

## CHAPTER LVII - AT LOUVAIN

NOT many English tourists go out of their way to visit Louvain, even though it has a Hotel de Ville surpassing even that of Brussels itself, and though one can get there in an hour from that city of youth and pleasure. And there are no English residents at all in the place--at least, none in evidence, though perhaps there may be some who have gone there for the same reasons which led Mr. William Linville and his wife to choose this spot--in order to be private and secluded. There are many more people than we know of who desire, above all things, seclusion and retirement, and dread nothing so much as a chance meeting with an old friend.

Mr. William Linville took a small house, furnished, like the cottage at Passy, and, also like that little villa, standing in its own garden. Here, with a cook and a maid, Iris set up her modest menage. To ask whether she was happy would be absurd. At no time since her marriage had she been happy; to live under the condition of perpetual concealment is not in itself likely to make a woman any the happier. Fortunately she had no time to experience the full bitterness of the plan proposed by her husband.

Consider. Had their scheme actually been carried out quite successfully, this pair, still young, would have found themselves condemned to transportation for life. That was the first thing. Next, they could never make any friends among their own countrymen or countrywomen for fear of discovery. Iris could never again speak to an English lady. If they had children the risk would appear ten times more terrible, the consequences ten times more awful. The children themselves would have to grow up without family and without friends. The husband, cut off from intercourse with other men, would be thrown back upon himself. Husband and wife, with this horrible load laid upon them, would inevitably grow to loathe and hate the sight of each other. The man would almost certainly take to drink: the woman--but we must not follow this line any further. The situation lasted only so long as to give the wife a glimpse of what it might become in the future.

They took their house, and sat down in it. They were very silent. Lord Harry, his great coup successfully carried so far, sat taciturn and glum. He stayed indoors all day, only venturing out after dark. For a man whose whole idea of life was motion, society, and action, this promised ill.

The monotony was first broken by the arrival of Hugh's letter, which was

sent in with other documents from Passy. Iris read it; she read it again, trying to understand exactly what it meant. Then she tore it up. "If he only knew," she said, "he would not have taken the trouble even to write this letter. There is no answer, Hugh. There can be none--now. Act by your advice? Henceforth, I must act by order. I am a conspirator."

Two days afterwards came a letter from the doctor. He did not think it necessary to say anything about Fanny's appearance or her journey to Borne. "Everything," he wrote, "has so far gone well. The world knows, through the papers, that Lord Harry is dead. There will be now only the business of claiming the money. For this purpose, as his widow is the sole heiress and executrix, it will be necessary for her to place the will and the policies of insurance in the hands of her husband's lawyers, so that the will may be proved and the claims duly made. Forms will have to be signed. The medical certificate of death and the forms attesting the burial are already in the lawyers' hands. The sooner the widow goes to London the better. She should write to announce her arrival, and she should write from Paris as if she had been staying there after her husband's death.

"I have only to remind you, my dear Linville, that you are indebted to me in a good round sum. Of course, I shall be very pleased to receive a cheque for this sum in full as soon as you have touched the amount due to you. I shall be in Paris, at the Hotel Continental, where you may address me. Naturally, there is no desire for concealment, and if the Insurance Companies desire any information from me I am always ready and willing to afford it."

Lord Harry gave this letter to his wife.

She read it, and laid it open in her lap.

"Must it be, Harry? Oh! must it be?"

"There is no other way possible, dear. But really, it is nothing. You were not at Passy when your husband died. You had been in London--you were in Brussels--anywhere; when you arrived it was all over; you have seen his headstone. Dr. Vimpany had him in his care; you knew he was ill, but you thought it was a trifling matter which time would cure; you go to the lawyers and present the will. They have the policies, and will do everything else; you will not even have to sign anything. The only thing that you must do is to get a complete rig-out of widow's weeds. Mind--there will not be the slightest doubt or question raised. Considering everything, you will be more than justified in seeing no one and going nowhere."

Hugh's letter breaking in upon her fool's paradise had awakened the poor woman to her better self; she had gone so far with the fraud as to acquiesce in it; but she recoiled with horror and shame when this active part was forced upon her.

"Oh, Harry!"--she burst into tears. "I cannot--I cannot. You ask me to be a liar and a thief--oh! heavens!--a vile thief!

"It is too late, Iris! We are all vile thieves. It is too late to begin crying now."

"Harry"--she threw herself upon her knees--"spare me! Let some other woman go, and call herself your widow. Then I will go away and hide myself."

"Don't talk nonsense, Iris," he replied roughly. "I tell you it is far too late. You should have thought of this before. It is now all arranged."

"I cannot go," she said.

"You must go; otherwise, all our trouble may prove useless."

"Then I will not go!" she declared, springing to her feet. "I will not degrade myself any further. I will not go!"

Harry rose too. He faced her for a moment. His eyes dropped. Even he remembered, at that moment, how great must be the fall of a woman who would consent to play such a part.

"You shall not go," he said, "unless you like. You can leave me to the consequences of my own acts--to my own degradation. Go back to England. In one thing only spare me. Do not tell what you know. As for me, I will forge a letter from you--"

"Forge a letter!"

"It is the only way left open, giving the lawyers authority to act, and inclosing the will. What will happen next? By whose hands the money is to reach me I know not yet. But you can leave me, Iris. Better that you should leave me--I shall only drag you lower."

"Why must you forge the letter? Why not come with me somewhere--the world is large!--to some place where you are not known, and there let us begin a new life? We have not much money, but I can sell my watches and

chains and rings, and we shall have enough. O Harry! for once be guided--listen to me! We shall find some humble manner of living, and we may be happy yet. There is no harm done if you have only pretended to be dead; nobody has been injured or defrauded--"

"Iris, you talk wildly! Do you imagine, for one moment, that the doctor will release me from my bargain?"

"What bargain?"

"Why--of course he was to be paid for the part he has taken in the business. Without him it could never have been done at all."

"Yes--yes--it was in the letter that you gave me," she said, conscious that such agreements belonged to works of fiction and to police courts.

"Certainly I have to pay him a good large slice out of the money."

"It is fifteen thousand pounds, is it not? How much is to be paid to the--to the doctor?"

"We agreed that he was to have the half," said Lord Harry, laughing lightly. "But as I thought that seven thousand five hundred pounds was a sum of money which would probably turn his head and bring him to starvation in a year or two, I told him that the whole amount was four thousand pounds. Therefore he is to have two thousand pounds for his share. And quite enough too."

"Treachery on treachery!" said his wife. "Fraud on fraud! Would to GOD," she added with a sigh, "that you had never met this man!"

"I dare say it would have been better for me, on the whole," he replied. "But then, my dear, a man like myself is always meeting people whom it would have been better not to have met. Like will to like, I suppose. Given the active villain and the passive consenter, and they are sure to meet. Not that I throw stones at the worthy doctor. Not at all."

"We cannot, Harry," said his wife.

"We cannot, my dear. Bien entendu! Well, Iris, there is no more to be said. You know the situation completely. You can back out of it if you please, and leave me. Then I shall have to begin all over again a new conspiracy far more dangerous than the last. Well, I shall not drag you down with me. That is my

resolution. If it comes to public degradation--but it shall not. Iris, I promise you one thing." For once he looked as if he meant it. "Death before dishonour. Death without your name being mixed up at all, save with pity for being the wife of such a man."

Again he conquered her.

"Harry," she said, "I will go."