

CHAPTER LVI - FANNY'S NARRATIVE

FANNY returned to London. Partly, the slenderness of her resources gave her no choice; partly, she had learned all there was to learn, and would do no good by staying longer at Passy.

She arrived with thirty shillings left out of Mr. Mountjoy's timely gift. She sought a cheap lodging, and found a room, among people who seemed respectable, which she could have for four-and-sixpence a week, with board at a shilling a day. This settled, she hastened to Mr. Mountjoy's hotel brimful of her news for Mrs. Vimpany.

Everyone knows the disappointment when the one person in the world whom you want at the moment to see and to talk with proves to be out. Then the news has to be suppressed; the conclusions, the suspicions, the guesses have to be postponed; the active brain falls back upon itself.

This disappointment--almost as great as that at Berne--was experienced by Fanny Mere at the hotel.

Mr. Mountjoy was no longer there.

The landlady of the hotel, who knew Fanny, came out herself and told her what had happened.

"He was better," she said, "but still weak. They sent him down to Scotland in Mrs. Vimpany's care. He was to travel by quick or slow stages, just as he felt able. And I've got the address for you. Here it is. Oh! and Mrs. Vimpany left a message. Will you, she says, when you write, send the letter to her and not to him? She says, you know why."

Fanny returned to her lodging profoundly discouraged. She was filled with this terrible secret that she had discovered. The only man who could advise at this juncture was Mr. Mountjoy, and he was gone. And she knew not what had become of her mistress. What could she do? The responsibility was more than she could bear.

The conversation with the French nurse firmly established one thing in her mind. The man who was buried in the cemetery of Auteuil with the name of Lord Harry Norland on a headstone, the man who had lingered so long with pulmonary disease, was the man whose death she had witnessed. It was

Oxbye the Dane. Of that there could be no doubt. Equally there was no doubt in her own mind that he had been poisoned by the doctor--by Mrs. Vimpany's husband--in the presence and, to all appearance, with the consent and full knowledge of Lord Harry himself. Then her mistress was in the power of these two men--villains who had now added murder to their other crimes. As for herself, she was alone, almost friendless; in a week or two she would be penniless. If she told her tale, what mischief might she not do? If she was silent, what mischief might not follow?

She sat down to write to the only friend she had. But her trouble froze her brain. She had not been able to put the case plainly. Words failed her.

She was not at any time fluent with her pen. She now found herself really unable to convey any intelligible account of what had happened. To state clearly all that she knew so that the conclusion should be obvious and patent to the reader would have been at all times difficult, and was now impossible. She could only confine herself to a simple vague statement. "I can only say that from all I have seen and heard I have reasons for believing that Lord Harry is not dead at all." She felt that this was a feeble way of summing up, but she was not at the moment equal to more. "When I write again, after I have heard from you, I will tell you more. To-day I cannot. I am too much weighed down. I am afraid of saying too much. Besides, I have no money, and must look for work. I am not anxious, however, about my own future, because my lady will not forsake me. I am sure of that. It is my anxiety about her and the dreadful secrets I have learned which give me no rest."

Several days passed before the answer came. And then it was an answer which gave her little help. "I have no good news for you," she said. "Mr. Mountjoy continues weak. Whatever your secret, I cannot ask you to communicate it to him in his present condition. He has been grieved and angry beyond all belief by Lady Harry's decision to rejoin her husband. It is hard to understand that a man should be so true a friend and so constant a lover. Yet he has brought himself to declare that he has broken off all friendly relations with her. He could no longer endure London. It was associated with thoughts and memories of her. In spite of his weak condition, he insisted on coming down here to his Scotch villa. Ill as he was, he would brook no delay. We came down by very easy stages, stopping at Peterborough, York, Durham, Newcastle, and Berwick--at some places for one night, and others for more. In spite of all my precautions, when we arrived at the villa he was dangerously exhausted. I sent for the local doctor, who seems to know something. At all events, he is wise enough to understand that this is not a case for drugs. Complete rest and absence

from all agitating thoughts must be aimed at. Above all, he is not to see the newspapers. That is fortunate, because, I suppose, Lord Harry's death has been announced in them, and the thought that his former mistress is a widow might excite him very dangerously. You will now understand why I left that message at the hotel for you, and why I have not shown him your letter. I told him, it is true, that you had returned without finding your mistress. 'Speak no more to me of Lady Harry,' he replied irritably. So I have said no more. As for money, I have a few pounds by me, which are at your service. You can repay me at some future time. I have thought of one thing--that new Continental paper started by Lord Harry. Wherever she may be, Lady Harry is almost sure to see that. Put an advertisement in it addressed to her, stating that you have not heard of her address, but that you yourself will receive any letter sent to some post-office which you can find. I think that such an advertisement will draw a reply from her, unless she desires to remain in seclusion."

