

## **CHAPTER XII. EXIT JULIAN.**

JULIAN happened to be standing nearest to Mercy. He was the first at her side when she fell.

In the cry of alarm which burst from him, as he raised her for a moment in his arms, in the expression of his eyes when he looked at her death-like face, there escaped the plain--too plain--confession of the interest which he felt in her, of the admiration which she had aroused in him. Horace detected it. There was the quick suspicion of jealousy in the movement by which he joined Julian; there was the ready resentment of jealousy in the tone in which he pronounced the words, "Leave her to me." Julian resigned her in silence. A faint flush appeared on his pale face as he drew back while Horace carried her to the sofa. His eyes sunk to the ground; he seemed to be meditating self-reproachfully on the tone in which his friend had spoken to him. After having been the first to take an active part in meeting the calamity that had happened, he was now, to all appearance, insensible to everything that was passing in the room.

A touch on his shoulder roused him.

He turned and looked round. The woman who had done the mischief--the stranger in the poor black garments--was standing behind him. She pointed to the prostrate figure on the sofa, with a merciless smile.

"You wanted a proof just now," she said. "There it is!"

Horace heard her. He suddenly left the sofa and joined Julian. His face, naturally ruddy, was pale with suppressed fury.

"Take that wretch away!" he said. "Instantly! or I won't answer for what I may do."

Those words recalled Julian to himself. He looked round the room. Lady Janet and the housekeeper were together, in attendance on the swooning woman. The startled servants were congregated in the library doorway. One of them offered to run to the nearest doctor; another asked if he should fetch the police. Julian silenced them by a gesture, and turned to Horace.

"Compose yourself," he said. "Leave me to remove her quietly from the house." He took Grace by the hand as he spoke. She hesitated, and tried to release herself. Julian pointed to the group at the sofa, and to the servants

looking on. "You have made an enemy of every one in this room," he said, "and you have not a friend in London. Do you wish to make an enemy of me? Her head drooped; she made no reply; she waited, dumbly obedient to the firmer will than her own. Julian ordered the servants crowding together in the doorway to withdraw. He followed them into the library, leading Grace after him by the hand. Before closing the door he paused, and looked back into the dining-room.

"Is she recovering?" he asked, after a moment's hesitation.

Lady Janet's voice answered him. "Not yet."

"Shall I send for the nearest doctor?"

Horace interposed. He declined to let Julian associate himself, even in that indirect manner, with Mercy's recovery.

"If the doctor is wanted," he said, "I will go for him myself."

Julian closed the library door. He absently released Grace; he mechanically pointed to a chair. She sat down in silent surprise, following him with her eyes as he walked slowly to and fro in the room.

For the moment his mind was far away from her, and from all that had happened since her appearance in the house. It was impossible that a man of his fineness of perception could mistake the meaning of Horace's conduct toward him. He was questioning his own heart, on the subject of Mercy, sternly and unreservedly as it was his habit to do. "After only once seeing her," he thought, "has she produced such an impression on me that Horace can discover it, before I have even suspected it myself? Can the time have come already when I owe it to my friend to see her no more?" He stopped irritably in his walk. As a man devoted to a serious calling in life, there was something that wounded his self-respect in the bare suspicion that he could be guilty of the purely sentimental extravagance called "love at first sight."

He had paused exactly opposite to the chair in which Grace was seated. Weary of the silence, she seized the opportunity of speaking to him.

"I have come here with you as you wished," she said. "Are you going to help me? Am I to count on you as my friend?"

He looked at her vacantly. It cost him an effort before he could give her the attention that she had claimed.

"You have been hard on me," Grace went on. "But you showed me some kindness at first; you tried to make them give me a fair hearing. I ask you, as a just man, do you doubt now that the woman on the sofa in the next room is an impostor who has taken my place? Can there be any plainer confession that she is Mercy Merrick than the confession she has made? You saw it; they saw it. She fainted at the sight of me."

Julian crossed the room--still without answering her--and rang the bell. When the servant appeared, he told the man to fetch a cab.

Grace rose from her chair. "What is the cab for?" she asked, sharply.

"For you and for me," Julian replied. "I am going to take you back to your lodgings."

"I refuse to go. My place is in this house. Neither Lady Janet nor you can get over the plain facts. All I asked was to be confronted with her. And what did she do when she came into the room? She fainted at the sight of me."

Reiterating her one triumphant assertion, she fixed her eyes on Julian with a look which said plainly: Answer that if you can. In mercy to her, Julian answered it on the spot.

"As far as I understand," he said, "you appear to take it for granted that no innocent woman would have fainted on first seeing you. I have something to tell you which will alter your opinion. On her arrival in England this lady informed my aunt that she had met with you accidentally on the French frontier, and that she had seen you (so far as she knew) struck dead at her side by a shell. Remember that, and recall what happened just now. Without a word to warn her of your restoration to life, she finds herself suddenly face to face with you, a living woman--and this at a time when it is easy for any one who looks at her to see that she is in delicate health. What is there wonderful, what is there unaccountable, in her fainting under such circumstances as these?"

The question was plainly put. Where was the answer to it?

