

CHAPTER XIII. ENTER JULIAN.

A WEEK has passed. The scene opens again in the dining-room at Mablethorpe House.

The hospitable table bears once more its burden of good things for lunch. But on this occasion Lady Janet sits alone. Her attention is divided between reading her newspaper and feeding her cat. The cat is a sleek and splendid creature. He carries an erect tail. He rolls luxuriously on the soft carpet. He approaches his mistress in a series of coquettish curves. He smells with dainty hesitation at the choicest morsels that can be offered to him. The musical monotony of his purring falls soothingly on her ladyship's ear. She stops in the middle of a leading article and looks with a careworn face at the happy cat. "Upon my honor," cries Lady Janet, thinking, in her inveterately ironical manner, of the cares that trouble her, "all things considered, Tom, I wish I was You!"

The cat starts--not at his mistress's complimentary apostrophe, but at a knock at the door, which follows close upon it. Lady Janet says, carelessly enough, "Come in;" looks round listlessly to see who it is; and starts, like the cat, when the door opens and discloses--Julian Gray!

"You--or your ghost?" she exclaims.

She has noticed already that Julian is paler than usual, and that there is something in his manner at once uneasy and subdued--highly uncharacteristic of him at other times. He takes a seat by her side, and kisses her hand. But--for the first time in his aunt's experience of him--he refuses the good things on the luncheon table, and he has nothing to say to the cat! That neglected animal takes refuge on Lady Janet's lap. Lady Janet, with her eyes fixed expectantly on her nephew (determining to "have it out of him" at the first opportunity), waits to hear what he has to say for himself. Julian has no alternative but to break the silence, and tell his story as he best may.

"I got back from the Continent last night," he began. "And I come here, as I promised, to report myself on my return. How does your ladyship do? How is Miss Roseberry?"

Lady Janet laid an indicative finger on the lace pelerine which ornamented the upper part of her dress. "Here is the old lady, well," she answered--and pointed next to the room above them. "And there," she added, "is the young lady, ill. Is anything the matter with you, Julian?"

"Perhaps I am a little tired after my journey. Never mind me. Is Miss Roseberry still suffering from the shock?"

"What else should she be suffering from? I will never forgive you, Julian, for bringing that crazy impostor into my house."

"My dear aunt, when I was the innocent means of bringing her here I had no idea that such a person as Miss Roseberry was in existence. Nobody laments what has happened more sincerely than I do. Have you had medical advice?"

"I took her to the sea-side a week since by medical advice."

"Has the change of air don e her no good?"

"None whatever. If anything, the change of air has made her worse. Sometimes she sits for hours together, as pale as death, without looking at anything, and without uttering a word. Sometimes she brightens up, and seems as if she was eager to say something; and then Heaven only knows why, checks herself suddenly as if she was afraid to speak. I could support that. But what cuts me to the heart, Julian, is, that she does not appear to trust me and to love me as she did. She seems to be doubtful of me; she seems to be frightened of me. If I did not know that it was simply impossible that such a thing could be, I should really think she suspected me of believing what that wretch said of her. In one word (and between ourselves), I begin to fear she will never get over the fright which caused that fainting-fit. There is serious mischief somewhere; and, try as I may to discover it, it is mischief beyond my finding."

"Can the doctor do nothing?"

Lady Janet's bright black eyes answered before she replied in words, with a look of supreme contempt.

"The doctor!" she repeated, disdainfully. "I brought Grace back last night in sheer despair, and I sent for the doctor this morning. He is at the head of his profession; he is said to be making ten thousand a year; and he knows no more about it than I do. I am quite serious. The great physician has just gone away with two guineas in his pocket. One guinea, for advising me to

keep her quiet; another guinea for telling me to trust to time. Do you wonder how he gets on at this rate? My dear boy, they all get on in the same way. The medical profession thrives on two incurable diseases in these modern days--a He-disease and a She-disease. She-disease--nervous depression; He-disease--suppressed gout. Remedies, one guinea, if you go to the doctor; two guineas if the doctor goes to you. I might have bought a new bonnet," cried her ladyship, indignantly, "with the money I have given to that man! Let us change the subject. I lose my temper when I think of it. Besides, I want to know something. Why did you go abroad?"

