

## **CHAPTER XV. A WOMAN'S REMORSE.**

HAVING warmed his feet to his own entire satisfaction, Horace turned round from the fireplace, and discovered that he and Lady Janet were alone.

"Can I see Grace?" he asked.

The easy tone in which he put the question--a tone, as it were, of proprietorship in "Grace"--jarred on Lady Janet at the moment. For the first time in her life she found herself comparing Horace with Julian--to Horace's disadvantage. He was rich; he was a gentleman of ancient lineage; he bore an unblemished character. But who had the strong brain? who had the great heart? Which was the Man of the two?

"Nobody can see her," answered Lady Janet. "Not even you!"

The tone of the reply was sharp, with a dash of irony in it. But where is the modern young man, possessed of health and an independent income, who is capable of understanding that irony can be presumptuous enough to address itself to him? Horace (with perfect politeness) declined to consider himself answered.

"Does your ladyship mean that Miss Roseberry is in bed?" he asked.

"I mean that Miss Roseberry is in her room. I mean that I have twice tried to persuade Miss Roseberry to dress and come downstairs, and tried in vain. I mean that what Miss Roseberry refuses to do for Me, she is not likely to do for You--"

How many more meanings of her own Lady Janet might have gone on enumerating, it is not easy to calculate. At her third sentence a sound in the library caught her ear through the incompletely closed door and suspended the next words on her lips. Horace heard it also. It was the rustling sound (traveling nearer and nearer over the library carpet) of a silken dress.

(In the interval while a coming event remains in a state of uncertainty, what is it the inevitable tendency of every Englishman under thirty to do? His inevitable tendency is to ask somebody to bet on the event. He can no more resist it than he can resist lifting his stick or his umbrella, in the absence of a gun, and pretending to shoot if a bird flies by him while he is out for a walk.)

"What will your ladyship bet that this is not Grace?" cried Horace.

Her ladyship took no notice of the proposal; her attention remained fixed on the library door. The rustling sound stopped for a moment. The door was softly pushed open. The false Grace Roseberry entered the room.

Horace advanced to meet her, opened his lips to speak, and stopped--struck dumb by the change in his affianced wife since he had seen her last. Some terrible oppression seemed to have crushed her. It was as if she had actually shrunk in height as well as in substance. She walked more slowly than usual; she spoke more rarely than usual, and in a lower tone. To those who had seen her before the fatal visit of the stranger from Mannheim, it was the wreck of the woman that now appeared instead of the woman herself. And yet there was the old charm still surviving through it all; the grandeur of the head and eyes, the delicate symmetry of the features, the unsought grace of every movement--in a word, the unconquerable beauty which suffering cannot destroy, and which time itself is powerless to wear out. Lady Janet advanced, and took her with hearty kindness by both hands.

"My dear child, welcome among us again! You have come down stairs to please me?"

She bent her head in silent acknowledgment that it was so. Lady Janet pointed to Horace: "Here is somebody who has been longing to see you, Grace."

She never looked up; she stood submissive, her eyes fixed on a little basket of colored wools which hung on her arm. "Thank you, Lady Janet," she said, faintly. "Thank you, Horace."

Horace placed her arm in his, and led her to the sofa. She shivered as she took her seat, and looked round her. It was the first time she had seen the dining-room since the day when she had found herself face to face with the dead-alive.

"Why do you come here, my love?" asked Lady Janet. "The drawing-room would have been a warmer and a pleasanter place for you."

"I saw a carriage at the front door. I was afraid of meeting with visitors in the drawing-room."

As she made that reply, the servant came in, and announced the visitors'

names. Lady Janet sighed wearily. "I must go and get rid of them," she said, resigning herself to circumstances. "What will you do, Grace?"

"I will stay here, if you please."

"I will keep her company," added Horace.

Lady Janet hesitated. She had promised to see her nephew in the dining-room on his return to the house--and to see him alone. Would there be time enough to get rid of the visitors and to establish her adopted daughter in the empty drawing-room before Julian appeared? It was ten minutes' walk to the lodge, and he had to make the gate-keeper understand his instructions. Lady Janet decided that she had time enough at her disposal. She nodded kindly to Mercy, and left her alone with her lover.

Horace seated himself in the vacant place on the sofa. So far as it was in his nature to devote himself to any one he was devoted to Mercy. "I am grieved to see how you have suffered," he said, with honest distress in his face as he looked at her. "Try to forget what has happened."

