

## **CHAPTER LX - ON THE EVE OF A CHANGE**

IRIS returned to Louvain by way of Paris. She had to settle up with the doctor.

He obeyed her summons and called upon her at the hotel.

"Well, my lady," he began in his gross voice, rubbing his hands and laughing, "it has come off, after all; hasn't it?"

"I do not desire, Dr. Vimpany, to discuss anything with you. We will proceed to settle what business we have together."

"To think that your ladyship should actually fall in!" he replied. "Now I confess that this was to me the really difficult part of the job. It is quite easy to pretend that a man is dead, but not so easy to touch his money. I really do not see how we could have managed at all without your co-operation. Well, you've had no difficulty, of course?"

"None at all."

"I am to have half."

"I am instructed to give you two thousand pounds. I have the money here for you."

"I hope you consider that I deserve this share?"

"I think, Dr. Vimpany, that whatever you get in the future or the present you will richly deserve. You have dragged a man down to your own level--"

"And a woman too."

"A woman too. Your reward will come, I doubt not."

"If it always takes the form of bank-notes I care not how great the reward may be. You will doubtless, as a good Christian, expect your own reward-- for him and for you?"

"I have mine already," she replied sadly. "Now, Dr. Vimpany, let me pay you, and get rid of your company."

He counted the money carefully and put it in the banker's bag in his coat-pocket. "Thank you, my lady. We have exchanged compliments enough over this job."

"I hope--I pray--that we may never set eyes on you again."

"I cannot say. People run up against each other in the strangest manner, especially people who've done shady things and have got to keep in the background."

"Enough!--enough!"

"The background of the world is a very odd place, I assure you. It is full of interesting people. The society has a piquancy which you will find, I hope, quite charming. You will be known by another name, of course?"

"I shall not tell you by what name--"

"Tut--tut! I shall soon find out. The background gets narrower when you fall into misery."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, Lady Harry, that your husband has no idea whatever as to the value of money. The two thousand that you are taking him will vanish in a year or two. What will you do then? As for myself, I know the value of money so well that I am always buying the most precious and delightful things with it. I enjoy them immensely. Never any man enjoyed good things so much as I do. But the delightful things cost money. Let us be under no illusions. Your ladyship and your noble husband and I all belong to the background; and in a year or two we shall belong to the needy background. I daresay that very soon after that the world will learn that we all belong to the criminal background. I wish your ladyship a joyful reunion with your husband!"

He withdrew, and Iris set eyes on him no more. But the prophecy with which he departed remained with her, and it was with a heart foreboding fresh sorrows that she left Paris and started for Louvain.

Here began the new life--that of concealment and false pretence. Iris put off her weeds, but she never ventured abroad without a thick veil. Her husband, discovering that English visitors sometimes ran over from Brussels to see the Hotel de Ville, never ventured out at all till evening. They

had no friends and no society of any kind.

The house, which stood secluded behind a high wall in its garden, was in the quietest part of this quiet old city; no sound of life and work reached it; the pair who lived there seldom spoke to each other. Except at the midday breakfast and the dinner they did not meet. Iris sat in her own room, silent; Lord Harry sat in his, or paced the garden walks for hours.

Thus the days went on monotonously. The clock ticked; the hours struck; they took meals; they slept; they rose and dressed; they took meals again--this was all their life. This was all that they could expect for the future.

The weeks went on. For three months Iris endured this life. No news came to her from the outer world; her husband had even forgotten the first necessary of modern life--the newspaper. It was not the ideal life of love, apart from the world, where the two make for themselves a Garden of Eden; it was a prison, in which two were confined together who were kept apart by their guilty secret.

They ceased altogether to speak; their very meals were taken in silence. The husband saw continual reproach in his wife's eyes; her sad and heavy look spoke more plainly than any words, "It is to this that you have brought me."

One morning Iris was idly turning over the papers in her desk. There were old letters, old photographs, all kinds of trifling treasures that reminded her of the past--a woman keeps everything; the little mementoes of her childhood, her first governess, her first school, her school friendships--everything. As Iris turned over these things her mind wandered back to the old days. She became again a young girl--innocent, fancy free; she grew up--she was a woman innocent still. Then her mind jumped at one leap to the present, and she saw herself as she was--innocent no longer, degraded and guilty, the vile accomplice of a vile conspiracy.

