

CHAPTER XX. THE POLICEMAN IN PLAIN CLOTHES.

JULIAN looked round the room, and stopped at the door which he had just opened.

His eyes rested first on Mercy, next on Grace.

The disturbed faces of both the women told him but too plainly that the disaster which he had dreaded had actually happened. They had met without any third person to interfere between them. To what extremities the hostile interview might have led it was impossible for him to guess. In his aunt's presence he could only wait his opportunity of speaking to Mercy, and be ready to interpose if anything was ignorantly done which might give just cause of offense to Grace.

Lady Janet's course of action on entering the dining-room was in perfect harmony with Lady Janet's character.

Instantly discovering the intruder, she looked sharply at Mercy. "What did I tell you?" she asked. "Are you frightened? No! not in the least frightened! Wonderful!" She turned to the servant. "Wait in the library; I may want you again." She looked at Julian. "Leave it all to me; I can manage it." She made a sign to Horace. "Stay where you are, and hold your tongue." Having now said all that was necessary to every one else, she advanced to the part of the room in which Grace was standing, with lowering brows and firmly shut lips, defiant of everybody.

"I have no desire to offend you, or to act harshly toward you," her ladyship began, very quietly. "I only suggest that your visits to my house cannot possibly lead to any satisfactory result. I hope you will not oblige me to say any harder words than these--I hope you will understand that I wish you to withdraw."

The order of dismissal could hardly have been issued with more humane consideration for the supposed mental infirmity of the person to whom it was addressed. Grace instantly resisted it in the plainest possible terms.

"In justice to my father's memory and in justice to myself," she answered, "I insist on a hearing. I refuse to withdraw." She deliberately took a chair and seated herself in the presence of the mistress of the house.

Lady Janet waited a moment--steadily controlling her temper. In the interval of silence Julian seized the opportunity of remonstrating with Grace.

"Is this what you promised me?" he asked, gently. "You gave me your word that you would not return to Mablethorpe House."

Before he could say more Lady Janet had got her temper under command. She began her answer to Grace by pointing with a peremptory forefinger to the library door.

"If you have not made up your mind to take my advice by the time I have walked back to that door," she said, "I will put it out of your power to set me at defiance. I am used to be obeyed, and I will be obeyed. You force me to use hard words. I warn you before it is too late. Go!"

She returned slowly toward the library. Julian attempted to interfere with another word of remonstrance. His aunt stopped him by a gesture which said, plainly, "I insist on acting for myself." He looked next at Mercy. Would she remain passive? Yes. She never lifted her head; she never moved from the place in which she was standing apart from the rest. Horace himself tried to attract her attention, and tried in vain.

Arrived at the library door, Lady Janet looked over her shoulder at the little immovable black figure in the chair.

"Will you go?" she asked, for the last time.

Grace started up angrily from her seat, and fixed her viperish eyes on Mercy.

"I won't be turned out of your ladyship's house in the presence of that impostor," she said. "I may yield to force, but I will yield to nothing else. I insist on my right to the place that she has stolen from me. It's no use scolding me," she added, turning doggedly to Julian. "As long as that woman is here under my name I can't and won't keep away from the house. I warn her, in your presence, that I have written to my friends in Canada! I dare her before you all to deny that she is the outcast and adventuress, Mercy Merrick!"

The challenge forced Mercy to take part in the proceedings in her own defense. She had pledged herself to meet and defy Grace Roseberry on her own ground. She attempted to speak--Horace stopped her.

"You degrade yourself if you answer her," he said. "Take my arm, and let us

leave the room."

"Yes! Take her out!" cried Grace. "She may well be ashamed to face an honest woman. It's her place to leave the room--not mine!"

Mercy drew her hand out of Horace's arm. "I decline to leave the room," she said, quietly.

Horace still tried to persuade her to withdraw. "I can't bear to hear you insulted," he rejoined. "The woman offends me, though I know she is not responsible for what she says."