"I am trying to forget. Do you think of it much?"

"My darling, it is too contemptible to be thought of."

She placed her work-basket on her lap. Her wasted fingers began absently sorting the wools inside.

"Have you seen Mr. Julian Gray?" she asked, suddenly.

"Yes."

"What does he say about it?" She looked at Horace for the first time, steadily scrutinizing his face. Horace took refuge in prevarication.

"I really haven't asked for Julian's opinion," he said.

She looked down again, with a sigh, at the basket on her lap--considered a little--and tried him once more.

"Why has Mr. Julian Gray not been here for a whole week?" she went on.

"The servants say he has been abroad. Is that true?"

It was useless to deny it. Horace admitted that the servants were right.

Her fingers, suddenly stopped at their restless work among the wools; her breath quickened perceptibly. What had Julian Gray been doing abroad? Had he been making inquiries? Did he alone, of all the people who saw that terrible meeting, suspect her? Yes! His was the finer intelligence; his was a clergyman's (a London clergyman's) experience of frauds and deceptions, and of the women who were guilty of them. Not a doubt of it now! Julian suspected her.

"When does he come back?" she asked, in tones so low that Horace could barely hear her.

"He has come back already. He returned last night."

A faint shade of color stole slowly over the pallor of her face. She suddenly put her basket away, and clasped her hands together to quiet the trembling of them, before she asked her next question.

"Where is--" She paused to steady her voice. "Where is the person," she resumed, "who came here and frightened me?"

Horace hastened to re-assure her. "The person will not come again," he said. "Don't talk of her! Don't think of her!"

She shook her head. "There is something I want to know," she persisted. "How did Mr. Julian Gray become acquainted with her?"

This was easily answered. Horace mentioned the consul at Mannheim, and the letter of introduction. She listened eagerly, and said her next words in a louder, firmer tone.

"She was quite a stranger, then, to Mr. Julian Gray--before that?"

"Quite a stranger," Horace replied. "No more questions--not another word about her, Grace! I forbid the subject. Come, my own love!" he said, taking her hand and bending over her tenderly, "rally your spirits! We are young--we love each other--now is our time to be happy!"

Her hand turned suddenly cold, and trembled in his. Her head sank with a helpless weariness on her breast. Horace rose in alarm.

"You are cold--you are faint," he said. "Let me get you a glass of wine!--let me mend the fire!"

The decanters were still on the luncheon-table. Horace insisted on her drinking some port-wine. She barely took half the contents of the wine-glass. Even that little told on her sensitive organization; it roused her sinking energies of body and mind. After watching her anxiously, without attracting her notice, Horace left her again to attend to the fire at the other end of the room. Her eyes followed him slowly with a hard and tearless despair. "Rally your spirits," she repeated to herself in a whisper. "My spirits! O God!" She looked round her at the luxury and beauty of the room, as those look who take their leave of familiar scenes. The moment after, her eyes sank, and rested on the rich dress that she wore a gift from Lady Janet. She thought of the past; she thought of the future. Was the time near when she would be back again in the Refuge, or back again in the streets?--she who had been Lady Janet's adopted daughter, and Horace Holmcroft's betrothed wife! A sudden frenzy of recklessness seized on her as she thought of the coming end. Horace was right! Why not rally her spirits? Why not make the most of her time? The last hours of her life in that house were at hand. Why not enjoy her stolen position while she could? "Adventuress!" whispered the mocking spirit within her, "be true to your character. Away with your remorse! Remorse is the luxury of an honest woman." She caught up her basket of wools, inspired by a new idea. "Ring the bell!" she cried out to Horace at the fire-place.

He looked round in wonder. The sound of her voice was so completely altered that he almost fancied there must have been another woman in the room.

"Ring the bell!" she repeated. "I have left my work upstairs. If you want me to be in good spirits, I must have my work."

Still looking at her, Horace put his hand mechanically to the bell and rang. One of the men-servants came in.

"Go upstairs and ask my maid for my work," she said, sharply. Even the man was taken by surprise: it was her habit to speak to the servants with a gentleness and consideration which had long since won all their hearts. "Do you hear me?" she asked, impatiently. The servant bowed, and went out on his errand. She turned to Horace with flashing eyes and fevered cheeks.

"What a comfort it is," she said, "to belong to the upper classes! A poor woman has no maid to dress her, and no footman to send upstairs. Is life worth having, Horace, on less than five thousand a year?"

