

CHAPTER L - IN THE ALCOVE

THE doctor was wrong. Fanny Mere did return, though he did not discover the fact.

She went away in a state of mind which is dangerous when it possesses a woman of determination. The feminine mind loves to understand motives and intentions; it hates to be puzzled. Fanny was puzzled. Fanny could not understand what had been intended and what was now meant. For, first, a man, apparently dying, had been brought into the house--why? Then the man began slowly to recover, and the doctor, whose attentions had always been of the most slender character, grew more morose every day. Then he suddenly, on the very day when he sent her away, became cheerful, congratulated the patient on his prospect of recovery, and assisted in getting him out of bed for a change. The cook having been sent away, there was now no one in the house but the Dane, the doctor, and Lord Harry.

Man hunts wild creatures; woman hunts man. Fanny was impelled by the hunting instinct. She was sent out of the house to prevent her hunting; she began to consider next, how, without discovery, she could return and carry on the hunt.

Everything conspired to drive her back: the mystery of the thing; the desire to baffle, or at least to discover, a dark design; the wish to be of service to her mistress; and the hope of finding out something which would keep Iris from going back to her husband. Fanny was unable to comprehend the depth of her mistress's affection for Lord Harry; but that she was foolishly, weakly in love with him, and that she would certainly return to him unless plain proofs of real villainy were prepared--so much Fanny understood very well. When the omnibus set her down, she found a quiet hotel near the terminus for Dieppe. She spent the day walking about--to see the shops and streets, she would have explained; to consider the situation, she should have explained. She bought a new dress, a new hat, and a thick veil, so as to be disguised at a distance. As for escaping the doctor's acuteness by any disguise should he meet her face to face, that was impossible. But her mind was made up--she would run any risk, meet any danger, in order to discover the meaning of all this.

Next morning she returned by an omnibus service which would allow her to reach the cottage at about a quarter-past eleven. She chose this time for two reasons: first, because breakfast was sent in from the restaurant at eleven,

and the two gentlemen would certainly be in the salle 'a manger over that meal; and, next, because the doctor always visited his patient after breakfast. She could, therefore, hope to get in unseen, which was the first thing.

The spare bedroom--that assigned to the patient--was on the ground-floor next to the dining-room; it communicated with the garden by French windows, and by a small flight of steps.

Fanny walked cautiously along the road past the garden-gate; a rapid glance assured her that no one was there; she hastily opened the gate and slipped in. She knew that the windows of the sick-room were closed on the inner side, and the blinds were still down. The patient, therefore, had not yet been disturbed or visited. The windows of the dining-room were on the other side of the house. The woman therefore slipped round to the back, where she found, as she expected, the door wide open. In the hall she heard the voices of the doctor and Lord Harry and the clicking of knives and forks. They were at breakfast.

One thing more--What should she say to Oxbye? What excuse should she make for coming back? How should she persuade him to keep silence about her presence? His passion suggested a plan and a reason. She had come back, she would tell him, for love of him, to watch over him, unseen by the doctor, to go away with him when he was strong enough to travel. He was a simple and a candid soul, and he would fall into such a little innocent conspiracy. Meantime, it would be quite easy for her to remain in the house perfectly undisturbed and unknown to either of the gentlemen.

She opened the door and looked in.

So far, no reason would be wanted. The patient was sleeping peacefully. But not in the bed. He was lying, partly dressed and covered with a blanket, on the sofa. With the restlessness of convalescence he had changed his couch in the morning after a wakeful night, and was now sleeping far into the morning.

The bed, as is common in French houses, stood in an alcove. A heavy curtain hung over a rod, also in the French manner. Part of this curtain lay over the head of the bed.

The woman perceived the possibility of using the curtain as a means of concealment. There was a space of a foot between the bed and the wall. She placed herself, therefore, behind the bed, in this space, at the head, where

the curtain entirely concealed her. Nothing was more unlikely than that the doctor should look behind the bed in that corner. Then with her scissors she pierced a hole in the curtain large enough for her to see perfectly without the least danger of being seen, and she waited to see what would happen.

She waited for half an hour, during which the sleeping man slept on without movement, and the voices of the two men in the salle 'a manger rose and fell in conversation. Presently there was silence, broken only by an occasional remark. "They have lit their cigars," Fanny murmured; "they will take their coffee, and in a few minutes they will be here."

When they came in a few minutes later, they had their cigars, and Lord Harry's face was slightly flushed, perhaps with the wine he had taken at breakfast--perhaps with the glass of brandy after his coffee.

The doctor threw himself into a chair and crossed his legs, looking thoughtfully at his patient. Lord Harry stood over him.

"Every day," he said, "the man gets better."

"He has got better every day, so far," said the doctor.

"Every day his face gets fatter, and he grows less like me."

"It is true," said the doctor.

"Then--what the devil are we to do?"

