

CHAPTER LIX - THE CONSEQUENCES OF AN ADVERTISEMENT

THE trouble was made by Iris herself.

In this way--

She saw Fanny's advertisement. Her first impulse was to take her back into her service. But she remembered the necessity for concealment. She must not place herself--she realised already the fact that she had done a thing which would draw upon her the vengeance of the law--and her husband in the power of this woman, whose fidelity might not stand the shock of some fit of jealousy, rage, or revenge for fancied slight. She must henceforth be cut off altogether from all her old friends.

She therefore answered the letter by one which contained no address, and which she posted with her own hand at the General Post Office. She considered her words carefully. She must not say too much or too little.

"I enclose," she said, "a bank note for ten pounds to assist you. I am about to travel abroad, but must, under existing circumstances, dispense with the services of a maid. In the course of my travels I expect to be in Brussels. If, therefore, you have anything to tell me or to ask of me, write to me at the Poste Restante of that city, and in the course of six mouths or so I am tolerably sure to send for the letter. In fact, I shall expect to find a letter from you. Do not think that I have forgotten you or your faithful services, though for a moment I am not able to call you to my side. Be patient."

There was no address given in the letter. This alone was mysterious. If Lady Harry was in London and the letter was posted at the General Post Office--why should she not give her address? If she was abroad, why should she hide her address? In any case, why should she do without a maid--she who had never been without a maid--to whom a maid was as necessary as one of her hands? Oh! she could never get along at all without a maid. As for Iris's business in London and her part in the conspiracy, of course Fanny neither knew nor suspected.

She had recourse again to her only friend--Mrs. Vimpany--to whom she sent Lady Harry's letter, and imploring her to lay the whole before Mr. Mountjoy.

"He is getting so much stronger," Mrs. Vimpany wrote back, "that I shall be able to tell him every thing before long. Do not be in a hurry. Let us do

nothing that may bring trouble upon her. But I am sure that something is going on--something wicked. I have read your account of what has happened over and over again. I am as convinced as you could possibly be that my husband and Lord Harry are trading on the supposed death of the letter. We can do nothing. Let us wait."

Three days afterwards she wrote again.

"The opportunity for which I have been waiting has come at last. Mr. Mountjoy is, I believe, fully recovered. This morning, seeing him so well and strong, I asked him if I might venture to place in his hands a paper containing a narrative.

"Is it concerning Iris?' he asked.

"It has to do with Lady Harry--indirectly.'

"For a while he made no reply. Then he asked me if it had also to do with her husband.

"With her husband and with mine,' I told him.

"Again he was silent.

"After a bit he looked up and said, 'I had promised myself never again to interfere in Lady Harry Norland's affairs. You wish me to read this document, Mrs. Vimpany?"

"Certainly; I am most anxious that you should read it and should advise upon it.'

"Who wrote it?'

"Fanny Mere, Lady Harry's maid.'

"If it is only to tell me that her husband is a villain,' he said, 'I will not read it.'

"If you were enabled by reading it to keep Lady Harry from a dreadful misfortune?' I suggested.

"Give me the document,' he said.

"Before I gave it to him--it was in my pocket--I showed him a newspaper containing a certain announcement.

"'Lord Harry dead?' he cried. 'Impossible! Then Iris is free.'

"'Perhaps you will first read the document.' I drew it out of my pocket, gave it to him, and retired. He should be alone while he read it.

"Half an hour afterwards I returned. I found him in a state of the most violent agitation, without, however, any of the weakness which he betrayed on previous occasions.

"'Mrs. Vimpany,' he cried, 'this is terrible! There is no doubt--not the least doubt--in my mind that the man Oxbye is the man buried under the name of Lord Harry, and that he was murdered--murdered in cold blood--by that worst of villains----'

"'My husband,' I said.

"'Your husband--most unfortunate of wives! As for Lord Harry's share in the murder, it is equally plain that he knew of it, even if he did not consent to it. Good heavens! Do you understand? Do you realise what they have done? Your husband and Iris's husband may be tried--actually tried--for murder and put to a shameful death. Think of it!'

"'I do think of it, Heaven knows! I think of it every day--I think of it all day long. But, remember, I will say nothing that will bring this fate upon them. And Fanny will say nothing. Without Fanny's evidence there cannot be even a suspicion of the truth.'

"'What does Iris know about it?'

"'I think that she cannot know anything of the murder. Consider the dates. On Wednesday Fanny was dismissed; on Thursday she returned secretly and witnessed the murder. It was on Thursday morning that Lady Harry drove to Victoria on her return to Passy, as we all supposed, and as I still suppose. On Saturday Fanny was back again. The cottage was deserted. She was told that the man Oxbye had got up and walked away; that her mistress had not been at the house at all, but was travelling in Switzerland; and that Lord Harry was gone on a long journey. And she was sent into Switzerland to get her out of the way. I gather from all this that Lady Harry was taken away by her husband directly she arrived--most likely by night--and that of the murder she knew nothing.'

"No--no--she could know nothing! That, at least, they dared not tell her. But about the rest? How much does she know? How far has she lent herself to the conspiracy? Mrs. Vimpany, I shall go back to London to-night. We will travel by the night train. I feel quite strong enough.'