The servant returned with a strip of embroidery. She took it with an insolent grace, and told him to bring her a footstool. The man obeyed. She tossed the embroidery away from her on the sofa. "On second thoughts, I don't care about my work," she said. "Take it upstairs again." The perfectly trained servant, marveling privately, obeyed once more. Horace, in silent astonishment, advanced to the sofa to observe her more nearly. "How grave you look!" she exclaimed, with an air of flippant unconcern. "You don't approve of my sitting idle, perhaps? Anything to please you! I haven't got to go up and downstairs. Ring the bell again."

"My dear Grace," Horace remonstrated, gravely, "you are quite mistaken. I never even thought of your work."

"Never mind; it's inconsistent to send for my work, and then send it away again. Ring the bell."

Horace looked at her without moving. "Grace," he said, "what has come to you?"

"How should I know?" she retorted, carelessly. "Didn't you tell me to rally my spirits? Will you ring the bell, or must I?"

Horace submitted. He frowned as he walked back to the bell. He was one of the many people who instinctively resent anything that is new to them. This strange outbreak was quite new to him. For the first time in his life he felt sympathy for a servant, when the much-enduring man appeared once more.

"Bring my work back; I have changed my mind." With that brief explanation she reclined luxuriously on the soft sofa-cushions, swinging one of her balls of wool to and fro above her head, and looking at it lazily as she lay back. "I have a remark to make, Horace," she went on, when the door had closed on her messenger. "It is only people in our rank of life who get good servants. Did you notice? Nothing upsets that man's temper. A servant in a poor family should have been impudent; a maid-of-all-work would have wondered when I was going to know my own mind." The man returned with the embroidery. This time she received him graciously; she dismissed him with her thanks. "Have you seen your mother lately, Horace?" she asked, suddenly sitting up and busying herself with her work.

"I saw her yesterday," Horace answered.

"She understands, I hope, that I am not well enough to call on her? She is not offended with me?"

Horace recovered his serenity. The deference to his mother implied in Mercy's questions gently flattered his self-esteem. He resumed his place on the sofa.

"Offended with you!" he answered, smiling. "My dear Grace, she sends you her love. And, more than that, she has a wedding present for you."

Mercy became absorbed in her work; she stooped close over the embroidery--so close that Horace could not see her face. "Do you know what the present is?" she asked, in lowered tones, speaking absently.

"No. I only know it is waiting for you. Shall I go and get it to-day?"

She neither accepted nor refused the proposal--she went on with her work more industriously than ever.

"There is plenty of time," Horace persisted. "I can go before dinner."

Still she took no notice: still she never looked up. "Your mother is very kind to me," she said, abruptly. "I was afraid, at one time, that she would think me hardly good enough to be your wife."

Horace laughed indulgently: his self-esteem was more gently flattered than ever.

"Absurd!" he exclaimed. "My darling, you are connected with Lady Janet Roy. Your family is almost as good as ours."

"Almost?" she repeated. "Only almost?"

The momentary levity of expression vanished from Horace's face. The family question was far too serious a question to be lightly treated. A becoming shadow of solemnity stole over his manner. He looked as if it was Sunday, and he was just stepping into church.

"In OUR family," he said, "we trace back--by my father, to the Saxons; by my mother, to the Normans. Lady Janet's family is an old family--on her side only."

Mercy dropped her embroidery, and looked Horace full in the face. She, too, attached no common importance to what she had next to say.

"If I had not been connected with Lady Janet," she began, "would you ever have thought of marrying me?"

"My love! what is the use of asking? You are connected with Lady Janet."

She refused to let him escape answering her in that way.

"Suppose I had not been connected with Lady Janet?" she persisted.

"Suppose I had only been a good girl, with nothing but my own merits to speak for me. What would your mother have said then?"

Horace still parried the question--only to find the point of it pressed home on him once more.

"Why do you ask?" he said.

"I ask to be answered," she rejoined. "Would your mother have liked you to marry a poor girl, of no family--with nothing but her own virtues to speak for her?"

Horace was fairly pressed back to the wall.

"If you must know," he replied, "my mother would have refused to sanction such a marriage as that."

"No matter how good the girl might have been?"

There was something defiant--almost threatening--in her tone. Horace was annoyed--and he showed it when he spoke.

