

CHAPTER XVII. THE GUARDIAN ANGEL.

"You were here when I fainted, were you not?" Mercy began. "You must think me a sad coward, even for a woman."

He shook his head. "I am far from thinking that," he replied. "No courage could have sustained the shock which fell on you. I don't wonder that you fainted. I don't wonder that you have been ill."

She paused in rolling up the ball of wool. What did those words of unexpected sympathy mean? Was he laying a trap for her? Urged by that serious doubt, she questioned him more boldly.

"Horace tells me you have been abroad," she said. "Did you enjoy your holiday?"

"It was no holiday. I went abroad because I thought it right to make certain inquiries--" He stopped there, unwilling to return to a subject that was painful to her.

Her voice sank, her fingers trembled round the ball of wool; but she managed to go on.

"Did you arrive at any results?" she asked.

"At no results worth mentioning."

The caution of that reply renewed her worst suspicions of him. In sheer despair, she spoke out plainly.

"I want to know your opinion--" she began.

"Gently!" said Julian. "You are entangling the wool again."

"I want to know your opinion of the person who so terribly frightened me. Do you think her--"

"Do I think her--what?"

"Do you think her an adventuress?"

(As she said those words the branches of a shrub in the conservatory were noiselessly parted by a hand in a black glove. The face of Grace Roseberry appeared dimly behind the leaves. Undiscovered, she had escaped from the billiard-room, and had stolen her way into the conservatory as the safer hiding-place of the two. Behind the shrub she could see as well as listen. Behind the shrub she waited as patiently as ever.)

"I take a more merciful view," Julian answered. "I believe she is acting under a delusion. I don't blame her: I pity her."

"You pity her?" As Mercy repeated the words, she tore off Julian's hands the last few lengths of wool left, and threw the imperfectly wound skein back into the basket. "Does that mean," she resumed, abruptly, "that you believe her?"

Julian rose from his seat, and looked at Mercy in astonishment.

"Good heavens, Miss Roseberry! what put such an idea as that into your head?"

"I am little better than a stranger to you," she rejoined, with an effort to assume a jesting tone. "You met that person before you met with me. It is not so very far from pitying her to believing her. How could I feel sure that you might not suspect me?"

"Suspect you!" he exclaimed. "You don't know how you distress, how you shock me. Suspect you! The bare idea of it never entered my mind. The man doesn't live who trusts you more implicitly, who believes in you more devotedly, than I do."

His eyes, his voice, his manner, all told her that those words came from the heart. She contrasted his generous confidence in her (the confidence of which she was unworthy) with her ungracious distrust of him. Not only had she wronged Grace Roseberry--she had wronged Julian Gray. Could she deceive him as she had deceived the others? Could she meanly accept that implicit trust, that devoted belief? Never had she felt the base submissions which her own imposture condemned her to undergo with a loathing of them so overwhelming as the loathing that she felt now. In horror of herself, she turned her head aside in silence and shrank from meeting his eye. He noticed the movement, placing his own interpretation on it. Advancing closer, he asked anxiously if he had offended her.

"You don't know how your confidence touches me," she said, without looking

up. "You little think how keenly I feel your kindness."

She checked herself abruptly. Her fine tact warned her that she was speaking too warmly--that the expression of her gratitude might strike him as being strangely exaggerated. She handed him her work-basket before he could speak again.

"Will you put it away for me?" she asked, in her quieter tones. "I don't feel able to work just now."

His back was turned on her for a moment, while he placed the basket on a side-table. In that moment her mind advanced at a bound from present to future. Accident might one day put the true Grace in possession of the proofs that she needed, and might reveal the false Grace to him in the identity that was her own. What would he think of her then? Could she make him tell her without betraying herself? She determined to try.

"Children are notoriously insatiable if you once answer their questions, and women are nearly as bad," she said, when Julian returned to her. "Will your patience hold out if I go back for the third time to the person whom we have been speaking of?"

"Try me," he answered, with a smile.

"Suppose you had not taken your merciful view of her?"

"Yes?"

"Suppose you believed that she was wickedly bent on deceiving others for a purpose of her own--would you not shrink from such a woman in horror and disgust?"

"God forbid that I should shrink from any human creature!" he answered, earnestly. "Who among us has a right to do that?"

She hardly dared trust herself to believe him. "You would still pity her?" she persisted, "and still feel for her?"

"With all my heart."

"Oh, how good you are!"

He held up his hand in warning. The tones of his voice deepened, the luster

of his eyes brightened. She had stirred in the depths of that great heart the faith in which the man lived--the steady principle which guided his modest and noble life.

