

CHAPTER LIII - THE WIFE'S RETURN

OF course Mrs. Vimpany was quite right. Iris had gone back to her husband. She arrived, in fact, at the cottage in the evening just before dark--in the falling day, when some people are more than commonly sensitive to sights and sounds, and when the eyes are more apt than at other times to be deceived by strange appearances. Iris walked into the garden, finding no one there. She opened the door with her own key and let herself in. The house struck her as strangely empty and silent. She opened the dining-room door: no one was there. Like all French dining-rooms, it was used for no other purpose than for eating, and furnished with little more than the barest necessaries. She closed the door and opened that of the salon: that also was empty. She called her husband: there was no answer. She called the name of the cook: there was no answer. It was fortunate that she did not open the door of the spare room, for there lay the body of the dead man. She went upstairs to her husband's room. That too was empty. But there was something lying on the table--a photograph. She took it up. Her face became white suddenly and swiftly. She shrieked aloud, then drooped the picture and fell fainting to the ground. For the photograph was nothing less than that of her husband, dead in his white graveclothes, his hands composed, his eyes closed, his cheek waxen.

The cry fell upon the ears of Lord Harry, who was in the garden below. He rushed into the house and lifted his wife upon the bed. The photograph showed him plainly what had happened.

She came to her senses again, but seeing her husband alive before her, and remembering what she had seen, she shrieked again, and fell into another swoon.

"What is to be done now?" asked the husband. "What shall I tell her? How shall I make her understand? What can I do for her?"

As for help, there was none: the nurse was gone on some errand; the doctor was arranging for the funeral of Oxbye under the name of Lord Harry Norland; the cottage was empty.

Such a fainting fit does not last for ever. Iris came round, and sat up, looking wildly around.

"What is it?" she cried. "What does it mean?"

"It means, my love, that you have returned to your husband." He laid an arm round her, and kissed her again and again.

"You are my Harry!--living!--my own Harry?"

"Your own Harry, my darling. What else should I be?"

"Tell me then, what does it mean--that picture--that horrid photograph?"

"That means nothing--nothing--a freak--a joke of the doctor's. What could it mean?" He took it up. "Why, my dear, I am living--living and well. What should this mean but a joke?"

He laid it on the table again, face downwards. But her eyes showed that she was not satisfied. Men do not make jokes on death; it is a sorry jest indeed to dress up a man in grave-clothes, and make a photograph of him as of one dead.

"But you--you, my Iris; you are here--tell me how and why--and when, and everything? Never mind that stupid picture: tell me."

"I got your letter, Harry," she replied.

"My letter?" he repeated. "Oh! my dear, you got my letter, and you saw that your husband loved you still."

"I could not keep away from you, Harry, whatever had happened. I stayed as long as I could. I thought about you day and night. And at last I--I--I came back. Are you angry with me, Harry?"

"Angry? Good God! my dearest, angry?" He kissed her passionately--not the less passionately that she had returned at a time so terrible. What was he to say to her? How was he to tell her? While he showered kisses on her he was asking himself these questions. When she found out--when he should confess to her the whole truth--she would leave him again. Yet he did not understand the nature of the woman who loves. He held her in his arms; his kisses pleaded for him; they mastered her--she was ready to believe, to accept, to surrender even her truth and honesty; and she was ready, though she knew it not, to become the accomplice of a crime. Rather than leave her husband again, she would do everything.

Yet, Lord Harry felt there was one reservation: he might confess everything,

except the murder of the Dane. No word of confession had passed the doctor's lips, yet he knew too well that the man had been murdered; and, so far as the man had been chosen for his resemblance to himself, that was perfectly useless, because the resemblance, though striking at the first, had been gradually disappearing as the man Oxbye grew better; and was now, as we have seen, wholly lost after death.

"I have a great deal--a great deal--to tell you, dear," said the husband, holding both her hands tenderly. "You will have to be very patient with me. You must make up your mind to be shocked at first, though I shall be able to convince you that there was really nothing else to be done--nothing else at all."

"Oh! go on, Harry. Tell me all. Hide nothing."

"I will tell you all," he replied.

"First, where is that poor man whom the doctor brought here and Fanny nursed? And where is Fanny?"

"The poor man," he replied carelessly, "made so rapid a recovery that he has got on his legs and gone away--I believe, to report himself to the hospital whence he came. It is a great triumph for the doctor, whose new treatment is now proved to be successful. He will make a grand flourish of trumpets about it. I dare say, if all he claims for it is true, he has taken a great step in the treatment of lung diseases."

Iris had no disease of the lungs, and consequently cared very little for the scientific aspect of the question.

"Where is my maid, then?"

"Fanny? She went away--let me see: to-day is Friday--on Wednesday morning. It was no use keeping her here. The man was well, and she was anxious to get back to you. So she started on Wednesday morning, proposing to take the night boat from Dieppe. She must have stopped somewhere on the way."