Then, as one who has been wearing coloured glasses puts them off and sees things in their own true colours, she saw how she had been pulled down by a blind infatuation to the level of the man who had held her in his fascination; she saw him as he was--reckless, unstable, careless of name and honour. Then for the first time she realised the depths into which she was plunged and the life which she was henceforth doomed to lead. The blind love fell from her--it was dead at last; but it left her bound to the man by a chain which nothing could break; she was in her right senses; she saw things as they were; but the knowledge came too late.

Her husband made no attempt to bridge over the estrangement which had thus grown up between them: it became wider every day; he lived apart and alone; he sat in his own room, smoking more cigars, drinking more brandy-and-water than was good for him; sometimes he paced the gravel walks in the garden; in the evening, after dinner, he went out and walked about the empty streets of the quiet city. Once or twice he ventured into a cafe, sitting in a corner, his hat drawn over his eyes; but that was dangerous. For the most part he kept in the streets, and he spoke to no one.

Meantime the autumn had given place to winter, which began in wet and dreary fashion. Day and night the rain fell, making the gravel walks too wet and the streets impossible. Then Lord Harry sat in his room and smoked all day long. And still the melancholy of the one increased, and the boredom of the other.

He spoke at last. It was after breakfast.

"Iris," he said, "how long is this to continue?"

"This--what?"

"This life--this miserable solitude and silence."

"Till we die," she replied. "What else do you expect? You have sold our freedom, and we must pay the price."

"No; it shall end. I will end it. I can endure it no longer."

"You are still young. You will perhaps have forty years more to live--all like this--as dull and empty. It is the price we must pay."

"No," he repeated, "it shall end. I swear that I will go on like this no longer."

"You had better go to London and walk in Piccadilly to get a little society."

"What do you care what I do or where I go?"

"We will not reproach each other, Harry."

"Why--what else do you do all day long but reproach me with your gloomy looks and your silence?"

"Well--end it if you can. Find some change in the life."

"Be gracious for a little, and listen to my plan. I have made a plan. Listen, Iris. I can no longer endure this life. It drives me mad."

"And me too. That is one reason why we should not desire to change it. Mad people forget. They think they are somewhere else. For us to believe that we were somewhere else would be in itself happiness."

"I am resolved to change it--to change it, I say--at any risk. We will leave Louvain."

"We can, I dare say," Iris replied coldly, "find another town, French or Belgian, where we can get another cottage, behind high walls in a garden, and hide there."

"No. I will hide no longer. I am sick of hiding."

"Go on. What is your plan? Am I to pretend to be some one else's widow?"

"We will go to America. There are heaps of places in the States where no English people ever go---neither tourists nor settlers--places where they have certainly never heard of us. We will find some quiet village, buy a small farm, and settle among the people. I know something about farming. We need not trouble to make the thing pay. And we will go back to mankind again. Perhaps, Iris--when we have gone back to the world--you will--" he hesitated--"you will be able to forgive me, and to regard me again with your old thoughts. It was done for your sake."

"It was not done for my sake. Do not repeat that falsehood. The old thoughts will never come back, Harry. They are dead and gone. I have ceased to respect you or myself. Love cannot survive the loss of self-respect. Who am I that I should give love to anybody? Who are you that you should expect love?"

"Will you go with me to America--love or no love? I cannot stay here--I will not stay here."

"I will go with you wherever you please. I should like not to run risks. There are still people whom it would pain to see Iris Henley tried and found guilty with two others on a charge of fraudulent conspiracy."

"I wouldn't accustom myself, if I were you, Iris, to speak of things too plainly. Leave the thing to me and I will arrange it. See now, we will travel by

a night train from Brussels to Calais. We will take the cross-country line from Amiens to Havre; there we will take boat for New York--no English people ever travel by the Havre line. Once in America we will push up country--to Kentucky or somewhere--and find that quiet country place: after that I ask no more. I will settle down for the rest of my life, and have no more adventures. Do you agree, Iris?"