"Nobody's endurance will be tried much longer," said Lady Janet. She glanced at Julian, and taking from her pocket the card which he had given to her, opened the library door.

"Go to the police station," she said to the servant in an undertone, "and give that card to the inspector on duty. Tell him there is not a moment to lose."

"Stop!" said Julian, before his aunt could close the door again.

"Stop?" repeated Lady Janet, sharply. "I have given the man his orders. What do you mean?"

"Before you send the card I wish to say a word in private to this lady," replied Julian, indicating Grace. "When that is done," he continued, approaching Mercy, and pointedly addressing himself to her, "I shall have a request to make--I shall ask you to give me an opportunity of speaking to you without interruption."

His tone pointed the allusion. Mercy shrank from looking at him. The signs of painful agitation began to show themselves in her shifting color and her uneasy silence. Roused by Julian's significantly distant reference to what had passed between them, her better impulses were struggling already to recover their influence over her. She might, at that critical moment, have yielded to the promptings of her own nobler nature--she might have risen superior to the galling remembrance of the insults that had been heaped upon her--if Grace's malice had not seen in her hesitation a means of referring offensively once again to her interview with Julian Gray.

"Pray don't think twice about trusting him alone with me," she said, with a sardonic affectation of politeness. "I am not interested in making a conquest of Mr. Julian Gray."

The jealous distrust in Horace (already awakened by Julian's request) now attempted to assert itself openly. Before he could speak, Mercy's indignation had dictated Mercy's answer.

"I am much obliged to you, Mr. Gray," she said, addressing Julian (but still not raising her eyes to his). "I have nothing more to say. There is no need for me to trouble you again."

In those rash words she recalled the confession to which she stood pledged. In those rash words she committed herself to keeping the position that she had usurped, in the face of the woman whom she had deprived of it!

Horace was silenced, but not satisfied. He saw Julian's eyes fixed in sad and searching attention on Mercy's face while she was speaking. He heard Julian sigh to himself when she had done. He observed Julian--after a moment's serious consideration, and a moment's glance backward at the stranger in the poor black clothes--lift his head with the air of a man who had taken a sudden resolution.

"Bring me that card directly," he said to the servant. His tone announced that he was not to be trifled with. The man obeyed.

Without answering Lady Janet--who still peremptorily insisted on her right to act for herself--Julian took the pencil from his pocketbook and added his signature to the writing already inscribed on the card. When he had handed it back to the servant he made his apologies to his aunt.

"Pardon me for venturing to interfere," he said "There is a serious reason for what I have done, which I will explain to you at a fitter time. In the meanwhile I offer no further obstruction to the course which you propose taking. On the contrary, I have just assisted you in gaining the end that you have in view."

As he said that he held up the pencil with which he had signed his name.

Lady Janet, naturally perplexed, and (with some reason, perhaps) offended as well, made no answer. She waved her hand to the servant, and sent him away with the card.

There was silence in the room. The eyes of all the persons present turned more or less anxiously on Julian. Mercy was vaguely surprised and alarmed. Horace, like Lady Janet, felt offended, without clearly knowing why. Even

Grace Roseberry herself was subdued by her own presentiment of some coming interference for which she was completely unprepared. Julian's words and actions, from the moment when he had written on the card, were involved in a mystery to which not one of the persons round him held the clew.

The motive which had animated his conduct may, nevertheless, be described in two words: Julian still held to his faith in the inbred nobility of Mercy's nature.

He had inferred, with little difficulty, from the language which Grace had used toward Mercy in his presence, that the injured woman must have taken pitiless advantage of her position at the interview which he had interrupted. Instead of appealing to Mercy's sympathies and Mercy's sense of right--instead of accepting the expression of her sincere contrition, and encouraging her to make the completest and the speediest atonement--Grace had evidently outraged and insulted her. As a necessary result, her endurance had given way--under her own sense of intolerable severity and intolerable wrong.

