

CHAPTER LXIII - A REFUGE

IT was all over. Iris had sent in her money. She was in a small lodging found for her by Fanny Mere, who called her cousin. She stayed indoors all day long, afraid of stirring abroad; afraid to read the papers; afraid that her husband was arrested on the charge of conspiracy and fraud; afraid that some kind of hue and cry might be out after her.

Therefore, when she heard a manly step on the stair, she started and turned pale, expecting nothing short of an armed messenger of the law. She never was in this danger for a single minute, but conscience made a coward of her.

The step was that of Hugh Mountjoy.

"I found you out," he said, "by means of Fanny. The girl knew that she was safe in letting me know your secret. Why are you in concealment?"

"You cannot know all, or you would not ask me that."

"I do know all; and again I ask, why are you in concealment?"

"Because--Oh, Hugh--spare me!"

"I know all, which is the reason why I cannot choose but come to see you. Come out of this poor place; resume your own name. There is no reason why you should not. You were not present at Passy when this conspiracy was hatched; you got there after the funeral. You, naturally, went to see the family solicitors. Iris, what has the conspiracy to do with you?" It will be observed that Hugh had not read the letter written to the Directors of the Company.

"Do you know about the money?"

"Certainly. You sent back all that you could--five thousand pounds. That showed your own innocence--"

"Hugh, you know that I am guilty."

"The world will think that you are innocent. At any rate, you can come out and go about without fear. Tell me, what are your plans?"

"I have no plans. I only want to hide my head--somewhere."

"Yes; we will talk about that presently. Meantime, I have some news for you."

"News? What news?"

"Really good news. I have to tell you a thing which will surprise you."

"Good news? What good news is there for me?"

"Your husband has sent back the whole of the money."

"Sent back? To the Insurance Office?"

"All has been sent back. He wrote two letters--one to the solicitors and the other to the Insurance Company. It is not likely now that anything can be said, because the Directors have accepted the money. Moreover, it appears that they might have proceeded against the lawyers for the recovery of the money, but that they have nothing to do either with you or with Lord Harry Norland. That is a difficult point, however. Somebody, it seems, has compounded--or is going to compound--a felony. I do not understand exactly what this means, or what dreadful consequences might follow; but I am assured by the lawyers that we need apprehend nothing more. All is over."

Iris heaved a profound sigh.

"Then he is safe?" she said.

"You think of him first," said Hugh, jealously. "Yes: he is safe; and, I do hope, gone away, out of the country, never to come back any more. The more important thing is that you should be safe from him. As for the doctor--but I cannot speak of the doctor with common patience. Let him be left to the end which always awaits such men. It is to be hoped that he will never, wherever he goes, feel himself in safety."

"I am safe," said Iris, "not only from my husband, but from what else beside? You know what I mean. You mean that I, as well as my husband, am safe from that. Oh! the fear of it has never left me--never for one moment. You tell me that I am safe from public disgrace, and I rejoice--when I ought to sink into the earth with shame!" She covered her face with her hands.

"Iris, we know what you have done. We also know why you did it. What need we say more? The thing is finished and done with. Let us never again allude to it. The question now is--what will you do next? Where will you live?"

"I do not know. I have got Fanny Mere with me. Mrs. Vimpany is also anxious to live with me. I am rich, indeed, since I have two faithful dependants and one friend."

"In such wealth, Iris, you will always be rich. Now listen seriously. I have a villa in the country. It is far away from London, in the Scottish Lowlands--quite out of the way--remote even from tourists and travellers. It is a very lonely place, but there is a pretty house, with a great garden behind and a stretch of sand and seashore in front. There one may live completely isolated. I offer you that villa for your residence. Take it; live in it as long as you please."

"No, no. I must not accept such a gift."

"You must, Iris--you shall. I ask it of you as a proof of friendship, and nothing more. Only, I fear that you will get tired of the loneliness."

"No--no," she said. "I cannot get tired of loneliness it is all I want."

"There is no society at all."

"Society? Society for me?"

"I go to the neighbourhood sometimes for fishing. You will let me call upon you?"

"Who else has such a right?"

"Then you will accept my offer?"

"I feel that I must. Yes, Hugh; yes, with deepest gratitude."

The next day she went down by the night-mail to Scotland. With her travelled Mrs. Vimpany and Fanny Mere.