

CHAPTER XXI. THE FOOTSTEP IN THE CORRIDOR.

MERCY was alone.

She had secured one half hour of retirement in her own room, designing to devote that interval to the writing of her confession, in the form of a letter addressed to Julian Gray.

No recent change in her position had, as yet, mitigated her horror of acknowledging to Horace and to Lady Janet that she had won her way to their hearts in disguise. Through Julian only could she say the words which were to establish Grace Roseberry in her right position in the house.

How was her confession to be addressed to him? In writing? or by word of mouth?

After all that had happened, from the time when Lady Janet's appearance had interrupted them, she would have felt relief rather than embarrassment in personally opening her heart to the man who had so delicately understood her, who had so faithfully befriended her in her sorest need. But the repeated betrayals of Horace's jealous suspicion of Julian warned her that she would only be surrounding herself with new difficulties, and be placing Julian in a position of painful embarrassment, if she admitted him to a private interview while Horace was in the house.

The one course left to take was the course that she had adopted. Determining to address the narrative of the Fraud to Julian in the form of a letter, she arranged to add, at the close, certain instructions, pointing out to him the line of conduct which she wished him to pursue.

These instructions contemplated the communication of her letter to Lady Janet and to Horace in the library, while Mercy--self-confessed as the missing woman whom she had pledged herself to produce--awaited in the adjoining room whatever sentence it pleased them to pronounce on her. Her resolution not to screen herself behind Julian from any consequences which might follow the confession had taken root in her mind from the moment when Horace had harshly asked her (and when Lady Janet had joined him in asking) why she delayed her explanation, and what she was keeping them waiting for. Out of the very pain which those questions inflicted, the idea of waiting her sentence in her own person in one room, while her letter to Julian was speaking for her in another, had sprung to life. "Let them break

my heart if they like," she had thought to herself, in the self-abasement of that bitter moment; "it will be no more than I have deserved."

She locked her door and opened her writing-desk. Knowing what she had to do, she tried to collect herself and do it.

The effort was in vain. Those persons who study writing as an art are probably the only persons who can measure the vast distance which separates a conception as it exists in the mind from the reduction of that conception to form and shape in words. The heavy stress of agitation that had been laid on Mercy for hours together had utterly unfitted her for the delicate and difficult process of arranging the events of a narrative in their due sequence and their due proportion toward each other. Again and again she tried to begin her letter, and again and again she was baffled by the same hopeless confusion of ideas. She gave up the struggle in despair.

A sense of sinking at her heart, a weight of hysterical oppression on her bosom, warned her not to leave herself unoccupied, a prey to morbid self-investigation and imaginary alarms.

She turned instinctively, for a temporary employment of some kind, to the consideration of her own future. Here there were no intricacies or entanglements. The prospect began and ended with her return to the Refuge, if the matron would receive her. She did no injustice to Julian Gray; that great heart would feel for her, that kind hand would be held out to her, she knew. But what would happen if she thoughtlessly accepted all that his sympathy might offer? Scandal would point to her beauty and to his youth, and would place its own vile interpretation on the purest friendship that could exist between them. And he would be the sufferer, for he had a character--a clergyman's character--to lose. No. For his sake, out of gratitude to him, the farewell to Mablethorpe House must be also the farewell to Julian Gray.

The precious minutes were passing. She resolved to write to the matron and ask if she might hope to be forgiven and employed at the Refuge again. Occupation over the letter that was easy to write might have its fortifying effect on her mind, and might pave the way for resuming the letter that was hard to write. She waited a moment at the window, thinking of the past life to which she was soon to return, before she took up the pen again.

Her window looked eastward. The dusky glare of lighted London met her as

her eyes rested on the sky. It seemed to beckon her back to the horror of the cruel streets--to point her way mockingly to the bridges over the black river--to lure her to the top of the parapet, and the dreadful leap into God's arms, or into annihilation--who knew which?

She turned, shuddering, from the window. "Will it end in that way," she asked herself, "if the matron says No?"

She began her letter.

"DEAR MADAM--So long a time has passed since you heard from me that I almost shrink from writing to you. I am afraid you have already given me up in your own mind as a hard-hearted, ungrateful woman.

"I have been leading a false life; I have not been fit to write to you before today. Now, when I am doing what I can to atone to those whom I have injured--now, when I repent with my whole heart--may I ask leave to return to the friend who has borne with me and helped me through many miserable years? Oh, madam, do not cast me off! I have no one to turn to but you.

"Will you let me own everything to you? Will you forgive me when you know what I have done? Will you take me back into the Refuge, if you have any employment for me by which I may earn my shelter and my bread?