The remedy for the mischief thus done was, as Julian had first seen it, to speak privately with Grace, to soothe her by owning that his opinion of the justice of her claims had undergone a change in her favor, and then to persuade her, in her own interests, to let him carry to Mercy such expressions of apology and regret as might lead to a friendly understanding between them.

With those motives, he had made his request to be permitted to speak separately to the one and the other. The scene that had followed, the new insult offered by Grace, and the answer which it had wrung from Mercy, had convinced him that no such interference as he had contemplated would have the slightest prospect of success.

The only remedy now left to try was the desperate remedy of letting things take their course, and trusting implicitly to Mercy's better nature for the result.

Let her see the police officer in plain clothes enter the room. Let her understand clearly what the result of his interference would be. Let her confront the alternative of consigning Grace Roseberry to a mad-house or of confessing the truth--and what would happen? If Julian's confidence in her

was a confidence soundly placed, she would nobly pardon the outrages that had been heaped upon her, and she would do justice to the woman whom she had wronged.

If, on the other hand, his belief in her was nothing better than the blind belief of an infatuated man--if she faced the alternative and persisted in asserting her assumed identity--what then?

Julian's faith in Mercy refused to let that darker side of the question find a place in his thoughts. It rested entirely with him to bring the officer into the house. He had prevented Lady Janet from making any mischievous use of his card by sending to the police station and warning them to attend to no message which they might receive unless the card produced bore his signature. Knowing the responsibility that he was taking on himself--knowing that Mercy had made no confession to him to which it was possible to appeal--he had signed his name without an instant's hesitation: and there he stood now, looking at the woman whose better nature he was determined to vindicate, the only calm person in the room.

Horace's jealousy saw something suspiciously suggestive of a private understanding in Julian's earnest attention and in Mercy's downcast face. Having no excuse for open interference, he made an effort to part them.

"You spoke just now," he said to Julian, "of wishing to say a word in private to that person." (He pointed to Grace.) "Shall we retire, or will you take her into the library?"

"I refuse to have anything to say to him," Grace burst out, before Julian could answer. "I happen to know that he is the last person to do me justice. He has been effectually hoodwinked. If I speak to anybody privately, it ought to be to you. You have the greatest interest of any of them in finding out the truth."

"What do you mean?"

"Do you want to marry an outcast from the streets?"

Horace took one step forward toward her. There was a look in his face which plainly betrayed that he was capable of turning her out of the house with his own hands. Lady Janet stopped him.

"You were right in suggesting just now that Grace had better leave the room," she said. "Let us all three go. Julian will remain here and give the

man his directions when he arrives. Come."

No. By a strange contradiction it was Horace himself who now interfered to prevent Mercy from leaving the room. In the heat of his indignation he lost all sense of his own dignity; he descended to the level of a woman whose intellect he believed to be deranged. To the surprise of every one present, he stepped back and took from the table a jewel-case which he had placed there when he came into the room. It was the wedding present from his mother which he had brought to his betrothed wife. His outraged self-esteem seized the opportunity of vindicating Mercy by a public bestowal of the gift.

"Wait!" he called out, sternly. "That wretch shall have her answer. She has sense enough to see and sense enough to hear. Let her see and hear!"

He opened the jewel-case, and took from it a magnificent pearl necklace in an antique setting.

"Grace," he said, with his highest distinction of manner, "my mother sends you her love and her congratulations on our approaching marriage. She begs you to accept, as part of your bridal dress, these pearls. She was married in them herself. They have been in our family for centuries. As one of the family, honored and beloved, my mother offers them to my wife."

He lifted the necklace to clasp it round Mercy's neck.

Julian watched her in breathless suspense. Would she sustain the ordeal through which Horace had innocently condemned her to pass?