At that plain question Julian looked unaffectedly surprised. "I wrote to explain," he said. "Have you not received my letter?"

"Oh, I got your letter. It was long enough, in all conscience; and, long as it was, it didn't tell me the one thing I wanted to know."

"What is the 'one thing'?"

Lady Janet's reply pointed--not too palpably at first--at that second motive for Julian's journey which she had suspected Julian of concealing from her.

"I want to know," she said, "why you troubled yourself to make your inquiries on the Continent in person? You know where my old courier is to be found. You have yourself pronounced him to be the most intelligent and trustworthy of men. Answer me honestly--could you not have sent him in your place?"

"I might have sent him," Julian admitted, a little reluctantly.

"You might have sent the courier--and you were under an engagement to stay here as my guest. Answer me honestly once more. Why did you go away?"

Julian hesitated. Lady Janet paused for his reply, with the air of a woman who was prepared to wait (if necessary) for the rest of the afternoon.

"I had a reason of my own for going," Julian said at last.

"Yes?" rejoined Lady Janet, prepared to wait (if necessary) till the next morning.

"A reason," Julian resumed, "which I would rather not mention."

"Oh!" said Lady Janet. "Another mystery--eh? And another woman at the bottom of it, no doubt. Thank you--that will do--I am sufficiently answered. No wonder, as a clergyman, that you look a little confused. There is, perhaps, a certain grace, under the circumstances, in looking confused. We will change the subject again. You stay here, of course, now you have come back?"

Once more the famous pulpit orator seemed to find himself in the inconceivable predicament of not knowing what to say. Once more Lady Janet looked resigned to wait (if necessary) until the middle of next week.

Julian took refuge in an answer worthy of the most commonplace man on the face of the civilized earth.

"I beg your ladyship to accept my thanks and my excuses," he said.

Lady Janet's many-ringed fingers, mechanically stroking the cat in her lap, began to stroke him the wrong way.

Lady Janet's inexhaustible patience showed signs of failing her at last.

"Mighty civil, I am sure," she said. "Make it complete. Say, Mr. Julian Gray presents his compliments to Lady Janet Roy, and regrets that a previous engagement--Julian!" exclaimed the old lady, suddenly pushing the cat off her lap, and flinging her last pretense of good temper to the winds--"Julian, I am not to be trifled with! There is but one explanation of your conduct--you are evidently avoiding my house. Is there somebody you dislike in it? Is it me?"

Julian intimated by a gesture that his aunt's last question was absurd. (The much-injured cat elevated his back, waved his tail slowly, walked to the fireplace, and honored the rug by taking a seat on it.)

Lady Janet persisted. "Is it Grace Roseberry?" she asked next.

Even Julian's patience began to show signs of yielding. His manner assumed a sudden decision, his voice rose a tone louder.

"You insist on knowing?" he said. "It is Miss Roseberry."

"You don't like her?" cried Lady Janet, with a sudden burst of angry surprise.

Julian broke out, on his side: "If I see any more of her," he answered, the rare color mounting passionately in his cheeks, "I shall be the unhappiest man living. If I see any more of her, I shall be false to my old friend, who is to marry her. Keep us apart. If you have any regard for my peace of mind, keep us apart."

Unutterable amazement expressed itself in his aunt's lifted hands. Ungovernable curiosity uttered itself in his aunt's next words.

"You don't mean to tell me you are in love with Grace?"

Julian sprung restlessly to his feet, and disturbed the cat at the fireplace. (The cat left the room.)

"I don't know what to tell you," he said; "I can't realize it to myself. No other woman has ever roused the feeling in me which this woman seems to have called to life in an instant. In the hope of forgetting her I broke my engagement here; I purposely seized the opportunity of making those inquiries abroad. Quite useless. I think of her, morning, noon, and night. I see her and hear her, at this moment, as plainly as I see and hear you. She has made herself a part of myself. I don't understand my life without her. My power of will seems to be gone. I said to myself this morning, 'I will write to my aunt; I won't go back to Mablethorpe House.' Here I am in Mablethorpe House, with a mean subterfuge to justify me to my own conscience. 'I owe it to my aunt to call on my aunt.' That is what I said to myself on the way here; and I was secretly hoping every step of the way that she would come into the room when I got here. I am hoping it now. And she is engaged to Horace Holmcroft--to my oldest friend, to my best friend! Am I an infernal rascal? or am I a weak fool? God knows--I don't. Keep my secret, aunt. I am heartily ashamed of myself; I used to think I was made of better stuff than this. Don't say a word to Horace. I must, and will, conquer it. Let me go."