"Before the night comes I must leave the house from which I am now writing. I have nowhere to go to. The little money, the few valuable possessions I have, must be left behind me: they have been obtained under false pretenses; they are not mine. No more forlorn creature than I am lives at this moment. You are a Christian woman. Not for my sake--for Christ's sake--pity me and take me back.

"I am a good nurse, as you know, and I am a quick worker with my needle. In one way or the other can you not find occupation for me?

"I could also teach, in a very unpretending way. But that is useless. Who would trust their children to a woman without a character? There is no hope for me in this direction. And yet I am so fond of children! I think I could be, not happy again, perhaps, but content with my lot, if I could be associated with them in some way. Are there not charitable societies which are trying to help and protect destitute children wandering about the streets? I think of my own wretched childhood--and oh! I should so like to be employed in saving other children from ending as I have ended. I could work, for such an object as that, from morning to night, and never feel weary. All my heart

would be in it; and I should have this advantage over happy and prosperous women--I should have nothing else to think of. Surely they might trust me with the poor little starving wanderers of the streets--if you said a word for me? If I am asking too much, please forgive me. I am so wretched, madam--so lonely and so weary of my life.

"There is only one thing more. My time here is very short. Will you please reply to this letter (to say yes or no) by telegram?"

"The name by which you know me is not the name by which I have been known here. I must beg you to address the telegram to 'The Reverend Julian Gray, Mablethorpe House, Kensington.' He is here, and he will show it to me. No words of mine can describe what I owe to him. He has never despaired of me--he has saved me from myself. God bless and reward the kindest, truest, best man I have ever known!

"I have no more to say, except to ask you to excuse this long letter, and to believe me your grateful servant, ----."

She signed and inclosed the letter, and wrote the address. Then, for the first time, an obstacle which she ought to have seen before showed itself, standing straight in her way.

There was no time to forward her letter in the ordinary manner by post. It must be taken to its destination by a private messenger. Lady Janet's servants had hitherto been, one and all, at her disposal. Could she presume to employ them on her own affairs, when she might be dismissed from the house, a disgraced woman, in half an hour's time? Of the two alternatives it seemed better to take her chance, and present herself at the Refuge without asking leave first.

While she was still considering the question she was startled by a knock at her door. On opening it she admitted Lady Janet's maid, with a morsel of folded note-paper in her hand.

"From my lady, miss," said the woman, giving her the note. "There is no answer."

Mercy stopped her as she was about to leave the room. The appearance of the maid suggested an inquiry to her. She asked if any of the servants were likely to be going into town that afternoon.

"Yes, miss. One of the grooms is going on horseback, with a message to her ladyship's coach-maker."

The Refuge was close by the coach-maker's place of business. Under the circumstances, Mercy was emboldened to make use of the man. It was a pardonable liberty to employ his services now.

"Will you kindly give the groom that letter for me?" she said. "It will not take him out of his way. He has only to deliver it--nothing more."

The woman willingly complied with the request. Left once more by herself, Mercy looked at the little note which had been placed in her hands.

It was the first time that her benefactress had employed this formal method of communicating with her when they were both in the house. What did such a departure from established habits mean? Had she received her notice of dismissal? Had Lady Janet's quick intelligence found its way already to a suspicion of the truth? Mercy's nerves were unstrung. She trembled pitiably as she opened the folded note.

It began without a form of address, and it ended without a signature. Thus it ran:

"I must request you to delay for a little while the explanation which you have promised me. At my age, painful surprises are very trying things. I must have time to compose myself, before I can hear what you have to say. You shall not be kept waiting longer than I can help. In the meanwhile everything will go on as usual. My nephew Julian, and Horace Holmcroft, and the lady whom I found in the dining-room, will, by my desire, remain in the house until I am able to meet them, and to meet you, again."

There the note ended. To what conclusion did it point?

Had Lady Janet really guessed the truth? or had she only surmised that her adopted daughter was connected in some discreditable manner with the mystery of "Mercy Merrick"? The line in which she referred to the intruder in the dining-room as "the lady" showed very remarkably that her opinions had undergone a change in that quarter. But was the phrase enough of itself to

justify the inference that she had actually anticipated the nature of Mercy's confession? It was not easy to decide that doubt at the moment--and it proved to be equally difficult to throw any light on it at an aftertime. To the end of her life Lady Janet resolutely refused to communicate to any one the conclusions which she might have privately formed, the griefs which she might have secretly stifled, on that memorable day.