Yes! In the insolent presence of Grace Roseberry, what was there now that she could not sustain? Her pride was in arms. Her lovely eyes lighted up as only a woman's eyes can light up when they see jewelry. Her grand head bent gracefully to receive the necklace. Her face warmed into color; her beauty rallied its charms. Her triumph over Grace Roseberry was complete! Julian's head sank. For one sad moment he secretly asked himself the question: "Have I been mistaken in her?"

Horace arrayed her in the pearls.

"Your husband puts these pearls on your neck, love," he said, proudly, and paused to look at her. "Now," he added, with a contemptuous backward glance at Grace, "we may go into the library. She has seen, and she has heard."

He believed that he had silenced her. He had simply furnished her sharp tongue with a new sting.

"You will hear, and you will see, when my proofs come from Canada," she retorted. "You will hear that your wife has stolen my name and my character! You will see your wife dismissed from this house!"

Mercy turned on her with an uncontrollable outburst of passion.

"You are mad!" she cried.

Lady Janet caught the electric infection of anger in the air of the room. She, too, turned on Grace. She, too, said it:

"You are mad!"

Horace followed Lady Janet. He was beside himself. He fixed his pitiless eyes on Grace, and echoed the contagious words:

"You are mad!"

She was silenced, she was daunted at last. The treble accusation revealed to her, for the first time, the frightful suspicion to which she had exposed herself. She shrank back with a low cry of horror, and struck against a chair. She would have fallen if Julian had not sprung forward and caught her.

Lady Janet led the way into the library. She opened the door--started--and suddenly stepped aside, so as to leave the entrance free.

A man appeared in the open doorway.

He was not a gentleman; he was not a workman; he was not a servant. He was vilely dressed, in glossy black broadcloth. His frockcoat hung on him instead of fitting him. His waistcoat was too short and too tight over the chest. His trousers were a pair of shapeless black bags. His gloves were too large for him. His highly-polished boots creaked detestably whenever he moved. He had odiously watchful eyes--eyes that looked skilled in peeping through key-holes. His large ears, set forward like the ears of a monkey, pleaded guilty to meanly listening behind other people's doors. His manner was quietly confidential when he spoke, impenetrably self-possessed when he was silent. A lurking air of secret service enveloped the fellow, like an

atmosphere of his own, from head to foot. He looked all round the magnificent room without betraying either surprise or admiration. He closely investigated every person in it with one glance of his cunningly watchful eyes. Making his bow to Lady Janet, he silently showed her, as his introduction, the card that had summoned him. And then he stood at ease, self-revealed in his own sinister identity--a police officer in plain clothes.

Nobody spoke to him. Everybody shrank inwardly as if a reptile had crawled into the room.

He looked backward and forward, perfectly unembarrassed, between Julian and Horace.

"Is Mr. Julian Gray here?" he asked.

Julian led Grace to a seat. Her eyes were fixed on the man. She trembled--she whispered, "Who is he?" Julian spoke to the police officer without answering her.

"Wait there," he said, pointing to a chair in the most distant corner of the room. "I will speak to you directly."

The man advanced to the chair, marching to the discord of his creaking boots. He privately valued the carpet at so much a yard as he walked over it. He privately valued the chair at so much the dozen as he sat down on it. He was quite at his ease: it was no matter to him whether he waited and did nothing, or whether he pried into the private character of every one in the room, as long as he was paid for it.

Even Lady Janet's resolution to act for herself was not proof against the appearance of the policeman in plain clothes. She left it to her nephew to take the lead. Julian glanced at Mercy before he stirred further in the matter. He alone knew that the end rested now not with him but with her.

She felt his eye on her while her own eyes were looking at the man. She turned her head--hesitated--and suddenly approached Julian. Like Grace Roseberry, she was trembling. Like Grace Roseberry, she whispered, "Who is he?"

Julian told her plainly who he was.

"Why is he here?"

"Can't you guess?"

"No!"

Horace left Lady Janet, and joined Mercy and Julian--impatient of the private colloquy between them.

"Am I in the way?" he inquired.