"I will do anything that you wish," she replied coldly.

"Very well. Let us lose no time. I feel choked here. Will you go into Brussels and buy a Continental Bradshaw or a Baedeker, or something that will tell us the times of sailing, the cost of passage, and all the rest of it? We will take with us money to start us with: you will have to write to your bankers. We can easily arrange to have the money sent to New York, and it can be invested there--except your own fortune--in my new name. We shall want no outfit for a fortnight at sea. I have arranged it all beautifully. Child, look like your old self." He took an unresisting hand. "I want to see you smile and look happy again."

"You never will."

"Yes--when we have got ourselves out of this damnable, unwholesome way of life; when we are with our fellow-creatures again. You will forget this--this little business--which was, you know, after all, an unhappy necessity."

"Oh! how can I ever forget?"

"New interests will arise; new friendships will be formed--"

"Harry, it is myself that I cannot forgive. Teach me to forgive myself, and I will forget everything."

He pressed her no longer.

"Well, then," he said, "go to Brussels and get this information. If you will not try to conquer this absurd moral sensitiveness--which comes too late--you will at least enable me to place you in a healthier atmosphere."

"I will go at once," she said, "I will go by the next train."

"There is a train at a quarter to two. You can do all you have to do and catch the train at five. Iris"--the chance of a change made him impatient--"let us go to-morrow. Let us go by the night express. There will be English

travellers, but they shall not recognise me. We shall be in Calais at one in the morning. We will go on by an early train before the English steamer comes in. Will you be ready?"

"Yes; there is nothing to delay me. I suppose we can leave the house by paying the rent? I will go and do what you want."

"Let us go this very night."

"If you please; I am always ready."

"No: there will be no time; it will look like running away. We will go to-morrow night. Besides, you would be too tired after going to Brussels and back. Iris, we are going to be happy again--I am sure we are." He, for one, looked as if there was nothing to prevent a return of happiness. He laughed and waved his hands. "A new sky---new scenes--new work--you will be happy again, Iris. You shall go, dear. Get me the things I want."

She put on her thick veil and started on her short journey. The husband's sudden return to his former good spirits gave her a gleam of hope. The change would be welcome indeed if it permitted him to go about among other men, and to her if it gave her occupation. As to forgetting--how could she forget the past, so long as they were reaping the fruit of their wickedness in the shape of solid dividends? She easily found what she wanted. The steamer of the Compagnie Generale Transatlantique left Havre every eighth day. They would go by that line. The more she considered the plan the more it recommended itself. They would at any rate go out of prison. There would be a change in their life. Miserable condition! To have no other choice of life but that of banishment and concealment: no other prospect than that of continual fraud renewed by every post that brought them money.

When she had got all the information that was wanted she had still an hour or two before her. She thought she would spend the time wandering about the streets of Brussels. The animation and life of the cheerful city--where all the people except the market-women are young--pleased her. It was long since she had seen any of the cheerfulness that belongs to a busy street. She walked slowly along, up one street and down another, looking into the shops. She made two or three little purchases. She looked into a place filled with Tauchnitz Editions, and bought two or three books. She was beginning to think that she was tired and had better make her way back to the station, when suddenly she remembered the post-office and her instructions to Fanny Mere.

"I wonder," she said, "if Fanny has written to me."

She asked the way to the post-office. There was time if she walked quickly.

At the Poste Restante there was a letter for her--more than a letter, a parcel, apparently a book.

She received it and hurried back to the station.

In the train she amused herself with looking through the leaves of her new books. Fanny Mere's letter she would read after dinner.

At dinner they actually talked. Lord Harry was excited with the prospect of going back to the world. He had enjoyed his hermitage, he said, quite long enough. Give him the society of his fellow-creatures. "Put me among cannibals," he said, "and I should make friends with them. But to live alone--it is the devil! To-morrow we begin our new flight."

After dinner he lit his cigar, and went on chattering about the future. Iris remembered the packet she had got at the post-office, and opened it. It contained a small manuscript book filled with writing and a brief letter. She read the letter, laid it down, and opened the book.