

CHAPTER XXII. THE MAN IN THE DINING-ROOM.

IN the great emergencies of life we feel, or we act, as our dispositions incline us. But we never think. Mercy's mind was a blank as she descended the stairs. On her way down she was conscious of nothing but the one headlong impulse to get to the library in the shortest possible space of time. Arrived at the door, the impulse capriciously left her. She stopped on the mat, wondering why she had hurried herself, with time to spare. Her heart sank; the fever of her excitement changed suddenly to a chill as she faced the closed door, and asked herself the question, Dare I go in?

Her own hand answered her. She lifted it to turn the handle of the lock. It dropped again helplessly at her side.

The sense of her own irresolution wrung from her a low exclamation of despair. Faint as it was, it had apparently not passed unheard. The door was opened from within--and Horace stood before her.

He drew aside to let her pass into the room. But he never followed her in. He stood in the doorway, and spoke to her, keeping the door open with his hand.

"Do you mind waiting here for me?" he asked.

She looked at him, in vacant surprise, doubting whether she had heard him aright.

"It will not be for long," he went on. "I am far too anxious to hear what you have to tell me to submit to any needless delays. The truth is, I have had a message from Lady Janet."

(From Lady Janet! What could Lady Janet want with him, at a time when she was bent on composing herself in the retirement of her own room?)

"I ought to have said two messages," Horace proceeded. "The first was given to me on my way downstairs. Lady Janet wished to see me immediately. I sent an excuse. A second message followed. Lady Janet would accept no excuse. If I refused to go to her I should be merely obliging her to come to me. It is impossible to risk being interrupted in that way; my only alternative is to get the thing over as soon as possible. Do you mind waiting?"

"Certainly not. Have you any idea of what Lady Janet wants with you?"

"No. Whatever it is, she shall not keep me long away from you. You will be quite alone here; I have warned the servants not to show any one in." With those words he left her.

Mercy's first sensation was a sensation of relief--soon lost in a feeling of shame at the weakness which could welcome any temporary relief in such a position as hers. The emotion thus roused merged, in its turn, into a sense of impatient regret. "But for Lady Janet's message," she thought to herself, "I might have known my fate by this time!"

The slow minutes followed each other drearily. She paced to and fro in the library, faster and faster, under the intolerable irritation, the maddening uncertainty, of her own suspense. Ere long, even the spacious room seemed to be too small for her. The sober monotony of the long book-lined shelves oppressed and offended her. She threw open the door which led into the dining-room, and dashed in, eager for a change of objects, athirst for more space and more air.

At the first step she checked herself; rooted to the spot, under a sudden revulsion of feeling which quieted her in an instant.

The room was only illuminated by the waning fire-light. A man was obscurely visible, seated on the sofa, with his elbows on his knees and his head resting on his hands. He looked up as the open door let in the light from the library lamps. The mellow glow reached his face and revealed Julian Gray.

Mercy was standing with her back to the light; her face being necessarily hidden in deep shadow. He recognized her by her figure, and by the attitude into which it unconsciously fell. That unsought grace, that lithe long beauty of line, belonged to but one woman in the house. He rose, and approached her.

"I have been wishing to see you," he said, "and hoping that accident might bring about some such meeting as this."

He offered her a chair. Mercy hesitated before she took her seat. This was their first meeting alone since Lady Janet had interrupted her at the moment when she was about to confide to Julian the melancholy story of the past. Was he anxious to seize the opportunity of returning to her confession? The terms in which he had addressed her seemed to imply it.

She put the question to him in plain words,

"I feel the deepest interest in hearing all that you have still to confide to me," he answered. "But anxious as I may be, I will not hurry you. I will wait, if you wish it."

"I am afraid I must own that I do wish it," Mercy rejoined. "Not on my account--but because my time is at the disposal of Horace Holmcroft. I expect to see him in a few minutes."

"Could you give me those few minutes?" Julian asked. "I have something on my side to say to you which I think you ought to know before you see any one--Horace himself included."

He spoke with a certain depression of tone which was not associated with her previous experience of him. His face looked prematurely old and careworn in the red light of the fire. Something had plainly happened to sadden and to disappoint him since they had last met.

"I willingly offer you all the time that I have at my own command," Mercy replied. "Does what you have to tell me relate to Lady Janet?"

He gave her no direct reply. "What I have to tell you of Lady Janet," he said, gravely, "is soon told. So far as she is concerned you have nothing more to dread. Lady Janet knows all."

