

CHAPTER V. THE GERMAN SURGEON.

THE youngest of the three strangers--judging by features, complexion, and manner--was apparently an Englishman. He wore a military cap and military boots, but was otherwise dressed as a civilian. Next to him stood an officer in Prussian uniform, and next to the officer was the third and the oldest of the party. He also was dressed in uniform, but his appearance was far from being suggestive of the appearance of a military man. He halted on one foot, he stooped at the shoulders, and instead of a sword at his side he carried a stick in his hand. After looking sharply through a large pair of tortoise-shell spectacles, first at Mercy, then at the bed, then all round the room, he turned with a cynical composure of manner to the Prussian officer, and broke the silence in these words:

"A woman ill on the bed; another woman in attendance on her, and no one else in the room. Any necessity, major, for setting a guard here?"

"No necessity," answered the major. He wheeled round on his heel and returned to the kitchen. The German surgeon advanced a little, led by his professional instinct, in the direction of the bedside. The young Englishman, whose eyes had remained riveted in admiration on Mercy, drew the canvas screen over the doorway and respectfully addressed her in the French language.

"May I ask if I am speaking to a French lady?" he said.

"I am an Englishwoman," Mercy replied.

The surgeon heard the answer. Stopping short on his way to the bed, he pointed to the recumbent figure on it, and said to Mercy, in good English, spoken with a strong German accent.

"Can I be of any use there?"

His manner was ironically courteous, his harsh voice was pitched in one sardonic monotony of tone. Mercy took an instantaneous dislike to this hobbling, ugly old man, staring at her rudely through his great tortoiseshell spectacles.

"You can be of no use, sir," she said, shortly. "The lady was killed when your troops shelled this cottage."

The Englishman started, and looked compassionately toward the bed. The German refreshed himself with a pinch of snuff, and put another question.

"Has the body been examined by a medical man?" he asked.

Mercy ungraciously limited her reply to the one necessary word "Yes."

The present surgeon was not a man to be daunted by a lady's disapproval of him. He went on with his questions.

"Who has examined the body?" he inquired next.

Mercy answered, "The doctor attached to the French ambulance."

The German grunted in contemptuous disapproval of all Frenchmen, and all French institutions. The Englishman seized his first opportunity of addressing himself to Mercy once more.

"Is the lady a countrywoman of ours?" he asked, gently.

Mercy considered before she answered him. With the object she had in view, there might be serious reasons for speaking with extreme caution when she spoke of Grace.

"I believe so," she said. "We met here by accident. I know nothing of her."

"Not even her name?" inquired the German surgeon.

Mercy's resolution was hardly equal yet to giving her own name openly as the name of Grace. She took refuge in flat denial.

"Not even her name," she repeated obstinately.

The old man stared at her more rudely than ever, considered with himself, and took the candle from the table. He hobbled back to the bed and examined the figure laid on it in silence. The Englishman continued the conversation, no longer concealing the interest that he felt in the beautiful woman who stood before him.

"Pardon me," he said, "you are very young to be alone in war-time in such a place as this."

The sudden outbreak of a disturbance in the kitchen relieved Mercy from any immediate necessity for answering him. She heard the voices of the wounded men raised in feeble remonstrance, and the harsh command of the foreign officers bidding them be silent. The generous instincts of the woman instantly prevailed over every personal consideration imposed on her by the position which she had assumed. Reckless whether she betrayed herself or not as nurse in the French ambulance, she instantly drew aside the canvas to enter the kitchen. A German sentinel barred the way to her, and announced, in his own language, that no strangers were admitted. The Englishman politely interposing, asked if she had any special object in wishing to enter the room.

"The poor Frenchmen!" she said, earnestly, her heart upbraiding her for having forgotten them. "The poor wounded Frenchmen!"

The German surgeon advanced from the bedside, and took the matter up before the Englishman could say a word more.

"You have nothing to do with the wounded Frenchmen," he croaked, in the harshest notes of his voice. "The wounded Frenchmen are my business, and not yours. They are our prisoners, and they are being moved to our ambulance. I am Ignatius Wetzel, chief of the medical staff--and I tell you this. Hold your tongue." He turned to the sentinel and added in German, "Draw the curtain again; and if the woman persists, put her back into this room with your own hand."

