorse whenever--which was fifty times a day--he took this little rag of a note from his pocket-book and read it again. Yes: she would always find the man, on her return--the man whom she had trusted and honoured--

-the latter clause he passed over--it would be, of course the same man: whether she would still be able to trust and honour him--that question he did not put to himself. After all, the doctor was acting--not he, himself.

And he remembered Hugh Mountjoy. Iris would be with him--the man whose affection was only brought out in the stronger light by his respect, his devotion, and his delicacy. She would be in his society: she would understand the true meaning of this respect and delicacy: she would appreciate the depth of his devotion: she would contrast Hugh, the man she might have married, with himself, the man she did marry.

And the house was wretched without her; and he hated the sight of the doctor--desperate and reckless.

He resolved to write to Iris: he sat down and poured out his heart, but not his conscience, to her.

"As for our separation," he said, "I, and only I, am to blame. It is my own abominable conduct that has caused it. Give me your pardon, dearest Iris. If I have made it impossible for you to live with me, it is also impossible for me to live without you. So am I punished. The house is dull and lonely; the hours crawl, I know not how to kill the time; my life is a misery and a burden because you are not with me. Yet I have no right to complain; I ought to rejoice in thinking that you are happy in being relieved of my presence. My dear, I do not ask you to come at present"--he remembered, indeed, that her arrival at this juncture might be seriously awkward--"I cannot ask you to come back yet, but let me have a little hope--let me feel that in the sweetness of your nature you will believe in my repentance, and let me look forward to a speedy reunion in the future."

When he had written this letter, which he would have done better to keep in his own hands for awhile, he directed it in a feigned hand to Lady Harry Norland, care of Hugh Mountjoy, at the latter's London hotel. Mountjoy would not know Iris's correspondent, and would certainly forward the letter. He calculated--with the knowledge of her affectionate and impulsive nature--that Iris would meet him half-way, and would return whenever he should be able to call her back. He did not calculate, as will be seen, on the step which she actually took.

The letter despatched, he came back to the cottage happier--he would get his wife again. He looked in at the sick-room. The patient was sitting up, chatting pleasantly; it was the best day he had known; the doctor was sitting in a chair placed beside the bed, and the nurse stood quiet, self-

composed, but none the less watchful and suspicious.

"You are going on so well, my man," Doctor Vimpany was saying, "That we shall have you out and about again in a day or two. Not quite yet, though--not quite yet," he pulled out his stethoscope and made an examination with an immense show of professional interest. "My treatment has succeeded, you see"--he made a note or two in his pocket-book--"has succeeded," he repeated. "They will have to acknowledge that."

"Gracious sir, I am grateful. I have given a great deal too much trouble."

"A medical case can never give too much trouble--that is impossible. Remember, Oxbye, it is Science which watches at your bedside. You are not Oxbye; you are a case; it is not a man, it is a piece of machinery that is out of order. Science watches: she sees you through and through. Though you are made of solid flesh and bones, and clothed, to Science you are transparent. Her business is not only to read your symptoms, but to set the machinery right again."

The Dane, overwhelmed, could only renew his thanks.

"Can he stand, do you think, nurse?" the doctor went on. "Let us try--not to walk about much to-day, but to get out of bed, if only to prove to himself that he is so much better; to make him understand that he is really nearly well. Come, nurse, let us give him a hand."

In the most paternal manner possible the doctor assisted his patient, weak, after so long a confinement to his bed, to get out of bed, and supported him while he walked to the open window, and looked out into the garden.

"There," he said, "that is enough. Not too much at first. To-morrow he will have to get up by himself. Well, Fanny, you agree at last, I suppose, that I have brought this poor man round? At last, eh?"

His look and his words showed what he meant. "You thought that some devilry was intended." That was what the look meant. "You proposed to nurse this man in order to watch for and to discover this devilry. Very well, what have you got to say?"

All that Fanny had to say was, submissively, that the man was clearly much better; and, she added, he had been steadily improving ever since he came to the cottage.

That is what she said; but she said it without the light of confidence in her

eyes--she was still doubtful and suspicious. Whatever power the doctor had of seeing the condition of lungs and hidden machinery, he certainly had the power of reading this woman's thoughts. He saw, as clearly as if upon a printed page, the bewilderment of her mind. She knew that something was intended---something not for her to know. That the man had been brought to the cottage to be made the subject of a scientific experiment she did not believe. She had looked to see him die, but he did not die. He was mending fast; in a little while he would be as well as ever he had been in his life. What had the doctor done it for? Was it really possible that nothing was ever intended beyond a scientific experiment, which had succeeded? In the case of any other man, the woman's doubts would have been entirely removed; in the case of Dr. Vimpany these doubts remained. There are some men of whom nothing good can be believed, whether of motive or of action; for if their acts seem good, their motive must be bad. Many women know, or fancy they know, such a man--one who seems to them wholly and hopelessly bad. Besides, what was the meaning of the secret conversation and the widespread colloquies of the doctor and my lord? And why, at first, was the doctor so careless about his patient?

