

EPILOGUE

IT is two years after the murder of Lord Harry Norland, the last event connected with this history.

Iris, when she accepted Hugh Mountjoy's offer of his Scotch villa, went there resolved to hide herself from the world. Too many people, she thought, knew her history, and what she had done. It was not likely that the Directors of the Insurance Company would all hold their tongues about a scandal so very unusual. Even if they did not charge her with complicity, as they could, they would certainly tell the story--all the more readily since Lord Harry's murder--of the conspiracy and its success. She could never again, she told herself, be seen in the world.

She was accompanied by her friend and maid--the woman whose fidelity to her had been so abundantly proved--and by Mrs. Vimpany, who acted as housekeeper.

After a decent interval, Hugh Mountjoy joined her. She was now a widow. She understood very well what he wished to say, and she anticipated him. She informed him that nothing would ever induce her to become the wife of any other man after her degradation. Hugh received this intimation without a remark. He remained in the neighbourhood, however, calling upon her frequently and offering no word of love. But he became necessary to her. The frequent visits became daily; the afternoon visits were paid in the morning: the visitor stayed all day. When the time came for Iris to yield, and he left the house no more, there seemed to be no change. But still they continued their retired life, and now I do not think they will ever change it again.

Their villa was situated on the north shore of the Solway Firth, close to the outfall of the Annan River, but on the west bank, opposite to the little town of Annan. At the back was a large garden, the front looked out upon the stretch of sand at low tide and the water at high tide. The house was provided with a good library. Iris attended to her garden, walked on the sands, read, or worked. They were a quiet household. Husband and wife talked little. They walked about in the garden, his arm about her waist, or hand in hand. The past, if not forgotten, was ceasing to trouble them; it seemed a dreadful, terrible dream. It left its mark in a gentle melancholy which had never belonged to Iris in the old days.

And then happened the last event which the chronicler of this history has to

relate.

It began in the morning with a letter.

Mrs. Vimpany received it. She knew the handwriting, started, and hid it quickly in her bosom. As soon as she could get away to her own room she opened and read it.

"Good and Tender Creature,--I ascertained, a good while ago, thinking that probably I might have to make this kind of application to you, where you were living and with whom. It was not difficult; I only had to connect you with Mr. Hugh Mountjoy and to find out where he lived. I congratulate you on being so well able to take care of yourself. You are probably settled for life in a comfortable home. I feel as happy about it as if I had myself contributed to thus satisfactory result.

"I have no intention of making myself more disagreeable than I am obliged to do. Necessity, however, knows no law. You will understand me when I tell you that I have spent all my money. I do not regret the manner in which the money has been spent, but the fact that it has all gone. This it is which cuts me to the heart.

"I have also discovered that the late lamented Lord Harry, whose death I myself have the greatest reasons to deplore, played me a scurvy trick in regard to certain sums of money. The amount for which he was insured was not less than 15,000 pounds. The amount as he stated it to me was only 4,000 pounds. In return for certain services rendered at a particular juncture I was to receive the half of the insurance money. I only received 2,000 pounds, consequently there is still due to me the sum of 5,500 pounds. This is a large lump of money. But Mr. Mountjoy is, I believe, a wealthy man. He will, doubtless, see the necessity of paying this money to me without further question or delay.

"You will, therefore, seek his presence--he is now, I hear, at home. You may read to him any part of this letter that you please, and you will let him know that I am in earnest. A man with empty pockets cannot choose but be in earnest.

"He may very possibly object.

"Very good. In that case you will tell him that a fraud has been committed in connection with which I am prepared to make a full confession. I consented, on the death of my patient, and at the earnest entreaty of Lord Harry

Norland, to represent the dead man as his lordship. I then went away, resolving to have nothing more to do with the further villainy which I believe was carried on to the obtaining of the whole amount for which he was insured.

"The murder of Lord Harry immediately afterwards caused the Company to drop their intended prosecution. I shall reveal to them the present residence of his widow, and shall place my evidence at their disposition. Whatever happens I shall make the facts of the case public. This done, nothing can hurt me; while, whether the Public Prosecutor intervenes or not, neither Mr. Hugh Mountjoy nor his wife can ever show face to the world again.

"Tell Mr. Mountjoy, I say, whatever you please, except that I am joking. You must not tell him that. I shall call to-morrow morning, and shall expect to find the business as good as done.

"A. V."

Mrs. Vimpany dropped the letter in dismay. Her husband had vanished out of her life for more than two years. She hoped that she was effectually hidden; she hoped that he had gone away to some far-off country where he would never more return. Alas! This world of ours has no far-off country left, and, even if the wicked man turneth away from his wickedness so far as to go to the Rocky Mountains, an express train and a swift boat will bring him back to his wickedness whenever he desires a little more enjoyment and the society of his old friends.