Amid much, however, which was beset with uncertainty, one thing at least was clear. The time at Mercy's disposal in her own room had been indefinitely prolonged by Mercy's benefactress. Hours might pass before the disclosure to which she stood committed would be expected from her. In those hours she might surely compose her mind sufficiently to be able to write her letter of confession to Julian Gray.

Once more she placed the sheet of paper before her. Resting her head on her hand as she sat at the table, she tried to trace her way through the labyrinth of the past, beginning with the day when she had met Grace Roseberry in the French cottage, and ending with the day which had brought them face to face, for the second time, in the dining-room at Mablethorpe House.

The chain of events began to unroll itself in her mind clearly, link by link.

She remarked, as she pursued the retrospect, how strangely Chance, or Fate, had paved the way for the act of personation, in the first place.

If they had met under ordinary circumstances, neither Mercy nor Grace would have trusted each other with the confidences which had been exchanged between them. As the event had happened, they had come together, under those extraordinary circumstances of common trial and common peril, in a strange country, which would especially predispose two women of the same nation to open their hearts to each other. In no other way could Mercy have obtained at a first interview that fatal knowledge of Grace's position and Grace's affairs which had placed temptation before her as the necessary consequence that followed the bursting of the German shell.

Advancing from this point through the succeeding series of events which had so naturally and yet so strangely favored the perpetration of the fraud, Mercy reached the later period when Grace had followed her to England. Here again she remarked, in the second place, how Chance, or Fate, had once more paved the way for that second meeting which had confronted them with one another at Mablethorpe House.

She had, as she well remembered, attended at a certain assembly (convened by a charitable society) in the character of Lady Janet's representative, at Lady Janet's own request. For that reason she had been absent from the house when Grace had entered it. If her return had been delayed by a few minutes only, Julian would have had time to take Grace out of the room, and the terrible meeting which had stretched Mercy senseless on the floor would never have taken place. As the event had happened, the period of her absence had been fatally shortened by what appeared at the time to be, the commonest possible occurrence. The persons assembled at the society's rooms had disagreed so seriously on the business which had brought them together as to render it necessary to take the ordinary course of adjourning the proceedings to a future day. And Chance, or Fate, had so timed that adjournment as to bring Mercy back into the dining-room exactly at the moment when Grace Roseberry insisted on being confronted with the woman who had taken her place.

She had never yet seen the circumstances in this sinister light. She was alone in her room, at a crisis in her life. She was worn and weakened by emotions which had shaken her to the soul.

Little by little she felt the enervating influences let loose on her, in her lonely position, by her new train of thought. Little by little her heart began to sink under the stealthy chill of superstitious dread. Vaguely horrible presentiments throbbed in her with her pulses, flowed through her with her blood. Mystic oppressions of hidden disaster hovered over her in the atmosphere of the room. The cheerful candle-light turned traitor to her and grew dim. Supernatural murmurs trembled round the house in the moaning of the winter wind. She was afraid to look behind her. On a sudden she felt her own cold hands covering her face, without knowing when she had lifted them to it, or why.

Still helpless, under the horror that held her, she suddenly heard footsteps--a man's footsteps--in the corridor outside. At other times the sound would have startled her: now it broke the spell. The footsteps suggested life, companionship, human interposition--no matter of what sort. She mechanically took up her pen; she found herself beginning to remember her letter to Julian Gray.

At the same moment the footsteps stopped outside her door. The man knocked.

She still felt shaken. She was hardly mistress of herself yet. A faint cry of

alarm escaped her at the sound of the knock. Before it could be repeated she had rallied her courage, and had opened the door.

The man in the corridor was Horace Holmcroft.

His ruddy complexion had turned pale. His hair (of which he was especially careful at other times) was in disorder. The superficial polish of his manner was gone; the undisguised man, sullen, distrustful, irritated to the last degree of endurance, showed through. He looked at her with a watchfully suspicious eye; he spoke to her, without preface or apology, in a coldly angry voice.

"Are you aware," he asked, "of what is going on downstairs?"

"I have not left my room," she answered. "I know that Lady Janet has deferred the explanation which I had promised to give her, and I know no more."

"Has nobody told you what Lady Janet did after you left us? Has nobody told you that she politely placed her own boudoir at the disposal of the very woman whom she had ordered half an hour before to leave the house? Do you really not know that Mr. Julian Gray has himself conducted this suddenly-honored guest to her place of retirement? and that I am left alone in the midst of these changes, contradictions, and mysteries--the only person who is kept out in the dark?"