Even the heavy weight of oppression caused by the impending interview with Horace failed to hold its place in Mercy's mind when Julian answered her in those words.

"Come into the lighted room," she said, faintly. "It is too terrible to hear you say that in the dark."

Julian followed her into the library. Her limbs trembled under her. She dropped into a chair, and shrank under his great bright eyes, as he stood by her side looking sadly down on her.

"Lady Janet knows all!" she repeated, with her head on her breast, and the tears falling slowly over her cheeks. "Have you told her?"

"I have said nothing to Lady Janet or to any one. Your confidence is a sacred confidence to me, until you have spoken first."

"Has Lady Janet said anything to you?"

"Not a word. She has looked at you with the vigilant eyes of love; she has listened to you with the quick hearing of love--and she has found her own way to the truth. She will not speak of it to me--she will not speak of it to any living creature. I only know now how dearly she loved you. In spite of herself she clings to you still. Her life, poor soul, has been a barren one; unworthy, miserably unworthy, of such a nature as hers. Her marriage was loveless and childless. She has had admirers, but never, in the higher sense of the word, a friend. All the best years of her life have been wasted in the unsatisfied longing for something to love. At the end of her life You have filled the void. Her heart has found its youth again, through You. At her age--at any age--is such a tie as this to be rudely broken at the mere bidding of circumstances? No! She will suffer anything, risk anything, forgive anything, rather than own, even to herself, that she has been deceived in you. There is more than her happiness at stake; there is pride, a noble pride, in such love as hers, which will ignore the plainest discovery and deny the most unanswerable truth. I am firmly convinced--from my own knowledge of her character, and from what I have observed in her to-day--that she will find some excuse for refusing to hear your confession. And more than that, I believe (if the exertion of her influence can do it) that she will leave no means untried of preventing you from acknowledging your true position here to any living creature. I take a serious responsibility on myself in telling you this--and I don't shrink from it. You ought to know, and you shall know, what trials and what temptations may yet lie before you."

He paused--leaving Mercy time to compose herself, if she wished to speak to him.

She felt that there was a necessity for her speaking to him. He was plainly not aware that Lady Janet had already written to her to defer her promised explanation. This circumstance was in itself a confirmation of the opinion which he had expressed. She ought to mention it to him; she tried to mention it to him. But she was not equal to the effort. The few simple words in which he had touched on the tie that bound Lady Janet to her had wrung her heart. Her tears choked her. She could only sign to him to go on.

"You may wonder at my speaking so positively," he continued, "with nothing better than my own conviction to justify me. I can only say that I have watched Lady Janet too closely to feel any doubt. I saw the moment in which the truth flashed on her, as plainly as I now see you. It did not disclose itself gradually--it burst on her, as it burst on me. She suspected nothing--she was frankly indignant at your sudden interference and your strange

language--until the time came in which you pledged yourself to produce Mercy Merrick. Then (and then only) the truth broke on her mind, trebly revealed to her in your words, your voice, and your look. Then (and then only) I saw a marked change come over her, and remain in her while she remained in the room. I dread to think of what she may do in the first reckless despair of the discovery that she has made. I distrust--though God knows I am not naturally a suspicious man--the most apparently trifling events that are now taking place about us. You have held nobly to your resolution to own the truth. Prepare yourself, before the evening is over, to be tried and tempted again."

Mercy lifted her head. Fear took the place of grief in her eyes, as they rested in startled inquiry on Julian's face.

"How is it possible that temptation can come to me now?" she asked.

"I will leave it to events to answer that question," he said. "You will not have long to wait. In the meantime I have put you on your guard." He stooped, and spoke his next words earnestly, close at her ear. "Hold fast by the admirable courage which you have shown thus far," he went on. "Suffer anything rather than suffer the degradation of yourself. Be the woman whom I once spoke of--the woman I still have in my mind--who can nobly reveal the noble nature that is in her. And never forget this--my faith in you is as firm as ever!"

She looked at him proudly and gratefully.

"I am pledged to justify your faith in me," she said. "I have put it out of my own power to yield. Horace has my promise that I will explain everything to him, in this room."

Julian started.

"Has Horace himself asked it of you?" he inquired. "He, at least, has no suspicion of the truth."

"Horace has appealed to my duty to him as his betrothed wife," she answered. "He has the first claim to my confidence--he resents my silence, and he has a right to resent it. Terrible as it will be to open his eyes to the truth, I must do it if he asks me."