Mercy attempted to remonstrate. The Englishman respectfully took her arm, and drew her out of the sentinel's reach.

"It is useless to resist," he said. "The German discipline never gives way. There is not the least need to be uneasy about the Frenchmen. The ambulance under Surgeon Wetzel is admirably administered. I answer for it, the men will be well treated." He saw the tears in her eyes as he spoke; his admiration for her rose higher and higher. "Kind as well as beautiful," he thought. "What a charming creature!"

"Well!" said Ignatius Wetzel, eying Mercy sternly through his spectacles. "Are you satisfied? And will you hold your tongue?"

She yielded: it was plainly useless to resist. But for the surgeon's resistance, her devotion to the wounded men might have stopped her on the downward way that she was going. If she could only have been absorbed again, mind and body, in her good work as a nurse, the temptation might even yet have

found her strong enough to resist it. The fatal severity of the German discipline had snapped asunder the last tie that bound her to her better self. Her face hardened as she walked away proudly from Surgeon Wetzels, and took a chair.

The Englishman followed her, and reverted to the question of her present situation in the cottage.

"Don't suppose that I want to alarm you," he said. "There is, I repeat, no need to be anxious about the Frenchmen, but there is serious reason for anxiety on your own account. The action will be renewed round this village by daylight; you ought really to be in a place of safety. I am an officer in the English army--my name is Horace Holmcraft. I shall be delighted to be of use to you, and I can be of use, if you will let me. May I ask if you are traveling?"

Mercy gathered the cloak which concealed her nurse's dress more closely round her, and committed herself silently to her first overt act of deception. She bowed her head in the affirmative.

"Are you on your way to England?"

"Yes."

"In that case I can pass you through the German lines, and forward you at once on your journey."

Mercy looked at him in unconcealed surprise. His strongly-felt interest in her was restrained within the strictest limits of good-breeding: he was unmistakably a gentleman. Did he really mean what he had just said?

"You can pass me through the German lines?" she repeated. "You must possess extraordinary influence, sir, to be able to do that."

Mr. Horace Holmcraft smiled.

"I possess the influence that no one can resist," he answered--"the influence of the Press. I am serving here as war correspondent of one of our great English newspapers. If I ask him, the commanding officer will grant you a pass. He is close to this cottage. What do you say?"

She summoned her resolution--not without difficulty, even now--and took him at his word.

"I gratefully accept your offer, sir."

He advanced a step toward the kitchen, and stopped.

"It may be well to make the application as privately as possible," he said. "I shall be questioned if I pass through that room. Is there no other way out of the cottage?"

Mercy showed him the door leading into the yard. He bowed--and left her.

She looked furtively toward the German surgeon. Ignatius Wetzel was still at the bed, bending over the body, and apparently absorbed in examining the wound which had been inflicted by the shell. Mercy's instinctive aversion to the old man increased tenfold, now that she was left alone with him. She withdrew uneasily to the window, and looked out at the moonlight.

Had she committed herself to the fraud? Hardly, yet. She had committed herself to returning to England--nothing more. There was no necessity, thus far, which forced her to present herself at Mablethorpe House, in Grace's place. There was still time to reconsider her resolution--still time to write the account of the accident, as she had proposed, and to send it with the letter-case to Lady Janet Roy. Suppose she finally decided on taking this course, what was to become of her when she found herself in England again? There was no alternative open but to apply once more to her friend the matron. There was nothing for her to do but to return to the Refuge!

The Refuge! The matron! What past association with these two was now presenting itself uninvited, and taking the foremost place in her mind? Of whom was she now thinking, in that strange place, and at that crisis in her life? Of the man whose words had found their way to her heart, whose influence had strengthened and comforted her, in the chapel of the Refuge. One of the finest passages in his sermon had been especially devoted by Julian Gray to warning the congregation whom he addressed against the degrading influences of falsehood and deceit. The terms in which he had appealed to the miserable women round him--terms of sympathy and encouragement never addressed to them before--came back to Mercy Merrick as if she had heard them an hour since. She turned deadly pale as they now pleaded with her once more. "Oh!" she whispered to herself, as she thought of what she had proposed and planned, "what have I done? what have I done?"