"No!" he cried. "Don't say that! Say that I try to love my neighbor as myself. Who but a Pharisee can believe that he is better than another? The best among us to-day may, but for the mercy of God, be the worst among us tomorrow. The true Christian virtue is the virtue which never despairs of a fellow-creature. The true Christian faith believes in Man as well as in God. Frail and fallen as we are, we can rise on the wings of repentance from earth to heaven. Humanity is sacred. Humanity has its immortal destiny. Who shall dare say to man or woman, 'There is no hope in you?' Who shall dare say the work is all vile, when that work bears on it the stamp of the Creator's hand?"

He turned away for a moment, struggling with the emotion which she had roused in him.

Her eyes, as they followed him, lighted with a momentary enthusiasm--then sank wearily in the vain regret which comes too late. Ah! if he could have been her friend and her adviser on the fatal day when she first turned her steps toward Mablethorpe House! She sighed bitterly as the hopeless aspiration wrung her heart. He heard the sigh; and, turning again, looked at her with a new interest in his face.

"Miss Roseberry," he said.

She was still absorbed in the bitter memories of the past: she failed to hear him.

"Miss Roseberry," he repeated, approaching her.

She looked up at him with a start.

"May I venture to ask you something?" he said, gently.

She shrank at the question.

"Don't suppose I am speaking out of mere curiosity," he went on. "And pray don't answer me unless you can answer without betraying any confidence which may have been placed in you."

"Confidence!" she repeated. "What confidence do you mean?"

"It has just struck me that you might have felt more than a common interest in the questions which you put to me a moment since," he answered. "Were you by any chance speaking of some unhappy woman--not the person who frightened you, of course--but of some other woman whom you know?"

Her head sank slowly on her bosom. He had plainly no suspicion that she had been speaking of herself: his tone and manner both answered for it that his belief in her was as strong as ever. Still those last words made her tremble; she could not trust herself to reply to them.

He accepted the bending of her head as a reply.

"Are you interested in her?" he asked next.

She faintly answered this time. "Yes."

"Have you encouraged her?"

"I have not dared to encourage her."

His face lighted up suddenly with enthusiasm. "Go to her," he said, "and let me go with you and help you!"

The answer came faintly and mournfully. "She has sunk too low for that!"

He interrupted her with a gesture of impatience.

"What has she done?" he asked.

"She has deceived--basely deceived--innocent people who trusted her. She has wronged--cruelly wronged--another woman."

For the first time Julian seated himself at her side. The interest that was now roused in him was an interest above reproach. He could speak to Mercy without restraint; he could look at Mercy with a pure heart.

"You judge her very harshly," he said. "Do you know how she may have been tried and tempted?"

There was no answer.

"Tell me," he went on, "is the person whom she has injured still living?"

"Yes."

"If the person is still living, she may atone for the wrong. The time may come when this sinner, too, may win our pardon and deserve our respect."

"Could you respect her?" Mercy asked, sadly. "Can such a mind as yours understand what she has gone through?"

A smile, kind and momentary, brightened his attentive face.

"You forget my melancholy experience," he answered. "Young as I am, I have seen more than most men of women who have sinned and suffered. Even after the little that you have told me, I think I can put myself in her place. I can well understand, for instance, that she may have been tempted beyond human resistance. Am I right?"

"You are right."

"She may have had nobody near at the time to advise her, to warn her, to save her. Is that true?"

"It is true."

"Tempted and friendless, self-abandoned to the evil impulse of the moment, this woman may have committed herself headlong to the act which she now vainly repents. She may long to make atonement, and may not know how to begin. All her energies may be crushed under the despair and horror of herself, out of which the truest repentance grows. Is such a woman as this all wicked, all vile? I deny it! She may have a noble nature; and she may show it nobly yet. Give her the opportunity she needs, and our poor fallen fellow-creature may take her place again among the best of us--honored, blameless, happy, once more!"

Mercy's eyes, resting eagerly on him while he was speaking, dropped again despondingly when he had done.

"There is no such future as that," she answered, "for the woman whom I am thinking of. She has lost her opportunity. She has done with hope."

Julian gravely considered with himself for a moment.

"Let us understand each other," he said. "She has committed an act of

deception to the injury of another woman. Was that what you told me?"

"Yes."

"And she has gained something to her own advantage by the act."

"Yes."

"Is she threatened with discovery?"

"She is safe from discovery--for the present, at least."

"Safe as long as she closes her lips?"

"As long as she closes her lips."

"There is her opportunity!" cried Julian. "Her future is before her. She has not done with hope!"

With clasped hands, in breathless suspense, Mercy looked at that inspiring face, and listened to those golden words.