Mr. Vimpany was back again. What should she do? What would Iris do? What would Mr. Mountjoy do?

She read the letter again.

Two things were obvious: first, that he had no clue of the restitution; and, next, that he had no idea of the evidence against him for the murder of the Dane. She resolved to communicate the latter fact only. She was braver now than she had been formerly. She saw more clearly that the way of the wicked man is not always so easy for him. If he knew that his crime could be brought home to him; that he would certainly be charged with murder if he dared to show himself, or if he asked for money, he would desist. Before such a danger the most hardened villain would shrink.

She also understood that it was desirable to hide from him the nature of the evidence and the name of the only witness against him. She would calmly

tell him what would happen, and bid him begone, or take the consequences.

Yet even if he were driven off he would return. She would live henceforth in continual apprehension of his return. Her tranquillity was gone.

Heavens! That a man should have such power over the lives of others!

She passed the most wretched day of her whole life. She saw in anticipation the happiness of that household broken up. She pictured his coming, but she could not picture his departure. For she had never seen him baffled and defeated.

He would come in, big, burly, with his farmer-like manner confident, bullying, masterful. He would ask her what she had done; he would swear at her when he learned that she had done nothing; he would throw himself into the most comfortable chair, stretch out his legs, and order her to go and fetch Mr. Mountjoy. Would she be subdued by him as of old? Would she find the courage to stand up to him? For the sake of Iris--yes. For the sake of the man who had been so kind to her--yes.

In the evening, the two women--Mrs. Vimpany and Fanny--were seated in the housekeeper's room. Both had work in their laps: neither was doing any work. The autumnal day had been boisterous; the wind was getting higher.

"What are you thinking of?" asked Fanny.

"I was thinking of my husband. If he were to come back, Fanny--if he were to threaten--"

"You would loose my tongue--you would let me speak?"

"Yes; for her sake. I would have shielded him once---if I could. But not now. I know, at last, that there is no single good thing left in him."

"You have heard from him. I saw the letter this morning, in the box. I knew the handwriting. I have been waiting for you to speak."

"Hush! Yes, Fanny; I have heard from him. He wants money. He will come here to-morrow morning, and will threaten Mr. Mountjoy. Keep your mistress in her own room. Persuade her to lie in bed--anything."

"He does not know what I have seen. Charge him with the murder of the Dane. Tell him," said Fanny, her lips stiffening, "that if he dares to come

again--if he does not go away--he shall be arrested for murder. I will keep silence no longer!"

"I will--I am resolved! Oh! who will rid us of this monster?"

Outside, the gale rose higher--higher still. They heard it howling, grinding branches together; they heard the roaring and the rushing of the waters as the rising tide was driven over the shallow sands, like a mountain reservoir at loose among the valleys below.

In the midst of the tempest there came a sudden lull. Wind and water alike seemed hushed. And out of the lull, as if in answer to the woman's question, there came a loud cry--the shriek of a man in deadly peril.

The two women caught each other by the hand and rushed to the window. They threw it open; the tempest began again; a fresh gust drove them back; the waters roared: the wind howled; they heard the voice no more. They closed the window and put up the shutters.

It was long past midnight when they dared to go to bed. One of them lay awake the whole night long. In the roaring tempest she had seen an omen of the wrath of Heaven about to fall once more upon her mistress.

She was wrong. The wrath of Heaven fell upon one far more guilty.

In the morning, with the ebbing tide, a dead body was found lashed to the posts of one of the standing nets in the Solway. It was recognised by Hugh, who went out to look at it, and found it the body of Vimpany.

Whether he was on his way back to Annan, or whether he intended to call at the villa that evening instead of next morning, no one can tell. His wife shed tears, but they were tears of relief. The man was buried as a stranger. Hugh kept his counsel. Mrs. Vimpany put the letter in the fire. Neither of them thought it wise to disturb the mind of Iris by any mention of the man. Some days later, however, Mrs. Vimpany came downstairs in a widow's cap.

To Iris's look of interrogation she replied calmly, "Yes, I heard the other day. He is dead. Is it not better--even for him, perhaps--that he should be dead? He can do no more wickedness; he can bring misery into no more households. He is dead."

Iris made no reply. Better--better far--that he was dead. But how she had been delivered from the man, to what new dangers she had been exposed,

she knew not, and will never know.

She has one secret--and only one--which she keeps from her husband. In her desk she preserves a lock of Lord Harry's hair. Why? I know not. Blind Love doth never wholly die.

THE END