"I began this letter in Scotland; I finish it in London.

"We are back again in town. Come to the hotel at once, and see us."

So, there was now a Man to advise. For once, Fanny was thankful for the creation of Man. To the most misanthropic female there sometimes comes a time when she must own that Man has his uses. These two women had now got a Man with whom to take counsel.

"I do not ask you," said Mr. Mountjoy, with grave face, "how far this statement of yours is true: I can see plainly that it is true in every particular."

"It is quite true, sir; every word of it is true. I have been tempted to make out a worse case against the doctor, but I have kept myself to the bare truth."

"You could not make out a worse case against any man. It is the blackest case that I ever heard of or read. It is the foulest murder. I do not understand the exact presence of Lord Harry when the medicine was given. Did he see the doctor administer it? Did he say anything?"

"He turned white when the doctor told him that the man was going to die--that day, perhaps, or next day. When the doctor was pouring out the medicine he turned pale again and trembled. While the doctor was taking the photograph he trembled again. I think, sir--I really think--that he knew all along that the man was going to die, but when it came to the moment, he was afraid. If it had depended on him, Oxbye would be alive still."

"He was a consenting party. Well; for the moment both of you keep perfect silence. Don't discuss the timing with each other lest you should be overheard: bury the thing. I am going to make some inquiries."

The first thing was to find out what steps had been taken, if any, with insurance companies. For Iris's sake his inquiry had to be conducted quite openly. His object must seem none other than the discovery of Lady Harry Norland's present address. When bankers, insurance companies, and solicitors altogether have to conduct a piece of business it is not difficult to

ascertain such a simple matter.

He found out the name of the family solicitor, he went to the office, sent in his card, and stated his object. As a very old friend of Lady Harry's, he wanted to learn her address. He had just come up from Scotland, where he had been ill, and had only just learned her terrible bereavement.

The lawyer made no difficulty at all. There was no reason why he should. Lady Harry had been in London; she was kept in town for nearly two months by business connected with the unfortunate event; but she had now gone-- she was travelling Switzerland or elsewhere. As for her address, a letter addressed to his care should be forwarded on hearing from her ladyship.

"Her business, I take it, was the proving of the will and the arrangement of the property."

"That was the business which kept her in town."

"Lady Harry," Mr. Mountjoy went on, "had a little property of her own apart from what she may ultimately get from her father. About five thousand pounds--not more."

"Indeed? She did not ask my assistance in respect of her own property."

"I suppose it is invested and in the hands of trustees. But, indeed, I do not know. Lord Harry himself, I have heard, was generally in a penniless condition. Were there any insurances?"

"Yes; happily there was insurance paid for him by the family. Otherwise there would have been nothing for the widow."

"And this has been paid up, I suppose?"

"Yes; it has been paid into her private account."

"Thank you," said Mr. Mountjoy. "With your permission, I will address a letter to Lady Harry here. Will you kindly order it to be forwarded at the very earliest opportunity?"

"Iris," he thought, "will not come to London any more. She has been persuaded by her husband to join in the plot. Good heavens! She has become a swindler--a conspirator---a fraudulent woman! Iris!--it is incredible--it is horrible! What shall we do?"

He first wrote a letter, to the care of the lawyers. He informed her that he had made a discovery of the highest importance to herself--he refrained from anything that might give rise to suspicion; he implored her to give him an interview anywhere, in any part of the world--alone, he told her that the consequences of refusal might be fatal--absolutely fatal--to her future happiness: he conjured her to believe that he was anxious for nothing but her happiness: that he was still, as always, her most faithful friend.

Well; he could do no more. He had not the least expectation that his letter would do any good; he did not even believe that it would reach Iris. The money was received and paid over to her own account. There was really no reason at all why she should place herself again in communication with these lawyers. What would she do, then? One thing only remained. With her guilty husband, this guilty woman must remain in concealment for the rest of their days, or until death released her of the man who was pretending to be dead. At the best, they might find some place where there would be no chance of anybody ever finding them who knew either of them before this wicked thing was done.

But could she know of the murder?

He remembered the instruction given to Fanny. She was to write to Brussels. Let her therefore write at once. He would arrange what she was to say. Under his dictation, therefore, Fanny wrote as follows:--

"My Lady,--I have received your ladyship's letter, and your kind gift of ten pounds. I note your directions to write to you at Brussels, and I obey them.

"Mr. Mountjoy, who has been ill and in Scotland, has come back to London. He begs me to tell you that he has had an interview with your lawyers, and has learned that you have been in town on business, the nature of which he has also learned. He has left an important letter for you at their office. They will forward it as soon as they learn your address.

"Since I came back from Passy I have thought it prudent to set down in writing an exact account of everything that happened there under my own observation. Mr. Mountjoy has read my story, and thinks that I ought without delay to send a copy of it to you. I therefore send you one, in which I have left out all the names, and put in A, B, and C instead, by his directions. He says that you will have no difficulty in filling up the names.

"I remain, my dear Lady,

"Your ladyship's most obedient and humble servant,

"FANNY MERE."

This letter, with the document, was dispatched to Brussels that night. And this is the trouble which Iris brought upon herself by answering Fanny's advertisement.