"My mother would have respected the girl, without ceasing to respect herself," he said. "My mother would have remembered what was due to the family name."

"And she would have said, No?"

"She would have said, No."

"Ah!"

There was an undertone of angry contempt in the exclamation which made Horace start. "What is the matter?" he asked.



"Nothing," she answered, and took up her embroidery again. There he sat at her side, anxiously looking at her--his hope in the future centered in his marriage! In a week more, if she chose, she might enter that ancient family of which he had spoken so proudly, as his wife. "Oh!" she thought, "if I didn't love him! if I had only his merciless mother to think of!"

Uneasily conscious of some estrangement between them, Horace spoke again. "Surely I have not offended you?" he said.

She turned toward him once more. The work dropped unheeded on her lap. Her grand eyes softened into tenderness. A smile trembled sadly on her delicate lips. She laid one hand caressingly on his shoulder. All the beauty of her voice lent its charm to the next words that she said to him. The woman's heart hungered in its misery for the comfort that could only come from his lips.

"You would have loved me, Horace--without stopping to think of the family name?"

The family name again! How strangely she persisted in coming back to that! Horace looked at her without answering, trying vainly to fathom what was passing in her mind.

She took his hand, and wrung it hard--as if she would wring the answer out of him in that way.

"You would have loved me?" she repeated.

The double spell of her voice and her touch was on him. He answered, warmly, "Under any circumstances! under any name!"

She put one arm round his neck, and fixed her eyes on his. "Is that true?" she asked.

"True as the heaven above us!"

She drank in those few commonplace words with a greedy delight. She forced him to repeat them in a new form.

"No matter who I might have been? For myself alone?"

"For yourself alone."

She threw both arms round him, and laid her head passionately on his breast. "I love you! I love you!! I love you!!!" Her voice rose with hysterical vehemence at each repetition of the words--then suddenly sank to a low hoarse cry of rage and despair. The sense of her true position toward him revealed itself in all its horror as the confession of her love escaped her lips. Her arms dropped from him; she flung herself back on the sofa-cushions, hiding her face in her hands. "Oh, leave me!" she moaned, faintly. "Go! go!"

Horace tried to wind his arm round her, and raise her. She started to her feet, and waved him back from her with a wild action of her hands, as if she was frightened of him. "The wedding present!" she cried, seizing the first pretext that occurred to her. "You offered to bring me your mother's present. I am dying to see what it is. Go and get it!"

Horace tried to compose her. He might as well have tried to compose the winds and the sea.

"Go!" she repeated, pressing one clinched hand on her bosom. "I am not well. Talking excites me--I am hysterical; I shall be better alone. Get me the present. Go!"

"Shall I send Lady Janet? Shall I ring for your maid?"

"Send for nobody! ring for nobody! If you love me--leave me here by myself! leave me instantly!"

"I shall see you when I come back?"

"Yes! yes!"

There was no alternative but to obey her. Unwillingly and forebodingly, Horace left the room.

She drew a deep breath of relief, and dropped into the nearest chair. If Horace had stayed a moment longer--she felt it, she knew it--her head would have given way; she would have burst out before him with the terrible truth. "Oh!" she thought, pressing her cold hands on her burning eyes, "if I could only cry, now there is nobody to see me!"

The room was empty: she had every reason for concluding that she was alone. And yet at that very moment there were ears that listened--there were eyes waiting to see her.

Little by little the door behind her which faced the library and led into the billiard-room was opened noiselessly from without, by an inch at a time. As the opening was enlarged a hand in a black glove, an arm in a black sleeve, appeared, guiding the movement of the door. An interval of a moment passed, and the worn white face of Grace Roseberry showed itself stealthily, looking into the dining-room.

Her eyes brightened with vindictive pleasure as they discovered Mercy sitting alone at the further end of the room. Inch by inch she opened the door more widely, took one step forward, and checked herself. A sound, just audible at the far end of the conservatory, had caught her ear.

She listened--satisfied herself that she was not mistaken--and drawing back with a frown of displeasure, softly closed the door again, so as to hide herself from view. The sound that had disturbed her was the distant murmur of men's voices (apparently two in number) talking together in lowered tones, at the garden entrance to the conservatory.

Who were the men? and what would they do next? They might do one of two things: they might enter the drawing-room, or they might withdraw again by way of the garden. Kneeling behind the door, with her ear at the key-hole, Grace Roseberry waited the event.