Fanny thought the suggestion worth adopting. After careful consideration, she drew up an advertisement:--

"Fanny H. to L--H--. I have not been able to ascertain your address. Please write to me, at the Post Office, Hunter Street, London, W.C."

She paid for the insertion of this advertisement three times on alternate Saturdays. They told her that this would be a more likely way than to take three successive Saturdays. Then, encouraged by the feeling that something, however little, had been done, she resolved to sit down to write out a narrative in which she would set down in order everything that had happened--exactly as it had happened. Her intense hatred and suspicion of Dr. Vimpany aided her, strange to say, to keep to the strictest fidelity as regards the facts. For it was not her desire to make up charges and accusations. She wanted to find out the exact truth, and so to set it down that anybody who read her statement would arrive at the same conclusion as she herself had done. In the case of an eye-witness there are thousands of things which cannot be produced in evidence which yet are most important in directing and confirming suspicions. The attitude, the voice, the look of a speaker, the things which he conceals as well as the things which he reveals--all these are evidence. But these Fanny was unable to set down. Therefore it behoved her to be strictly careful.

First, she stated how she became aware that there was some secret scheme under consideration between Lord Harry and the doctor. Next, she set down the fact that they began to talk French to each other, thinking that she could not understand them; that they spoke of deceiving Lady Harry by

some statement which had already deceived the authorities; that the doctor undertook to get the lady out of the house; that they engaged herself as nurse to a sick man; that she suspected from the beginning that their design was to profit in some way by the death of this sick man, who bore a slight resemblance to Lord Harry himself. And so on, following the story as closely as she could remember, to the death of the Dane and her own subsequent conversation with the nurse. She was careful to put in the dates, day after day. When she had done all this--it took a good deal of time--she bought a manuscript book and copied it all out. This enabled her to remember two or three facts which had escaped her at the beginning. Then she made another copy this time without names of people or place. The second copy she forwarded as a registered letter to Mrs. Vimpany, with a letter of which this was the conclusion: "Considering, therefore, that on Wednesday morning I left Lord Harry in perfect health; considering that on the Thursday morning I saw the man who had been ill so long actually die--how, I have told you in the packet enclosed; considering that the nurse was called in purposely to attend a patient who was stated to have long been ill--there can be no doubt whatever that the body in the cemetery is that of the unfortunate Dane, Oxbye; and that, somewhere or other, Lord Harry is alive and well.

"What have they done it for? First of all, I suppose, to get money. If it were not for the purpose of getting money the doctor would have had nothing to do with the conspiracy, which was his own invention. That is very certain. Your idea was they would try to get money out of the Insurance Offices. I suppose that is their design. But Lord Harry may have many other secret reasons of his own for wishing to be thought dead. They say his life has been full of wicked things, and he may well wish to be considered dead and gone. Lots of wicked men would like above all things, I should think, to be considered dead and buried. But the money matter is at the bottom of all, I am convinced. What are we to do?"

What could they do? These two women had got hold of a terrible secret. Neither of them could move. It was too big a thing. One cannot expect a woman to bring her own husband--however wicked a husband he may be--to the awful shame and horror of the gallows if murder should be proved--or to a lifelong imprisonment if the conspiracy alone should be brought home to him. Therefore Mrs. Vimpany could do nothing. As for Fanny, the mere thought of the pain she would inflict upon her mistress, were Lord Harry, through her interference, to be brought to justice and an infamous sentence, kept her quiet.

Meantime, the announcement of Lord Harry's death had been made. Those

who knew the family history spoke cheerfully of the event. "Best timing he had ever done. Very good thing for his people. One more bad lot out of the way. Dead, Sir, and a very good thing, too. Married, I believe. One of the men who have done everything. Pity they can't write a life of him." These were the comments made upon the decease of this young gentleman. Such is fame. Next day he was clean forgotten; just as if he had never existed. Such is life.