"The time has come at last," said the doctor that evening, when the two men were alone, "for this woman to go. The man is getting well rapidly, he no longer wants a nurse; there is no reason for keeping her. If she has suspicions there is no longer the least foundation for them; she has assisted at the healing of a man desperately sick by a skilful physician. What more? Nothing--positively nothing."

"Can she tell my wife so much and no more?" asked Lord Harry. "Will there be no more?"

"She can tell her ladyship no more, because she will have no more to tell," the doctor replied quietly. "She would like to learn more; she is horribly disappointed that there is no more to tell; but she shall hear no more. She hates me: but she hates your lordship more."

"Why?"

"Because her mistress loves you still. Such a woman as this would like to absorb the whole affection of her mistress in herself. You laugh. She is a servant, and a common person. How can such a person conceive an affection so strong as to become a passion for one so superior? But it is true. It is perfectly well known, and there have been many recorded instances of such a woman, say a servant, greatly inferior in station, conceiving a desperate affection for her mistress, accompanied by the fiercest jealousy.

Fanny Mere is jealous--and of you. She hates you; she wants your wife to hate you. She would like nothing better than to go back to her mistress with the proofs in her hand of such acts on your part--such acts, I say," he chose his next words carefully, "as would keep her from you for ever."

"She's a devil, I dare say," said Lord Harry, carelessly. "What do I care? What does it matter to me whether a lady's maid, more or less, hates me or loves me?"

"There spoke the aristocrat. My lord, remember that a lady's maid is a woman. You have been brought up to believe, perhaps, that people in service are not men and women. That is a mistake--a great mistake. Fanny Mere is a woman--that is to say, an inferior form of man; and there is no man in the world so low or so base as not to be able to do mischief. The power of mischief is given to every one of us. It is the true, the only Equality of Man--we can all destroy. What? a shot in the dark; the striking of a lucifer match; the false accusation; the false witness; the defamation of character;--upon my word, it is far more dangerous to be hated by a woman than by a man. And this excellent and faithful Fanny, devoted to her mistress, hates you, my lord, even more"--he paused and laughed--"even more than the charming Mrs. Vimpany hates her husband. Never mind. To-morrow we see the last of Fanny Mere. She goes; she leaves her patient rapidly recovering. That is the fact that she carries away--not the fact she hoped and expected to carry away. She goes to-morrow and she will never come back again."

The next morning the doctor paid a visit to his patient rather earlier than usual. He found the man going on admirably: fresh in colour, lively and cheerful, chatting pleasantly with his nurse.

"So," said Dr. Vimpany, after the usual examination and questions, "this is better than I expected. You are now able to get up. You can do so by-and-by, after breakfast; you can dress yourself, you want no more help. Nurse," he turned to Fanny, "I think that we have done with you. I am satisfied with the careful watch you have kept over my patient. If ever you think of becoming a nurse by profession, rely on my recommendation. The experiment," he added, thoughtfully, "has fully succeeded. I cannot deny that it has been owing partly to the intelligence and patience with which you have carried out my instructions. But I think that your services may now be relinquished."

"When am I to go, sir?" she asked, impassively.

"In any other case I should have said, 'Stay a little longer, if you please. Use

your own convenience.' In your case I must say, 'Go to your mistress.' Her ladyship was reluctant to leave you behind. She will be glad to have you back again. How long will you take to get ready?"

"I could be ready in ten minutes, if it were necessary."

"That is not necessary. You can take the night mail via Dieppe and Newhaven. It leaves Paris at 9.50. Give yourself an hour to get from station to station. Any time, therefore, this evening before seven o'clock will do perfectly well. You will ask his lordship for any letters or messages he may have."

"Yes, sir," Fanny replied. "With your permission, sir, I will go at once, so as to get a whole day in Paris."

"As you please, as you please," said the doctor, wondering why she wanted a day in Paris; but it could have nothing to do with his sick man. He left the room, promising to see the Dane again in an hour or two, and took up a position at the garden gate through which the nurse must pass. In about half an hour she walked down the path carrying her box. The doctor opened the gate for her.

"Good-bye, Fanny," he said. "Again, many thanks for your care and your watchfulness--especially the latter. I am very glad," he said, with what he meant for the sweetest smile, but it looked like a grin, "that it has been rewarded in such a way as you hardly perhaps expected."

"Thank you, sir," said the girl. "The man is nearly well now, and can do without me very well indeed."

"The box is too heavy for you, Fanny. Nay, I insist upon it: I shall carry it to the station for you."

It was not far to the station, and the box was not too heavy, but Fanny yielded it. "He wants to see me safe out of the station," she thought.

"I will see her safe out of the place," he thought.

Ten minutes later the doors of the salle d'attente were thrown open, the train rolled in, and Fanny was carried away.

The doctor returned thoughtfully to the house. The time was come for the execution of his project. Everybody was out of the way.

"She is gone," he said, when Lord Harry returned for breakfast at eleven. "I saw her safely out of the station."

"Gone!" his confederate echoed: "and I am alone in the house with you and--and----"

"The sick man--henceforth, yourself, my lord, yourself."