

CHAPTER LXI - THE LAST DISCOVERY

"I SHALL like to turn farmer," Lord Harry went on talking while Iris opened and began to read Fanny's manuscript. "After all my adventures, to settle down in a quiet place and cultivate the soil. On market-day we will drive into town together"--he talked as if Kentucky were Warwickshire--"side by side in a spring cart. I shall have samples of grain in bags, and you will have a basket of butter and cream. It will be an ideal life. We shall dine at the ordinary, and, after dinner, over a pipe and a glass of grog, I shall discuss the weather and the crops. And while we live in this retreat of ours, over here the very name of Harry Norland will have been forgotten. Queer, that! We shall go on living long after we are dead and buried and forgotten. In the novels the man turns up after he is supposed to be cast away--wrecked--drowned--dead long ago. But he never turns up when he is forgotten--unless he is Rip Van Winkle. By Gad, Iris! when we are old people we will go home and see the old places together. It will be something to look forward to--something to live for--eh?"

"I feel quite happy this evening, Iris; happier than I have been for months. The fact is, this infernal place has hipped us both confoundedly. I didn't like to grumble, but I've felt the monotony more than a bit. And so have you. It's made you brood over things. Now, for my part, I like to look at the bright side. Here we are comfortably cut off from the past. That's all done with. Nothing in the world can revive the memory of disagreeable things if we are only true to ourselves and agree to forget them. What has been done can never be discovered. Not a soul knows except the doctor, and between him and ourselves we are going to put a few thousand--What's the matter, Iris? What the devil is the matter?"

For Iris, who had been steadily reading while her husband chattered on, suddenly dropped the book, and turned upon him a white face and eyes struck with horror.

"What is it?" Lord Harry repeated.

"Oh! Is this true?"

"What?"

"I cannot say it. Oh, my God! can this be true?"

"What? Speak, Iris." He sprang to his feet. "Is it--is it discovered?"

"Discovered? Yes, all--all--all--is discovered!"

"Where? How? Give me the thing, Iris. Quick! Who knows? What is known?"

He snatched the book from her hands. She shrank from his touch, and pushed back her chair, standing in an attitude of self-defence--watching him as one would watch a dangerous creature.

He swiftly read page after page, eager to know the worst. Then he threw the book upon the table.

"Well?" he said, not lifting his eyes.

"The man was murdered--murdered!" she whispered.

He made no reply.

"You looked on while he was murdered! You looked on consenting! You are a murderer!"

"I had no share or part in it. I did not know he was being poisoned."

"You knew when I was with you. Oh! the dead man--the murdered man--was in the house at the very moment! Your hands were red with blood when you took me away--to get me out of the way--so that I should not know--" She stopped, she could not go on.

"I did not know, Iris--not with certainty. I thought he was dying when he came into the house. He did not die; he began to recover. When the doctor gave him his medicine--after that woman went away--I suspected. When he died, my suspicions were stronger. I challenged him. He did not deny it. Believe me, Iris, I neither counselled it nor knew of it."

"You acquiesced in it. You consented. You should have warned the--the other murderer that you would denounce him if the man died. You took advantage of it. His death enabled you to carry out your fraud with me as your accomplice. With ME! I am an accomplice in a murder!"

"No, no, Iris; you knew nothing of it. No one can ever accuse you--"

"You do not understand. It is part of the accusation which I make against

myself."

"As for what this woman writes," her husband went on, "it is true. I suppose it is useless to deny a single word of it. She was hidden behind the curtain, then! She heard and saw all! If Vimpany had found her! He was right. No one so dangerous as a woman. Yes; she has told you exactly what happened. She suspected all along. We should have sent her away and changed our plans. This comes of being too clever. Nothing would do for the doctor but the man's death. I hoped--we both hoped--that he would die a natural death. He did not. Without a dead man we were powerless. We had to get a dead man, Iris, I will hide nothing more from you, whatever happens. I confess everything. I knew that he was going to die. When he began to get well I was filled with forebodings, because I knew that he would never be allowed to go away. How else could we find a dead body? You can't steal a body; you can't make one up. You must have one for proof of death. I say"--his voice was harsh and hoarse--"I say that I knew he must die. I saw his death in the doctor's face. And there was no more money left for a new experiment if Oxbye should get well and go away. When it came to the point I was seized with mortal terror. I would have given up everything--everything--to see the man get up from his bed and go away. But it was too late. I saw the doctor prepare the final dose, and when he had it to his lips I saw by his eyes that it was the drink of death. I have told you all," he concluded.