"Wait a little longer," said the doctor.

The woman in her hiding-place hardly dared to breathe.

"What?" asked Lord Harry. "You mean that the man, after all--"

"Wait a little longer," the doctor repeated quietly.

"Tell me"--Lord Harry bent over the sick man eagerly--"you think----"

"Look here," the doctor said. "Which of us two has had a medical education--you, or I?"

"You, of course."

"Yes; I, of course. Then I tell you, as a medical man, that appearances are sometimes deceptive. This man, for instance--he looks better; he thinks he is recovering; he feels stronger. You observe that he is fatter in the face. His nurse, Fanny Mere, went away with the knowledge that he was much better, and the conviction that he was about to leave the house as much recovered as such a patient with such a disorder can expect."

"Well?"

"Well, my lord, allow me to confide in you. Medical men mostly keep their knowledge in such matters to themselves. We know and recognise symptoms which to you are invisible. By these symptoms--by those symptoms," he repeated slowly and looking hard at the other man, "I know that this man--no longer Oxbye, my patient, but--another--is in a highly dangerous condition. I have noted the symptoms in my book"--he tapped his pocket--"for future use."

"And when--when----" Lord Harry was frightfully pale. His lips moved, but he could not finish the sentence. The Thing he had agreed to was terribly near, and it looked uglier than he had expected.

"Oh! when?" the doctor replied carelessly. "Perhaps to-day--perhaps in a week. Here, you see, Science is sometimes baffled. I cannot say."

Lord Harry breathed deeply. "If the man is in so serious a condition," he said, "is it safe or prudent for us to be alone in the house without a servant and without a nurse?"

"I was not born yesterday, my lord, I assure you," said the doctor in his jocular way. "They have found me a nurse. She will come to-day. My patient's life is, humanly speaking"--Lord Harry shuddered--"perfectly safe until her arrival."

"Well--but she is a stranger. She must know whom she is nursing."

"Certainly. She will be told--I have already told her--that she is going to nurse Lord Harry Norland, a young Irish gentleman. She is a stranger. That is the most valuable quality she possesses. She is a complete stranger. As for you, what are you? Anything you please. An English gentleman staying with me under the melancholy circumstances of his lordship's illness. What more natural? The English doctor is staying with his patient, and the English friend is staying with the doctor. When the insurance officer makes inquiries, as he is very likely to do, the nurse will be invaluable for the

evidence she will give."

He rose, pulled up the blinds noiselessly, and opened the windows. Neither the fresh air nor the light awoke the sleeping man.

Vimpany looked at his watch. "Time for the medicine," he said. "Wake him up while I get it ready."

"Would you not--at least---suffer him to have his sleep out?" asked Lord Harry, again turning pale.

"Wake him up. Shake him by the shoulder. Do as I tell you," said the doctor, roughly. "He will go to sleep again. It is one of the finer qualities of my medicine that it sends people to sleep. It is a most soothing medicine. It causes a deep--a profound sleep. Wake him up, I say." he went to the cupboard in which the medicines were kept. Lord Harry with some difficulty roused the sick man, who awoke dull and heavy, asking why he was disturbed.

"Time for your medicine, my good fellow," said the doctor. "Take it, and you shall not be disturbed again--I promise you that."

The door of the cupboard prevented the spy from seeing what the doctor was doing; but he took longer than usual in filling the glass. Lord Harry seemed to observe this, for he left the Dane and looked over the doctor's shoulder. "What are you doing?" he asked in a whisper.

"Better not inquire, my lord," said the doctor. "What do you know about the mysteries of medicine?"

"Why must I not inquire?"

Vimpany turned, closing the cupboard behind him. In his hand was a glass full of the stuff he was about to administer.

"If you look in the glass," he said, "you will understand why."

Lord Harry obeyed. He saw a face ghastly in pallor: he shrank back and fell into a chair, saying no more.

"Now, my good friend," said the doctor, "drink this and you'll be better--ever so much better, ever so much better. Why--that is brave----" he looked at him strangely, "How do you like the medicine?"

Oxbye shook his head as a man who has taken something nauseous. "I don't like it at all," he said. "It doesn't taste like the other physic."

"No I have been changing it--improving it."

The Dane shook his head again. "There's a pain in my throat," he said; "it stings--it burns!"

"Patience--patience. It will pass away directly, and you will lie down again and fall asleep comfortably."

Oxbye sank back upon the sofa. His eyes closed. Then he opened them again, looking about him strangely, as one who is suffering some new experience. Again he shook his head, again he closed his eyes, and he opened them no more. He was asleep.

The doctor stood at his head watching gravely. Lord Harry, in his chair, leaned forward, also watching, but with white face and trembling hands.

As they watched, the man's head rolled a little to the side, turning his face more towards the room. Then a curious and terrifying thing happened. His mouth began slowly to fall open.