She was looking at Julian while she spoke. The old longing to associate with the hard trial of the confession the one man who had felt for her, and

believed in her, revived under another form. If she could only know, while she was saying the fatal words to Horace, that Julian was listening too, she would be encouraged to meet the worst that could happen! As the idea crossed her mind, she observed that Julian was looking toward the door through which they had lately passed. In an instant she saw the means to her end. Hardly waiting to hear the few kind expressions of sympathy and approval which he addressed to her, she hinted timidly at the proposal which she had now to make to him.

"Are you going back into the next room?" she asked.

"Not if you object to it," he replied.

"I don't object. I want you to be there."

"After Horace has joined you?"

"Yes. After Horace has joined me."

"Do you wish to see me when it is over?"

She summoned her resolution, and told him frankly what she had in her mind.

"I want you to be near me while I am speaking to Horace," she said. "It will give me courage if I can feel that I am speaking to you as well as to him. I can count on your sympathy--and sympathy is so precious to me now! Am I asking too much, if I ask you to leave the door unclosed when you go back to the dining-room? Think of the dreadful trial--to him as well as to me! I am only a woman; I am afraid I may sink under it, if I have no friend near me. And I have no friend but you."

In those simple words she tried her powers of persuasion on him for the first time.

Between perplexity and distress Julian was, for the moment, at a loss how to answer her. The love for Mercy which he dared not acknowledge was as vital a feeling in him as the faith in her which he had been free to avow. To refuse anything that she asked of him in her sore need--and, more even than that, to refuse to hear the confession which it had been her first impulse to make to him--these were cruel sacrifices to his sense of what was due to Horace and of what was due to himself. But shrink as he might, even from the appearance of deserting her, it was impossible for him (except

under a reserve which was almost equivalent to a denial) to grant her request.

"All that I can do I will do," he said. "The doors shall be left unclosed, and I will remain in the next room, on this condition, that Horace knows of it as well as you. I should be unworthy of your confidence in me if I consented to be a listener on any other terms. You understand that, I am sure, as well as I do."

She had never thought of her proposal to him in this light. Woman-like, she had thought of nothing but the comfort of having him near her. She understood him now. A faint flush of shame rose on her pale cheeks as she thanked him. He delicately relieved her from her embarrassment by putting a question which naturally occurred under the circumstances.

"Where is Horace all this time?" he asked. "Why is he not here?"

"He has been called away," she answered, "by a message from Lady Janet."

The reply more than astonished Julian; it seemed almost to alarm him. He returned to Mercy's chair; he said to her, eagerly, "Are you sure?"

"Horace himself told me that Lady Janet had insisted on seeing him."

"When?"

"Not long ago. He asked me to wait for him here while he went upstairs."

Julian's face darkened ominously.

"This confirms my worst fears," he said. "Have you had any communication with Lady Janet?"

Mercy replied by showing him his aunt's note. He read it carefully through.

"Did I not tell you," he said, "that she would find some excuse for refusing to hear your confession? She begins by delaying it, simply to gain time for something else which she has it in her mind to do. When did you receive this note? Soon after you went upstairs?"

"About a quarter of an hour after, as well as I can guess."

"Do you know what happened down here after you left us?"

"Horace told me that Lady Janet had offered Miss Roseberry the use of her boudoir."

"Any more?"

"He said that you had shown her the way to the room."

"Did he tell you what happened after that?"

"No."

"Then I must tell you. If I can do nothing more in this serious state of things, I can at least prevent your being taken by surprise. In the first place, it is right you should know that I had a motive for accompanying Miss Roseberry to the boudoir. I was anxious (for your sake) to make some appeal to her better self--if she had any better self to address. I own I had doubts of my success--judging by what I had already seen of her. My doubts were confirmed. In the ordinary intercourse of life I should merely have thought her a commonplace, uninteresting woman. Seeing her as I saw her while we were alone--in other words, penetrating below the surface--I have never, in all my sad experience, met with such a hopelessly narrow, mean, and low nature as hers. Understanding, as she could not fail to do, what the sudden change in Lady Janet's behavior toward her really meant, her one idea was to take the cruelest possible advantage of it. So far from feeling any consideration for you, she was only additionally embittered toward you. She protested against your being permitted to claim the merit of placing her in her right position here by your own voluntary avowal of the truth. She insisted on publicly denouncing you, and on forcing Lady Janet to dismiss you, unheard, before the whole household! 'Now I can have my revenge! At last Lady Janet is afraid of me!' Those were her own words--I am almost ashamed to repeat them--those, on my honor, were her own words! Every possible humiliation to be heaped on you; no consideration to be shown for Lady Janet's age and Lady Janet's position; nothing, absolutely nothing, to be allowed to interfere with Miss Roseberry's vengeance and Miss Roseberry's triumph! There is this woman's shameless view of what is due to her, as stated by herself in the plainest terms. I kept my temper; I did all I could to bring her to a better frame of mind. I might as well have pleaded--I won't say with a savage; savages are sometimes accessible to remonstrance, if you know how to reach them--I might as well have pleaded with a hungry animal to abstain from eating while food was within its reach. I had just given up the hopeless effort in disgust, when Lady Janet's maid appeared with a message for Miss Roseberry from her mistress: 'My lady's

