

CHAPTER LI - WHAT NEXT?

WHAT should she do with the terrible secret?

She ought to inform the police. But there were two objections. First, the nurse may have been mistaken in supposing her patient to be dead. She herself had no choice but to escape as she did. Next, the dreadful thought occurred to her that she herself until the previous day had been the man's nurse--his only nurse, day and night. What was to prevent the doctor from fixing the guilt of poisoning upon herself? Nay; it would be his most obvious line of action. The man was left alone all the morning; the day before he had shown every sign of returning strength; she would have to confess that she was in hiding. How long had she been there? Why was she in hiding? Was it not after she had poisoned the man and when she heard the doctor's footstep? Naturally ignorant of poisons and their symptoms, it seemed to her as if these facts so put together would be conclusive against her. Therefore, she determined to keep quiet in Paris that day and to cross over by the night boat from Dieppe in the evening. She would at first disclose everything to Mrs. Vimpany and to Mountjoy. As to what she would tell her mistress she would be guided by the advice of the others.

She got to London in safety and drove straight to Mr. Mountjoy's hotel, proposing first to communicate the whole business to him. But she found in his sitting-room Mrs. Vimpany herself.

"We must not awake him," she said, "whatever news you bring. His perfect recovery depends entirely on rest and quiet. There"--she pointed to the chimneypiece--"is a letter in my lady's handwriting. I am afraid I know only too well what it tells him."

"What does it tell?"

"This very morning," Mrs. Vimpany went on, "I called at her lodging. She has gone away."

"Gone away? My lady gone away? Where is she gone?"

"Where do you think she is most likely to have gone?"

"Not?--oh!--not to her husband? Not to him!--oh! this is more terrible--far more terrible--than you can imagine."

"You will tell me why it is now so much more terrible. Meantime, I find that the cabman was told to drive to Victoria. That is all I know. I have no doubt, however, but that she has gone back to her husband. She has been in a disturbed, despondent condition ever since she arrived in London. Mr. Mountjoy has been as kind as usual: but he has not been able to chase away her sadness. Whether she was fretting after her husband, or whether--but this I hardly think--she was comparing the man she had lost with the man she had taken--but I do not know. All I do know is that she has been uneasy ever since she came from France, and what I believe is that she has been reproaching herself with leaving her husband without good cause."

"Good cause!" echoed Fanny. "Oh! good gracious! If she only knew, there's cause enough to leave a hundred husbands."

"Nothing seemed to rouse her," Mrs. Vimpany continued, without regarding the interruption. "I went with her to the farm to see her former maid, Rhoda. The girl's health is re-established; she is engaged to marry the farmer's brother. Lady Harry was kind, and said the most pleasant things; she even pulled off one of her prettiest rings and gave it to the girl. But I could see that it was an effort for her to appear interested--her thoughts were with her husband all the time. I was sure it would end in this way, and I am not in the least surprised. But what will Mr. Mountjoy say when he opens the letter?"

"Back to her husband!" Fanny repeated. "Oh! what shall we do?"

"Tell me what you mean. What has happened?"

"I must tell you. I thought I would tell Mr. Mountjoy first: but I must tell you, although--" She stopped.

"Although it concerns my husband. Never mind that consideration--go on." Fanny told the story from the beginning.

When she had finished, Mrs. Vimpany looked towards the bedroom door. "Thank God!" she said, "that you told this story to me instead of to Mr. Mountjoy. At all events, it gives me time to warn you not to tell him what you have told me. We can do nothing. Meantime, there is one thing you must do--go away. Do not let Mr. Mountjoy find you here. He must not learn your story. If he hears what has happened and reads her letter, nothing will keep him from following her to Passy. He will see that there is every prospect of her being entangled in this vile conspiracy, and he will run any risk in the

useless attempt to save her. He is too weak to bear the journey--far too weak for the violent emotions that will follow; and, oh! how much too weak to cope with my husband--as strong and as crafty as he is unprincipled!

"Then, what, in Heaven's name, are we to do?"

"Anything--anything--rather than suffer Mr. Mountjoy, in his weak state, to interfere between man and wife."

"Yes--yes--but such a man! Mrs. Vimpany, he was present when the Dane was poisoned. He knew that the man was poisoned. He sat in the chair, his face white, and he said nothing. Oh! It was as much as I could do not to rush out and dash the glass from his hands. Lord Harry said nothing."

"My dear, do you not understand what you have got to do?"

Fanny made no reply.

"Consider--my husband---Lord Harry--neither of them knows that you were present. You can return with the greatest safety; and then whatever happens, you will be at hand to protect my lady. Consider, again, as her maid, you can be with her always--in her own room; at night; everywhere and at all times; while Mr. Mountjoy could only be with her now and then, and at the price of not quarrelling with her husband."

"Yes," said Fanny.

"And you are strong, and Mr. Mountjoy is weak and ill."

"You think that I should go back to Passy?"

"At once, without the delay of an hour. Lady Harry started last night. Do you start this evening. She will thus have you with her twenty-four hours after her arrival."

Fanny rose.

"I will go," she said. "It terrifies me even to think of going back to that awful cottage with that dreadful man. Yet I will go. Mrs. Vimpany, I know that it will be of no use. Whatever is going to happen now will happen without any power of mine to advance or to prevent. I am certain that my journey will prove useless. But I will go. Yes, I will go this evening."

Then, with a final promise to write as soon as possible--as soon as there should be anything to communicate--Fanny went away.

Mrs. Vimpany, alone, listened. From the bedroom came no sound at all. Mr. Mountjoy slept still. When he should be strong enough it would be time to let him know what had been done. But she sat thinking--thinking--even when one has the worst husband in the world, and very well knows his character, it is disagreeable to hear such a story as Fanny had told that wife this morning.