She turned from the window with some vague idea in her mind of following

Mr. Holmcroft and calling him back. As she faced the bed again she also confronted Ignatius Wetzel. He was just stepping forward to speak to her, with a white handkerchief--the handkerchief which she had lent to Grace--held up in his hand.

"I have found this in her pocket," he said. "Here is her name written on it. She must be a countrywoman of yours." He read the letters marked on the handkerchief with some difficulty. "Her name is--Mercy Merrick."

His lips had said it--not hers! He had given her the name.

"'Mercy Merrick' is an English name?" pursued Ignatius Wetzel, with his eyes steadily fixed on her. "Is it not so?"

The hold on her mind of the past association with Julian Gray began to relax. One present and pressing question now possessed itself of the foremost place in her thoughts. Should she correct the error into which the German had fallen? The time had come--to speak, and assert her own identity; or to be silent, and commit herself to the fraud.

Horace Holmcroft entered the room again at the moment when Surgeon Wetzel's staring eyes were still fastened on her, waiting for her reply.

"I have not overrated my interest," he said, pointing to a little slip of paper in his hand. "Here is the pass. Have you got pen and ink? I must fill up the form."

Mercy pointed to the writing materials on the table. Horace seated himself, and dipped the pen in the ink.

"Pray don't think that I wish to intrude myself into your affairs," he said. "I am obliged to ask you one or two plain questions. What is your name?"

A sudden trembling seized her. She supported herself against the foot of the bed. Her whole future existence depended on her answer. She was incapable of uttering a word.

Ignatius Wetzel stood her friend for once. His croaking voice filled the empty gap of silence exactly at the right time. He doggedly held the handkerchief under her eyes. He obstinately repeated: "Mercy Merrick is an English name. Is it not so?"

Horace Holmcroft looked up from the table. "Mercy Merrick?" he said. "Who

is Mercy Merrick?"

Surgeon Wetzel pointed to the corpse on the bed.

"I have found the name on the handkerchief," he said. "This lady, it seems, had not curiosity enough to look for the name of her own countrywoman." He made that mocking allusion to Mercy with a tone which was almost a tone of suspicion, and a look which was almost a look of contempt. Her quick temper instantly resented the discourtesy of which she had been made the object. The irritation of the moment--so often do the most trifling motives determine the most serious human actions--decided her on the course that she should pursue. She turned her back scornfully on the rude old man, and left him in the delusion that he had discovered the dead woman's name.

Horace returned to the business of filling up the form. "Pardon me for pressing the question," he said. "You know what German discipline is by this time. What is your name?"

She answered him recklessly, defiantly, without fairly realizing what she was doing until it was done.

"Grace Roseberry," she said.

The words were hardly out of her mouth before she would have given everything she possessed in the world to recall them.

"Miss?" asked Horace, smiling.

She could only answer him by bowing her head.

He wrote: "Miss Grace Roseberry"--reflected for a moment--and then added, interrogatively, "Returning to her friends in England?" Her friends in England? Mercy's heart swelled: she silently replied by another sign. He wrote the words after the name, and shook the sandbox over the wet ink. "That will be enough," he said, rising and presenting the pass to Mercy; "I will see you through the lines myself, and arrange for your being sent on by the railway. Where is your luggage?"

Mercy pointed toward the front door of the building. "In a shed outside the cottage," she answered. "It is not much; I can do everything for myself if the sentinel will let me pass through the kitchen."

Horace pointed to the paper in her hand. "You can go where you like now," he said. "Shall I wait for you here or outside?"

Mercy glanced distrustfully at Ignatius Wetzel. He was again absorbed in his endless examination of the body on the bed. If she left him alone with Mr. Holmcroft, there was no knowing what the hateful old man might not say of her. She answered:

"Wait for me outside, if you please."