"I suppose she will go to see Mrs. Vimpany. I will send her a line there."

"Certainly. That will be sure to find her."

"Well, Harry, is there anything else to tell me?"

"A great deal," he repeated. "That photograph, Iris, which frightened you so much, has been very carefully taken by Vimpany for a certain reason."

"What reason?"

"There are occasions," he replied, "when the very best thing that can happen to a man is the belief that he is dead. Such a juncture of affairs has happened to myself--and to you--at this moment. It is convenient--even necessary--for me that the world should believe me dead. In point of fact, I must be dead henceforth. Not for anything that I have done, or that I am afraid of--don't think that. No; it is for the simple reason that I have no longer any money or any resources whatever. That is why I must be dead. Had you not returned in this unexpected manner, my dear, you would have heard of my death from the doctor, and he would have left it to chance to find a convenient opportunity of letting you know the truth. I am, however, deeply grieved that I was so careless as to leave that photograph upon the table."

"I do not understand," she said. "You pretend to be dead?"

"Yes. I must have money. I have some left--a very little. I must have money; and, in order to get it, I must be dead."

"How will that help?"

"Why, my dear, I am insured, and my insurances will be paid after my death; but not before."

"Oh! must you get money--even by a----" She hesitated.

"Call it a conspiracy, my dear, if you please. As there is no other way whatever left, I must get money that way."

"Oh, this is dreadful! A conspiracy, Harry? a--a--fraud?"

"If you please. That is the name which lawyers give to it."

"But oh, Harry!--it is a crime. It is a thing for which men are tried and found guilty and sentenced."

"Certainly; if they are found out. Meantime, it is only the poor, ignorant, clumsy fool who gets found out. In the City these things are done every day."

Quite as a matter of course," he added carelessly. "It is not usual for men to take their wives into confidence, but in this case I must take you into confidence: I have no choice, as you will understand directly."

"Tell me, Harry, who first thought of this way?"

"Vimpany, of course. Oh! give him the credit where real cleverness is concerned. Vimpany suggested the thing. He found me well-nigh as desperately hard up as he is himself. He suggested it. At first, I confess, I did not like it. I refused to listen to any more talk about it. But, you see, when one meets destitution face to face, one will do anything--everything. Besides, as I will show you, this is not really a fraud. It is only an anticipation of a few years. However, there was another reason."

"Was it to find the money to meet the promissory note?"

"My dear, you may forget--you may resolve never to throw the thing in my teeth; but my love for you will never suffer me to forget that I have lost your little fortune in a doubtful speculation. It is all gone, never to be recovered again; and this after I had sworn never to touch a farthing of it. Iris!"--he started to his feet and walked about the room as one who is agitated by emotion--"Iris! I could face imprisonment for debt, I could submit to pecuniary ruin, for that matter; the loss of money would not cause me the least trouble, but I cannot endure to have ruined you."

"Oh! Harry, as if I mind. Everything that I have is yours. When I gave you myself I gave all. Take--use--lose it all. As you think, I should never feel reproach, far less utter a word of blame. Dearest Harry, if that is all--"

"No; it is the knowledge that you will not even feel reproach that is my constant accuser. At my death you will get all back again. But I am not old; I may live for many, many years to come. How can I wait for my own death when I can repair this wickedness by a single stroke?"

"But by another wickedness--and worse."

"No--not another crime. Remember that this money is mine. It will come to my heirs some day, as surely as to-morrow's sun will rise. Sooner or later it will be mine; I will make it sooner, that is all. The Insurance Company will lose nothing but the paltry interest for the remainder of my life. My dear, if it is disgraceful to do this I will endure disgrace. It is easier to bear that than constant self-reproach which I feel when I think of you and the losses I have inflicted upon you."

Again he folded her in his arms; he knelt before her; he wept over her. Carried out of herself by this passion, Iris made no more resistance.

"Is it--is it," she asked timidly, "too late to draw back?"

"It is too late," he replied, thinking of the dead man below. "It is too late. All is completed."

"My poor Harry! What shall we do? How shall we live? How shall we contrive never to be found out?"

She would not leave him, then. She accepted the situation. He was amazed at the readiness with which she fell; but he did not understand how she was ready to cling to him, for better for worse, through worse evils than this; nor could he understand how things formerly impossible to her had been rendered possible by the subtle deterioration of the moral nature, when a woman of lofty mind at the beginning loves and is united to a man of lower nature and coarser fibre than herself. Only a few months before, Iris would have swept aside these sophistries with swift and resolute hand. Now she accepted them.

"You have fallen into the doctor's hands, dear," she said. "Pray Heaven it brings us not into worse evils! What can I say? it is through love of your wife--through love of your wife--oh! husband!" she threw herself into his arms, and forgave everything and accepted everything. Henceforth she would be--though this she knew not--the willing instrument of the two conspirators.