Julian drew back a little, understanding Horace perfectly. He looked round at Grace. Nearly the whole length of the spacious room divided them from the place in which she was sitting. She had never moved since he had placed her in a chair. The direst of all terrors was in possession of her--terror of the unknown. There was no fear of her interfering, and no fear of her hearing what they said so long as they were careful to speak in guarded tones. Julian set the example by lowering his voice.

"Ask Horace why the police officer is here?" he said to Mercy.

She put the question directly. "Why is he here?"

Horace looked across the room at Grace, and answered, "He is here to relieve us of that woman."

"Do you mean that he will take her away?"

"Yes."

"Where will he take her to?"

"To the police station."

Mercy started, and looked at Julian. He was still watching the slightest changes in her face. She looked back again at Horace.

"To the police station!" she repeated. "What for?"

"How can you ask the question?" said Horace, irritably. "To be placed under restraint, of course."

"Do you mean prison?"

"I mean an asylum."

Again Mercy turned to Julian. There was horror now, as well as surprise, in her face. "Oh!" she said to him, "Horace is surely wrong? It can't be?"

Julian left it to Horace to answer. Every faculty in him seemed to be still absorbed in watching Mercy's face. She was compelled to address herself to Horace once more.

"What sort of asylum?" she asked. "You don't surely mean a madhouse?"

"I do," he rejoined. "The workhouse first, perhaps--and then the madhouse. What is there to surprise you in that? You yourself told her to her face she was mad. Good Heavens! how pale you are! What is the matter?"

She turned to Julian for the third time. The terrible alternative that was offered to her had showed itself at last, without reserve or disguise. Restore the identity that you have stolen, or shut her up in a madhouse--it rests with you to choose! In that form the situation shaped itself in her mind. She chose on the instant. Before she opened her lips the higher nature in her spoke to Julian, in her eyes. The steady inner light that he had seen in them once already shone in them again, brighter and purer than before. The conscience that he had fortified, the soul that he had saved, looked at him and said, Doubt us no more!

"Send that man out of the house."

Those were her first words. She spoke (pointing to the police officer) in clear, ringing, resolute tones, audible in the remotest corner of the room.

Julian's hand stole unobserved to hers, and told her, in its momentary pressure, to count on his brotherly sympathy and help. All the other persons in the room looked at her in speechless surprise. Grace rose from her chair. Even the man in plain clothes started to his feet. Lady Janet (hurriedly joining Horace, and fully sharing his perplexity and alarm) took Mercy impulsively by the arm, and shook it, as if to rouse her to a sense of what she was doing. Mercy held firm; Mercy resolutely repeated what she had said: "Send that man out of the house."

Lady Janet lost all her patience with her. "What has come to you?" she asked, sternly. "Do you know what you are saying? The man is here in your interest, as well as in mine; the man is here to spare you, as well as me, further annoyance and insult. And you insist--insist, in my presence--on his being sent away! What does it mean?"

"You shall know what it means, Lady Janet, in half an hour. I don't insist--I only reiterate my entreaty. Let the man be sent away."

Julian stepped aside (with his aunt's eyes angrily following him) and spoke to the police officer. "Go back to the station," he said, "and wait there till you hear from me."

The meanly vigilant eyes of the man in plain clothes traveled sidelong from Julian to Mercy, and valued her beauty as they had valued the carpet and the chairs. "The old story," he thought. "The nice-looking woman is always at the bottom of it; and, sooner or later, the nice-looking woman has her way." He marched back across the room, to the discord of his own creaking boots, bowed, with a villainous smile which put the worst construction on everything, and vanished through the library door.

Lady Janet's high breeding restrained her from saying anything until the police officer was out of hearing. Then, and not till then, she appealed to Julian.

"I presume you are in the secret of this?" she said. "I suppose you have some reason for setting my authority at defiance in my own house?"