"Is he--is he--is he fainting?" Lord Harry whispered.

"No; he is asleep. Did you never see a man sleep with his mouth wide open?"

They were silent for a space.

The doctor broke the silence.

"There's a good light this morning," he said carelessly. "I think I will try a photograph. Stop! Let me tie up his mouth with a handkerchief--so." The patient was not disturbed by the operation, though the doctor tied up the handkerchief with vigour enough to awaken a sound sleeper. "Now--we'll see if he looks like a post-mortem portrait."

He went into the next room, and returned with his camera. In a few minutes he had taken the picture, and was holding the glass negative against the dark sleeve of his coat, so as to make it visible. "We shall see how it looks," he said, "when it is printed. At present I don't think it is good enough as an imitation of you to be sent to the insurance offices. Nobody, I am afraid, who

knew you, would ever take this for a post-mortem portrait of Lord Harry. Well, we shall see. Perhaps by-and-by--to-morrow--we may be able to take a better photograph. Eh?" Lord Harry followed his movements, watching him closely, but said nothing. His face remained pale and his fingers still trembled. There was now no doubt at all in his mind, not only as to Vimpany's intentions, but as to the crime itself. He dared not speak or move.

A ring at the door pealed through the house. Lord Harry started in his chair with a cry of terror.

"That," said the doctor, quietly, "is the nurse--the new nurse---the stranger." He took off the handkerchief from Oxbye's face, looked about the room as if careful that everything should be in its right place, and went out to admit the woman. Lord Harry sprang to his feet and passed his hand over the sick man's face.

"Is it done?" he whispered. "Can the man be poisoned? Is he already dead?--already? Before my eyes?"

He laid his finger on the sick man's pulse. But the doctor's step and voice stopped him. Then the nurse came in, following Vimpany. She was an elderly, quiet-looking French woman.

Lord Harry remained standing at the side of the sofa, hoping to see the man revive.

"Now," said Vimpany, cheerfully, "here is your patient, nurse. He is asleep now. Let him have his sleep out--he has taken his medicine and will want nothing more yet awhile. If you want anything let me know. We shall be in the next room or in the garden--somewhere about the house. Come, my friend." He drew away Lord Harry gently by the arm, and they left the room.

Behind the curtain Fanny Mere began to wonder how she was to get off unseen.

The nurse, left alone, looked at her patient, who lay with his head turned partly round, his eyes closed, his mouth open. "A strange sleep," she murmured; "but the doctor knows, I suppose. He is to have his sleep out."

"A strange sleep, indeed!" thought the watcher. She was tempted at this moment to disclose herself and to reveal what she had seen; but the thought of Lord Harry's complicity stopped her. With what face could she return to her mistress and tell her that she herself was the means of her husband

being charged with murder? She stayed herself, therefore, and waited.

Chance helped her, at last, to escape.

The nurse took off her bonnet and shawl and began to look about the room. She stepped to the bed and examined the sheets and pillow-case as a good French housewife should. Would she throw back the curtain? If so--what would happen next? Then it would become necessary to take the new nurse into confidence, otherwise---Fanny did not put the remainder of this sentence into words. It remained a terror: it meant that if Vimpany found out where she had been and what she had seen and heard, there would be two, instead of one, cast into a deep slumber.

The nurse turned from the bed, however, attracted by the half-open door of the cupboard. Here were the medicine bottles. She took them out one by one, looked at them with professional curiosity, pulled out the corks, smelt the contents, replaced the bottles. Then she went to the window, which stood open; she stepped out upon the stone steps which led into the garden, looking about her, to breathe the soft air of noon among the flowers.

She came back, and it again seemed as if she would examine the bed, but her attention was attracted by a small book-case. She began to pull down the books one after the other and to turn them over, as a half-educated person does, in the hope of finding something amusing. She found a book with pictures. Then she sat down in the armchair beside the sofa and began to turn over the leaves slowly. How long was this going to last?

It lasted about half an hour. The nurse laid down the volume with a yawn, stretched herself, yawned again, crossed her hands, and closed her eyes. She was going to sleep. If she would only fall so fast asleep that the woman behind the curtain could creep away!

But sometimes at the sleepest moment sleep is driven away by an accident. The accident in this case was that the nurse before finally dropping off remembered that she was nursing a sick man, and sat up to look at him before she allowed herself to drop off.

Stung with sudden inspiration she sprang to her feet and bent over the man. "Does he breathe?" she asked. She bent lower. "His pulse! does it beat?" she caught his wrist.

"Doctor!" she shrieked, running into the garden. "Doctor! Come--come quick! He is dead!"

Fanny Mere stepped from her hiding-place and ran out of the back door, and by the garden gate into the road.

She had escaped. She had seen the crime committed. She knew now at least what was intended and why she was sent away. The motive for the crime she could not guess.