He snatched up his hat. Lady Janet, rising with the activity of a young woman, pursued him across the room, and stopped him at the door.

"No," answered the resolute old lady, "I won't let you go. Come back with me."

As she said those words she noticed with a certain fond pride the brilliant color mounting in his cheeks--the flashing brightness which lent an added luster to his eyes. He had never, to her mind, looked so handsome before. She took his arm, and led him to the chairs which they had just left. It was

shocking, it was wrong (she mentally admitted) to look on Mercy, under the circumstances, with any other eye than the eye of a brother or a friend. In a clergyman (perhaps) doubly shocking, doubly wrong. But, with all her respect for the vested interests of Horace, Lady Janet could not blame Julian. Worse still, she was privately conscious that he had, somehow or other, risen, rather than fallen, in her estimation within the last minute or two. Who could deny that her adopted daughter was a charming creature? Who could wonder if a man of refined tastes admired her? Upon the whole, her ladyship humanely decided that her nephew was rather to be pitied than blamed. What daughter of Eve (no matter whether she was seventeen or seventy) could have honestly arrived at any other conclusion? Do what a man may--let him commit anything he likes, from an error to a crime--so long as there is a woman at the bottom of it, there is an inexhaustible fund of pardon for him in every other woman's heart. "Sit down," said Lady Janet, smiling in spite of herself; "and don't talk in that horrible way again. A man, Julian--especially a famous man like you--ought to know how to control himself."

Julian burst out laughing bitterly.

"Send upstairs for my self-control," he said. "It's in her possession--not in mine. Good morning, aunt."

He rose from his chair. Lady Janet instantly pushed him back into it.

"I insist on your staying here," she said, "if it is only for a few minutes longer. I have something to say to you."

"Does it refer to Miss Roseberry?"

"It refers to the hateful woman who frightened Miss Roseberry. Now are you satisfied?"

Julian bowed, and settled himself in his chair.

"I don't much like to acknowledge it," his aunt went on. "But I want you to understand that I have something really serious to speak about, for once in a way. Julian! that wretch not only frightens Grace--she actually frightens me."

"Frightens you? She is quite harmless, poor thing."

"'Poor thing!'" repeated Lady Janet. "Did you say 'poor thing'?"

"Yes."

"Is it possible that you pity her?"

"From the bottom of my heart."

The old lady's temper gave way again at that reply. "I hate a man who can't hate anybody!" she burst out. "If you had been an ancient Roman, Julian, I believe you would have pitied Nero himself."

Julian cordially agreed with her. "I believe I should," he said, quietly. "All sinners, my dear aunt, are more or less miserable sinners. Nero must have been one of the wretchedest of mankind."

"Wretched!" exclaimed Lady Janet. "Nero wretched! A man who committed robbery, arson and murder to his own violin accompaniment--only wretched! What next, I wonder? When modern philanthropy begins to apologize for Nero, modern philanthropy has arrived at a pretty pass indeed! We shall hear next that Bloody Queen Mary was as playful as a kitten; and if poor dear Henry the Eighth carried anything to an extreme, it was the practice of the domestic virtues. Ah, how I hate cant! What were we talking about just now? You wander from the subject, Julian; you are what I call bird-witted. I protest I forget what I wanted to say to you. No, I won't be reminded of it. I may be an old woman, but I am not in my dotage yet! Why do you sit there staring? Have you nothing to say for yourself? Of all the people in the world, have you lost the use of your tongue?"

Julian's excellent temper and accurate knowledge of his aunt's character exactly fitted him to calm the rising storm. He contrived to lead Lady Janet insensibly back to the lost subject by dexterous reference to a narrative which he had thus far left untold--the narrative of his adventures on the Continent.

"I have a great deal to say, aunt," he replied. "I have not yet told you of my discoveries abroad."

Lady Janet instantly took the bait.

"I knew there was something forgotten," she said. "You have been all this time in the house, and you have told me nothing. Begin directly."

Patient Julian began.