"I have never yet failed to respect your ladyship," Julian answered. "Before long you will know that I am not failing in respect toward you now."

Lady Janet looked across the room. Grace was listening eagerly, conscious that events had taken some mysterious turn in her favor within the last minute.

"Is it part of your new arrangement of my affairs," her ladyship continued, "that this person is to remain in the house?"

The terror that had daunted Grace had not lost all hold of her yet. She left it to Julian to reply. Before he could speak Mercy crossed the room and whispered to her, "Give me time to confess it in writing. I can't own it before them--with this round my neck." She pointed to the necklace. Grace cast a threatening glance at her, and suddenly looked away again in silence.

Mercy answered Lady Janet's question. "I beg your ladyship to permit her to remain until the half hour is over," she said. "My request will have explained itself by that time."

Lady Janet raised no further obstacles. For something in Mercy's face, or in Mercy's tone, seemed to have silenced her, as it had silenced Grace. Horace was the next who spoke. In tones of suppressed rage and suspicion he addressed himself to Mercy, standing fronting him by Julian's side.

"Am I included," he asked, "in the arrangement which engages you to explain your extraordinary conduct in half an hour?"

His hand had placed his mother's wedding present round Mercy's neck. A sharp pang wrung her as she looked at Horace, and saw how deeply she had already distressed and offended him. The tears rose in her eyes; she humbly and faintly answered him.

"If you please," was all she could say, before the cruel swelling at her heart rose and silenced her.

Horace's sense of injury refused to be soothed by such simple submission as this.

"I dislike mysteries and innuendoes," he went on, harshly. "In my family circle we are accustomed to meet each other frankly. Why am I to wait half an hour for an explanation which might be given now? What am I to wait for?"

Lady Janet recovered herself as Horace spoke.

"I entirely agree with you," she said. "I ask, too, what are we to wait for?"

Even Julian's self-possession failed him when his aunt repeated that cruelly plain question. How would Mercy answer it? Would her courage still hold out?

"You have asked me what you are to wait for," she said to Horace, quietly and firmly. "Wait to hear something more of Mercy Merrick."

Lady Janet listened with a look of weary disgust.

"Don't return to that!" she said. "We know enough about Mercy Merrick already."

"Pardon me--your ladyship does not know. I am the only person who can inform you."

"You?"

She bent her head respectfully.

"I have begged you, Lady Janet, to give me half an hour," she went on. "In half an hour I solemnly engage myself to produce Mercy Merrick in this room. Lady Janet Roy, Mr. Horace Holmcraft, you are to wait for that."

Steadily pledging herself in those terms to make her confession, she unclasped the pearls from her neck, put them away in their cases and placed it in Horace's hand. "Keep it," she said, with a momentary faltering in her voice, "until we meet again."

Horace took the case in silence; he looked and acted like a man whose mind was paralyzed by surprise. His hand moved mechanically. His eyes followed Mercy with a vacant, questioning look. Lady Janet seemed, in her different way, to share the strange oppression that had fallen on him. A vague sense of dread and distress hung like a cloud over her mind. At that memorable moment she felt her age, she looked her age, as she had never felt it or looked it yet.

"Have I your ladyship's leave," said Mercy, respectfully, "to go to my room?"

Lady Janet mutely granted the request. Mercy's last look, before she went out, was a look at Grace. "Are you satisfied now?" the grand gray eyes seemed to say, mournfully. Grace turned her head aside, with a quick, petulant action. Even her narrow nature opened for a moment unwillingly, and let pity in a little way, in spite of itself.

Mercy's parting words recommended Grace to Julian's care:

"You will see that she is allowed a room to wait in? You will warn her yourself when the half hour has expired?"

Julian opened the library door for her.

"Well done! Nobly done!" he whispered. "All my sympathy is with you--all my help is yours."

Her eyes looked at him, and thanked him, through her gathering tears. His own eyes were dimmed. She passed quietly down the room, and was lost to him before he had shut the door again.