There was no answer to it. Mercy's wisely candid statement of the manner in which she had first met with Grace, and of the accident which had followed had served Mercy's purpose but too well. It was simply impossible for persons acquainted with that statement to attach a guilty meaning to the swoon. The false Grace Roseberry was still as far beyond the reach of

suspicion as ever, and the true Grace was quick enough to see it. She sank into the chair from which she had risen; her hands fell in hopeless despair on her lap.

"Everything is against me," she said. "The truth itself turns liar, and takes her side." She paused, and rallied her sinking courage. "No!" she cried, resolutely, "I won't submit to have my name and my place taken from me by a vile adventuress! Say what you like, I insist on exposing her; I won't leave the house!"

The servant entered the room, and announced that the cab was at the door.

Grace turned to Julian with a defiant wave of her hand. "Don't let me detain you," she said. "I see I have neither advice nor help to expect from Mr. Julian Gray."

Julian beckoned to the servant to follow him into a corner of the room.

"Do you know if the doctor has been sent for?" he asked.

"I believe not, sir. It is said in the servants' hall that the doctor is not wanted."

Julian was too anxious to be satisfied with a report from the servants' hall. He hastily wrote on a slip of paper: "Has she recovered?" and gave the note to the man, with directions to take it to Lady Janet.

"Did you hear what I said?" Grace inquired, while the messenger was absent in the dining room.

"I will answer you directly," said Julian.

The servant appeared again as he spoke, with some lines in pencil written by Lady Janet on the back of Julian's note. "Thank God, we have revived her. In a few minutes we hope to be able to take her to her room."

The nearest way to Mercy's room was through the library. Grace's immediate removal had now become a necessity which was not to be trifled with. Julian addressed himself to meeting the difficulty the instant he was left alone with Grace.

"Listen to me," he said. "The cab is waiting, and I have my last words to say to you. You are now (thanks to the consul's recommendation) in my care."

Decide at once whether you will remain under my charge, or whether you will transfer yourself to the charge of the police."

Grace started. "What do you mean?" she asked, angrily.

"If you wish to remain under my charge," Julian proceeded, "you will accompany me at once to the cab. In that case I will undertake to give you an opportunity of telling your story to my own lawyer. He will be a fitter person to advise you than I am. Nothing will induce me to believe that the lady whom you have accused has committed, or is capable of committing, such a fraud as you charge her with. You will hear what the lawyer thinks, if you come with me. If you refuse, I shall have no choice but to send into the next room, and tell them that you are still here. The result will be that you will find yourself in charge of the police. Take which course you like: I will give you a minute to decide in. And remember this--if I appear to express myself harshly, it is your conduct which forces me to speak out. I mean kindly toward you; I am advising you honestly for your good."

He took out his watch to count the minute.

Grace stole one furtive glance at his steady, resolute face. She was perfectly unmoved by the manly consideration for her which Julian's last words had expressed. All she understood was that he was not a man to be trifled with. Future opportunities would offer themselves of returning secretly to the house. She determined to yield--and deceive him.

"I am ready to go," she said, rising with dogged submission. "Your turn now," she muttered to herself, as she turned to the looking-glass to arrange her shawl. "My turn will come."

Julian advanced toward her, as if to offer her his arm, and checked himself. Firmly persuaded as he was that her mind was deranged--readily as he admitted that she claimed, in virtue of her affliction, every indulgence that he could extend to her--there was something repellent to him at that moment in the bare idea of touching her. The image of the beautiful creature who was the object of her monstrous accusation--the image of Mercy as she lay helpless for a moment in his arms--was vivid in his mind while he opened the door that led into the hall, and drew back to let Grace pass out before him. He left the servant to help her into the cab. The man respectfully addressed him as he took his seat opposite to Grace.

"I am ordered to say that your room is ready, sir, and that her ladyship expects you to dinner."

Absorbed in the events which had followed his aunt's invitation, Julian had forgotten his engagement to stay at Mablethorpe House. Could he return, knowing his own heart as he now knew it? Could he honorably remain, perhaps for weeks together, in Mercy's society, conscious as he now was of the impression which she had produced on him? No. The one honorable course that he could take was to find an excuse for withdrawing from his engagement. "Beg her ladyship not to wait dinner for me," he said. "I will write and make my apologies." The cab drove off. The wondering servant waited on the doorstep, looking after it. "I wouldn't stand in Mr. Julian's shoes for something," he thought, with his mind running on the difficulties of the young clergyman's position. "There she is along with him in the cab. What is he going to do with her after that?"

Julian himself, if it had been put to him at the moment, could not have answered the question.

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Lady Janet's anxiety was far from being relieved when Mercy had been restored to her senses and conducted to her own room.

Mercy's mind remained in a condition of unreasoning alarm, which it was impossible to remove. Over and over again she was told that the woman who had terrified her had left the house, and would never be permitted to enter it more; over and over again she was assured that the stranger's frantic assertions were regarded by everybody about her as unworthy of a moment's serious attention. She persisted in doubting whether they were telling her the truth. A shocking distrust of her friends seemed to possess her. She shrank when Lady Janet approached the bedside. She shuddered when Lady Janet kissed her. She flatly refused to let Horace see her. She asked the strangest questions about Julian Gray, and shook her head suspiciously when they told her that he was absent from the house. At intervals she hid her face in the bedclothes and murmured to herself piteously, "Oh, what shall I do? What shall I do?" At other times her one petition was to be left alone. "I want nobody in my room"--that was her sullen cry--"nobody in my room."