The sentinel drew back with a military salute at the sight of the pass. All the French prisoners had been removed; there were not more than half-a-dozen Germans in the kitchen, and the greater part of them were asleep. Mercy took Grace Roseberry's clothes from the corner in which they had been left to dry, and made for the shed--a rough structure of wood, built out from the cottage wall. At the front door she encountered a second sentinel, and showed her pass for the second time. She spoke to this man, asking him if he understood French. He answered that he understood a little. Mercy gave him a piece of money, and said: "I am going to pack up my luggage in the shed. Be kind enough to see that nobody disturbs me." The sentinel saluted, in token that he understood. Mercy disappeared in the dark interior of the shed.

Left alone with Surgeon Wetzel, Horace noticed the strange old man still bending intently over the English lady who had been killed by the shell.

"Anything remarkable," he asked, "in the manner of that poor creature's death?"

"Nothing to put in a newspaper," retorted the cynic, pursuing his investigations as attentively as ever.

"Interesting to a doctor--eh?" said Horace.

"Yes. Interesting to a doctor," was the gruff reply.

Horace good-humoredly accepted the hint implied in those words. He quitted the room by the door leading into the yard, and waited for the charming Englishwoman, as he had been instructed, outside the cottage.

Left by himself, Ignatius Wetzel, after a first cautious look all round him, opened the upper part of Grace's dress, and laid his left hand on her heart. Taking a little steel instrument from his waistcoat pocket with the other

hand, he applied it carefully to the wound, raised a morsel of the broken and depressed bone of the skull, and waited for the result. "Aha!" he cried, addressing with a terrible gayety the senseless creature under his hands. "The Frenchman says you are dead, my dear--does he? The Frenchman is a Quack! The Frenchman is an Ass!" He lifted his head, and called into the kitchen. "Max!" A sleepy young German, covered with a dresser's apron from his chin to his feet, drew the curtain, and waited for his instructions. "Bring me my black bag," said Ignatius Wetzel. Having given that order, he rubbed his hands cheerfully, and shook himself like a dog. "Now I am quite happy," croaked the terrible old man, with his fierce eyes leering sidelong at the bed. "My dear, dead Englishwoman, I would not have missed this meeting with you for all the money I have in the world. Ha! you infernal French Quack, you call it death, do you? I call it suspended animation from pressure on the brain!"

Max appeared with the black bag.

Ignatius Wetzel selected two fearful instruments, bright and new, and hugged them to his bosom. "My little boys," he said, tenderly, as if they were his children; "my blessed little boys, come to work!" He turned to the assistant. "Do you remember the battle of Solferino, Max--and the Austrian soldier I operated on for a wound on the head?"

The assistant's sleepy eyes opened wide; he was evidently interested. "I remember," he said. "I held the candle."

The master led the way to the bed.

"I am not satisfied with the result of that operation at Solferino," he said; "I have wanted to try again ever since. It's true that I saved the man's life, but I failed to give him back his reason along with it. It might have been something wrong in the operation, or it might have been something wrong in the man. Whichever it was, he will live and die mad. Now look here, my little Max, at this dear young lady on the bed. She gives me just what I wanted; here is the case at Solferino once more. You shall hold the candle again, my good boy; stand there, and look with all your eyes. I am going to try if I can save the life and the reason too this time."

He tucked up the cuffs of his coat and began the operation. As his fearful instruments touched Grace's head, the voice of the sentinel at the nearest outpost was heard, giving the word in German which permitted Mercy to take the first step on her journey to England:

"Pass the English lady!"

The operation proceeded. The voice of the sentinel at the next post was heard more faintly, in its turn: "Pass the English lady!"

The operation ended. Ignatius Wetzel held up his hand for silence and put his ear close to the patient's mouth.

The first trembling breath of returning life fluttered over Grace Roseberry's lips and touched the old man's wrinkled cheek. "Aha!" he cried. "Good girl! you breathe--you live!" As he spoke, the voice of the sentinel at the final limit of the German lines (barely audible in the distance) gave the word for the last time:

"Pass the English lady!"

SECOND SCENE.--Mablethorpe House.

PREAMBLE.

THE place is England.

The time is winter, in the year eighteen hundred and seventy.

The persons are, Julian Gray, Horace Holmcroft, Lady Janet Roy, Grace Roseberry, and Mercy Merrick.