



The information struck her dumb! She handed the letter to me and left the table.

past, that memorable afternoon was like a glimpse of Paradise.

On the next morning, there was an end to my short-lived enjoyment of no more than the latter half of a day.

Watching her opportunity, Fanny Mere came to me while I was alone, carrying a thick letter in her hand. She held it before me with the address uppermost.

'Please to look at that,' she said.

The letter was directed (in Harry's handwriting) to Mr Vimpany, at a publishing office in London. Fanny next turned the envelope the other way.

'Look at this side,' she resumed.

The envelope was specially protected by a seal; bearing a device of my husband's own invention; that is to say, the initials of his name (Harry Norland) surmounted by a star—his lucky star, as he paid me the compliment of calling it, on the day when he married me. I was thinking of that day now. Fanny saw me looking, with a sad heart, at the impression on the wax. She completely misinterpreted the direction taken by my thoughts.

'Tell me to do it, my lady,' she proceeded; 'and I'll open the letter.'

I looked at her. She showed no confusion. 'I can seal it up again,' she coolly explained, 'with a bit of fresh wax and my thumb. Perhaps Mr Vimpany won't be sober enough to notice it.'

'Do you know, Fanny, that you are making a dishonourable proposal to me?' I said.

'I know there's nothing I can do to help you that I won't do,' she answered; 'and you know why. I have made a dishonourable proposal—have I? That comes quite naturally to a lost woman like me. Shall I tell you what Honour means? It means sticking at nothing in your service. Please tell me to open the letter.'

'How did you come by the letter, Fanny?'

'My master gave it to me to put in the post.'

'Then, post it.'

The strange creature, so full of contraries—so sensitive at one time, so impenetrable at another—pointed again to the address.

'When the master writes to that man,' she went on—'a long letter (if you will notice), and a sealed letter—your ladyship ought to see what is inside it. I haven't a doubt myself that there's writing under this seal which bodes trouble to you. The spare bedroom is empty. Do you want to have the doctor for your visitor again? Don't tell me to post the letter, till I've opened it first.'

'I do tell you to post the letter.'

Fanny submitted, so far. But she had a new form of persuasion to try, before her reserves of resistance were exhausted. 'If the doctor comes back,' she continued, 'will your ladyship give me leave to go out, whenever I ask for it?'

This was surely presuming on my indulgence. 'Are you not expecting a little too much?' I suggested—not unkindly.

'If you say that, my lady,' she answered, 'I shall be obliged to ask you to suit yourself with another maid.'

There was a tone of dictation in this, which I found beyond endurance. In my anger, I said: 'Leave me whenever you like.'

'I shall leave you when I'm dead—not before,' was the reply that I received. 'But if you won't let me have my liberty without going away from you, for a time I must go—for your sake.'

(For my sake! Pray observe that.)

She went on:—

'Try to see it, my lady, as I do! If we have the doctor with us again, I must be able to watch him.'

'Why?'

'Because he is your enemy, as I believe.'

'How can he hurt me, Fanny?'

'Through your husband, my lady, if he can do it in no other way. Mr Vimpany shall have a spy at his heels. Dishonourable! oh, dishonourable again! Never mind. I don't pretend to know what that villain means to do, if he and my lord get together again. But this I can tell you, if it's in woman's wit to circumvent him, here I am with my mind made up. With my mind made up! she repeated fiercely—and recovered on a sudden her customary character as a quiet well-trained servant, devoted to her duties. 'I'll take my master's letter to the post now,' she said. 'Is there anything your ladyship wants in the town?'

What do you think of Fanny Mere? Ought I to have treated this last offer of her services, as I treated her proposal to open the letter? I was not able to do it.

I believe there may be a good reason for the distrust of the doctor which possessed her so strongly; and I feel the importance of having this faithful and determined woman for an ally. Let me hope that Mr Vimpany's return (if it is to take place) may be delayed until you can safely write, with your own hand, such a letter of wise advice as I sadly need.

In the meantime, give my love to Hugh, and say to this dear friend all that I might have said for myself, if I had been near him. But take care that his recovery is not retarded by anxiety for me. Pray keep him in ignorance of the doubts and fears with which I am now looking at the future. If I was not so fond of my husband, I should be easier in my mind. This sounds contradictory, but I believe you will understand it. For awhile, my dear, good-bye.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)