"It is surely needless to ask me these questions," said Mercy, gently. "Who could possibly have told me what was going on below stairs before you knocked at my door?"

He looked at her with an ironical affectation of surprise.

"You are strangely forgetful to-day," he said. "Surely your friend Mr. Julian Gray might have told you? I am astonished to hear that he has not had his private interview yet."

"I don't understand you, Horace."

"I don't want you to understand me," he retorted, irritably. "The proper person to understand me is Julian Gray. I look to him to account to me for the confidential relations which seem to have been established between you behind my back. He has avoided me thus far, but I shall find my way to him yet."

His manner threatened more than his words expressed. In Mercy's nervous condition at the moment, it suggested to her that he might attempt to fasten a quarrel on Julian Gray.

"You are entirely mistaken," she said, warmly. "You are ungratefully doubting your best and truest friend. I say nothing of myself. You will soon discover why I patiently submit to suspicions which other women would resent as an insult."

"Let me discover it at once. Now! Without wasting a moment more!"

There had hitherto been some little distance between them. Mercy had listened, waiting on the threshold of her door; Horace had spoken, standing against the opposite wall of the corridor. When he said his last words he suddenly stepped forward, and (with something imperative in the gesture) laid his hand on her arm. The strong grasp of it almost hurt her. She struggled to release herself.

"Let me go!" she said. "What do you mean?"

He dropped her arm as suddenly as he had taken it.

"You shall know what I mean," he replied. "A woman who has grossly outraged and insulted you--whose only excuse is that she is mad--is detained in the house at your desire, I might almost say at your command, when the police officer is waiting to take her away. I have a right to know what this means. I am engaged to marry you. If you won't trust other people, you are bound to explain yourself to Me. I refuse to wait for Lady Janet's convenience. I insist (if you force me to say so)--I insist on knowing the real nature of your connection with this affair. You have obliged me to follow you here; it is my only opportunity of speaking to you. You avoid me; you shut yourself up from me in your own room. I am not your husband yet--I have no right to follow you in. But there are other rooms open to us. The library is at our disposal, and I will take care that we are not interrupted. I am now going there, and I have a last question to ask. You are to be my wife in a week's time: will you take me into your confidence or not?"

To hesitate was, in this case, literally to be lost. Mercy's sense of justice told her that Horace had claimed no more than his due. She answered instantly:

"I will follow you to the library, Horace, in five minutes."

Her prompt and frank compliance with his wishes surprised and touched him. He took her hand.

She had endured all that his angry sense of injury could say. His gratitude wounded her to the quick. The bitterest moment she had felt yet was the moment in which he raised her hand to his lips, and murmured tenderly, "My own true Grace!" She could only sign to him to leave her, and hurry back into her own room.

Her first feeling, when she found herself alone again, was wonder--wonder that it should never have occurred to her, until he had himself suggested it, that her betrothed husband had the foremost right to her confession. Her horror at owning to either of them that she had cheated them out of their love had hitherto placed Horace and Lady Janet on the same level. She now saw for the first time that there was no comparison between the claims which they respectively had on her. She owned an allegiance to Horace to which Lady Janet could assert no right. Cost her what it might to avow the truth to him with her own lips, the cruel sacrifice must be made.

Without a moment's hesitation she put away her writing materials. It amazed her that she should ever have thought of using Julian Gray as an interpreter between the man to whom she was betrothed and herself. Julian's sympathy (she thought) must have made a strong impression on her indeed to blind her to a duty which was beyond all compromise, which admitted of no dispute!

She had asked for five minutes of delay before she followed Horace. It was too long a time.

Her one chance of finding courage to crush him with the dreadful revelation of who she really was, of what she had really done, was to plunge headlong into the disclosure without giving herself time to think. The shame of it would overpower her if she gave herself time to think.

She turned to the door to follow him at once.

Even at that terrible moment the most ineradicable of all a woman's instincts--the instinct of personal self-respect--brought her to a pause. She had passed through more than one terrible trial since she had dressed to go downstairs. Remembering this, she stopped mechanically, retraced her steps, and looked at herself in the glass.

There was no motive of vanity in what she now did. The action was as

unconscious as if she had buttoned an unfastened glove, or shaken out a crumpled dress. Not the faintest idea crossed her mind of looking to see if her beauty might still plead for her, and of trying to set it off at its best.

A momentary smile, the most weary, the most hopeless, that ever saddened a woman's face, appeared in the reflection which her mirror gave her back. "Haggard, ghastly, old before my time!" she said to herself. "Well! better so. He will feel it less--he will not regret me."

With that thought she went downstairs to meet him in the library.