The evening advanced, and brought with it no change for the better. Lady Janet, by the advice of Horace, sent for her own medical adviser.

The doctor shook his head. The symptoms, he said, indicated a serious shock to the nervous system. He wrote a sedative prescription; and he gave

(with a happy choice of language) some sound and safe advice. It amounted briefly to this: "Take her away, and try the sea-side." Lady Janet's customary energy acted on the advice, without a moment's needless delay. She gave the necessary directions for packing the trunks overnight, and decided on leaving Mablethorpe House with Mercy the next morning.

Shortly after the doctor had taken his departure a letter from Julian, addressed to Lady Janet, was delivered by private messenger.

Beginning with the necessary apologies for the writer's absence, the letter proceeded in these terms:

"Before I permitted my companion to see the lawyer, I felt the necessity of consulting him as to my present position toward her first.

"I told him--what I think it only right to repeat to you--that I do not feel justified in acting on my own opinion that her mind is deranged. In the case of this friendless woman I want medical authority, and, more even than that, I want some positive proof, to satisfy my conscience as well as to confirm my view.

"Finding me obstinate on this point, the lawyer undertook to consult a physician accustomed to the treatment of the insane, on my behalf.

"After sending a message and receiving the answer, he said, 'Bring the lady here--in half an hour; she shall tell her story to the doctor instead of telling it to me.' The proposal rather staggered me; I asked how it was possible to induce her to do that. He laughed, and answered, 'I shall present the doctor as my senior partner; my senior partner will be the very man to advise her.' You know that I hate all deception, even where the end in view appears to justify it. On this occasion, however, there was no other alternative than to let the lawyer take his own course, or to run the risk of a delay which might be followed by serious results.

"I waited in a room by myself (feeling very uneasy, I own) until the doctor joined me, after the interview was over.

"His opinion is, briefly, this:

"After careful examination of the unfortunate creature, he thinks that there are unmistakably symptoms of mental aberration. But how far the mischief has gone, and whether her case is, or is not, sufficiently grave to render actual restraint necessary, he cannot positively say, in our present state of

ignorance as to facts.

"Thus far,' he observed, 'we know nothing of that part of her delusion which relates to Mercy Merrick. The solution of the difficulty, in this case, is to be found there. I entirely agree with the lady that the inquiries of the consul at Mannheim are far from being conclusive. Furnish me with satisfactory evidence either that there is, or is not, such a person really in existence as Mercy Merrick, and I will give you a positive opinion on the case whenever you choose to ask for it.'

"Those words have decided me on starting for the Continent and renewing the search for Mercy Merrick.

"My friend the lawyer wonders jocosely whether I am in my right senses. His advice is that I should apply to the nearest magistrate, and relieve you and myself of all further trouble in that way.

"Perhaps you agree with him? My dear aunt (as you have often said), I do nothing like other people. I am interested in this case. I cannot abandon a forlorn woman who has been confided to me to the tender mercies of strangers, so long as there is any hope of my making discoveries which may be instrumental in restoring her to herself--perhaps, also, in restoring her to her friends.

"I start by the mail-train of to-night. My plan is to go first to Mannheim and consult with the consul and the hospital doctors; then to find my way to the German surgeon and to question him; and, that done, to make the last and hardest effort of all--the effort to trace the French ambulance and to penetrate the mystery of Mercy Merrick.

"Immediately on my return I will wait on you, and tell you what I have accomplished, or how I have failed.

"In the meanwhile, pray be under no alarm about the reappearance of this unhappy woman at your house. She is fully occupied in writing (at my suggestion) to her friends in Canada; and she is under the care of the landlady at her lodgings--an experienced and trustworthy person, who has satisfied the doctor as well as myself of her fitness for the charge that she has undertaken.

"Pray mention this to Miss Roseberry (whenever you think it desirable), with the respectful expression of my sympathy, and of my best wishes for her speedy restoration to health. And once more forgive me for failing, under



stress of necessity, to enjoy the hospitality of Mablethorpe House."

Lady Janet closed Julian's letter, feeling far from satisfied with it. She sat for a while, pondering over what her nephew had written to her.

"One of two things," thought the quick-witted old lady. "Either the lawyer is right, and Julian is a fit companion for the madwoman whom he has taken under his charge, or he has some second motive for this absurd journey of his which he has carefully abstained from mentioning in his letter. What can the motive be?"

At intervals during the night that question recurred to her ladyship again and again. The utmost exercise of her ingenuity failing to answer it, her one resource left was to wait patiently for Julian's return, and, in her own favorite phrase, to "have it out of him" then.

The next morning Lady Janet and her adopted daughter left Mablethorpe House for Brighton; Horace (who had begged to be allowed to accompany them) being sentenced to remain in London by Mercy's express desire. Why-nobody could guess; and Mercy refused to say.