"Explain yourself," she said. "Tell her, through me, what she must do."

"Let her own the truth," answered Julian, "without the base fear of discovery to drive her to it. Let her do justice to the woman whom she has wronged, while that woman is still powerless to expose her. Let her sacrifice everything that she has gained by the fraud to the sacred duty of atonement. If she can do that--for conscience' sake, and for pity's sake--to her own prejudice, to her own shame, to her own loss--then her repentance has nobly revealed the noble nature that is in her; then she is a woman to be trusted, respected, beloved! If I saw the Pharisees and fanatics of this lower earth passing her by in contempt, I would hold out my hand to her before them all. I would say to her in her solitude and her affliction, 'Rise, poor wounded heart! Beautiful, purified soul, God's angels rejoice over you! Take your place among the noblest of God's creatures!'"

In those last sentences he unconsciously repeated the language in which he had spoken, years since, to his congregation in the chapel of the Refuge. With tenfold power and tenfold persuasion they now found their way again to Mercy's heart. Softly, suddenly, mysteriously, a change passed over her. Her troubled face grew beautifully still. The shifting light of terror and suspense vanished from her grand gray eyes, and left in them the steady

inner glow of a high and pure resolve.

There was a moment of silence between them. They both had need of silence. Julian was the first to speak again.

"Have I satisfied you that her opportunity is still before her?" he asked. "Do you feel, as I feel, that she has not done with hope?"

"You have satisfied me that the world holds no truer friend to her than you," Mercy answered, gently and gratefully. "She shall prove herself worthy of your generous confidence in her. She shall show you yet that you have not spoken in vain."

Still inevitably failing to understand her, he led the way to the door.

"Don't waste the precious time," he said. "Don't leave her cruelly to herself. If you can't go to her, let me go as your messenger, in your place."

She stopped him by a gesture. He took a step back into the room, and paused, observing with surprise that she made no attempt to move from the chair that she occupied.

"Stay here," she said to him, in suddenly altered tones.

"Pardon me," he rejoined, "I don't understand you."

"You will understand me directly. Give me a little time."

He still lingered near the door, with his eyes fixed inquiringly on her. A man of a lower nature than his, or a man believing in Mercy less devotedly than he believed, would now have felt his first suspicion of her. Julian was as far as ever from suspecting her, even yet. "Do you wish to be alone?" he asked, considerately. "Shall I leave you for a while and return again?"

She looked up with a start of terror. "Leave me?" she repeated, and suddenly checked herself on the point of saying more. Nearly half the length of the room divided them from each other. The words which she was longing to say were words that would never pass her lips unless she could see some encouragement in his face. "No!" she cried out to him, on a sudden, in her sore need, "don't leave me! Come back to me!"

He obeyed her in silence. In silence, on her side, she pointed to the chair near her. He took it. She looked at him, and checked herself again; resolute

to make her terrible confession, yet still hesitating how to begin. Her woman's instinct whispered to her, "Find courage in his touch!" She said to him, simply and artlessly said to him, "Give me encouragement. Give me strength. Let me take your hand." He neither answered nor moved. His mind seemed to have become suddenly preoccupied; his eyes rested on her vacantly. He was on the brink of discovering her secret; in another instant he would have found his way to the truth. In that instant, innocently as his sister might have taken it, she took his hand. The soft clasp of her fingers, clinging round his, roused his senses, fired his passion for her, swept out of his mind the pure aspirations which had filled it but the moment before, paralyzed his perception when it was just penetrating the mystery of her disturbed manner and her strange words. All the man in him trembled under the rapture of her touch. But the thought of Horace was still present to him: his hand lay passive in hers; his eyes looked uneasily away from her.

She innocently strengthened her clasp of his hand. She innocently said to him, "Don't look away from me. Your eyes give me courage."

His hand returned the pressure of hers. He tasted to the full the delicious joy of looking at her. She had broken down his last reserves of self-control. The thought of Horace, the sense of honor, became obscured in him. In a moment more he might have said the words which he would have deplored for the rest of his life, if she had not stopped him by speaking first. "I have more to say to you," she resumed abruptly, feeling the animating resolution to lay her heart bare before him at last; "more, far more, than I have said yet. Generous, merciful friend, let me say it here!"

She attempted to throw herself on her knees at his feet. He sprung from his seat and checked her, holding her with both his hands, raising her as he rose himself. In the words which had just escaped her, in the startling action which had accompanied them, the truth burst on him. The guilty woman she had spoken of was herself!

While she was almost in his arms, while her bosom was just touching his, before a word more had passed his lips or hers, the library door opened.

Lady Janet Roy entered the room.