"You have told me all," she repeated. "All! Good Heavens! All!"

"I have hidden nothing from you. Now there is nothing more to tell."

She stood perfectly still--her hands clasped, her eyes set, her face white and stern.

"What I have to do now," she said, "lies plain before me."

"Iris! I implore you, make no change in our plans. Let us go away as we proposed. Let the past be forgotten. Come with me--"

"Go with you? With you? With you? Oh!" she shuddered.

"Iris! I have told you all. Let us go on as if you had heard nothing. We cannot be more separated than we have been for the last three months. Let us remain as we are until the time when you will be able to feel for me--to pity my weakness--and to forgive me."

"You do not understand. Forgive you? It is no longer a question of forgiveness. Who am I that my forgiveness should be of the least value to you--or to any?"

"What is the question, then?"

"I don't know. A horrible crime has been committed--a horrible, ghastly, dreadful crime--such a thing as one reads of in the papers and wonders, reading it, what manner of wild beasts must be those who do such things. Perhaps one wonders, besides, what manner of women must be those who associate with those wild beasts. My husband is one of those wild beasts!--my husband!--my husband!--and--I--I am one of the women who are the fit companions of these wild creatures."

"You can say what you please, Iris; what you please."

"I have known--only since I came here have I really known and understood--that I have wrecked my life in a blind passion. I have loved you, Harry; it has been my curse. I followed you against the warnings of everybody: I have been rewarded--by this. We are in hiding. If we are found we shall be sent to a convict prison for conspiracy. We shall be lucky if we are not tried for murder and hanged by the neck until we are dead. This is my reward!"

"I have never played the hypocrite with you, Iris. I have never pretended to virtues which I do not possess. So far--"

"Hush! Do not speak to me. I have something more to say, and then I shall never speak to you any more. Hush! Let me collect my thoughts. I cannot find the words. I cannot. . . Wait--wait! Oh!" She sat down and burst into sobbings and moanings. But only for a minute. Then she sprang to her feet again and dashed back the tears. "Time for crying," she said, "when all is done. Harry, listen carefully; these are my last words. You will never hear from me any more. You must manage your own life in your own way, to save it or to spoil it; I will never more bear any part in it. I am going back to England--alone. I shall give up your name, and I shall take my maiden name again--or some other. I shall live somewhere quietly where you will not discover me. But perhaps you will not look for me?"

"I will not," he said. "I owe you so much. I will not look for you."

"As regards the money which I have obtained for you under false pretences, out of the fifteen thousand pounds for which you were insured, five thousand have been paid to my private account. I shall restore to the

Company all that money."

"Good Heavens! Iris, you will be prosecuted on a criminal charge."

"Shall I? That will matter little, provided I make reparation. Alas! who shall make reparation--who shall atone--for the blood-spilling? For all things else in this world we may make what we call atonement; but not for the spilling of blood."

"You mean this? You will deliberately do this?"

"I mean every word. I will do nothing and say nothing that will betray you. But the money that I can restore, I will restore--SO HELP ME, GOD!" With streaming eyes she raised her hand and pointed upwards.

Her husband bowed his head.

"You have said all you wished to say?" he asked humbly.

"I have said all."

"Let me look in your face once more---so--full--with the light upon it. Yes; I have loved you, Iris--I have always loved you. Better, far better, for you had you fallen dead at my feet on the day when you became my wife. Then I should have been spared--I should have been spared a great deal. You are right, Iris. Your duty lies plainly before you. As for me, I must think of mine. Farewell! The lips of a murderer are not fit to touch even the hem of your garments. Farewell!"

He left her. She heard the hall door open and shut. She would see her husband no more.

She went to her own room and packed a single box with necessary things. Then she called the housemaid and informed her that she had been summoned to return suddenly to England; she must reach Brussels at least that evening. The woman brought a porter who carried her box to the station; and Iris left Louvain--and her husband--for ever.