compliments, ma'am, and she will be glad to see you at your earliest convenience, in her room."

Another surprise! Grace Roseberry invited to an interview with Lady Janet! It would have been impossible to believe it, if Julian had not heard the invitation given with his own ears.

"She instantly rose," Julian proceeded. "I won't keep her ladyship waiting a moment,' she said; 'show me the way.' She signed to the maid to go out of the room first, and then turned round and spoke to me from the door. I despair of describing the insolent exultation of her manner. I can only repeat her words: 'This is exactly what I wanted! I had intended to insist on seeing Lady Janet: she saves me the trouble. I am infinitely obliged to her.' With that she nodded to me, and closed the door. I have not seen her, I have not heard of her, since. For all I know, she may be still with my aunt, and Horace may have found her there when he entered the room."

"What can Lady Janet have to say to her?" Mercy asked, eagerly.

"It is impossible even to guess. When you found me in the dining-room I was considering that very question. I cannot imagine that any neutral ground can exist on which it is possible for Lady Janet and this woman to meet. In her present frame of mind she will in all probability insult Lady Janet before she has been five minutes in the room. I own I am completely puzzled. The one conclusion I can arrive at is that the note which my aunt sent to you, the private interview with Miss Roseberry which has followed, and the summons to Horace which has succeeded in its turn, are all links in the same chain of events, and are all tending to that renewed temptation against which I have already warned you."

Mercy held up her hand for silence. She looked toward the door that opened on the hall; had she heard a footstep outside? No. All was still. Not a sign yet of Horace's return.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "what would I not give to know what is going on upstairs!"

"You will soon know it now," said Julian. "It is impossible that our present uncertainty can last much longer."

He turned away, intending to go back to the room in which she had found him. Looking at her situation from a man's point of view, he naturally assumed that the best service he could now render to Mercy would be to

leave her to prepare herself for the interview with Horace. Before he had taken three steps away from her she showed him the difference between the woman's point of view and the man's. The idea of considering beforehand what she should say never entered her mind. In her horror of being left by herself at that critical moment, she forgot every other consideration. Even the warning remembrance of Horace's jealous distrust of Julian passed away from her, for the moment, as completely as if it never had a place in her memory. "Don't leave me!" she cried. "I can't wait here alone. Come back--come back!"

She rose impulsively while she spoke, as if to follow him into the dining-room, if he persisted in leaving her.

A momentary expression of doubt crossed Julian's face as he retraced his steps and signed to her to be seated again. Could she be depended on (he asked himself) to sustain the coming test of her resolution, when she had not courage enough to wait for events in a room by herself? Julian had yet to learn that a woman's courage rises with the greatness of the emergency. Ask her to accompany you through a field in which some harmless cattle happen to be grazing, and it is doubtful, in nine cases out of ten, if she will do it. Ask her, as one of the passengers in a ship on fire, to help in setting an example of composure to the rest, and it is certain, in nine cases out of ten, that she will do it. As soon as Julian had taken a chair near her, Mercy was calm again.

"Are you sure of your resolution?" he asked.

"I am certain of it," she answered, "as long as you don't leave me by myself."

The talk between them dropped there. They sat together in silence, with their eyes fixed on the door, waiting for Horace to come in.

After the lapse of a few minutes their attention was attracted by a sound outside in the grounds. A carriage of some sort was plainly audible approaching the house.

The carriage stopped; the bell rang; the front door was opened. Had a visitor arrived? No voice could be heard making inquiries. No footsteps but the servant's footsteps crossed the hall. A long pause followed, the carriage remaining at the door. Instead of bringing some one to the house, it had apparently arrived to take some one away.

The next event was the return of the servant to the front door. They listened

again. Again no second footstep was audible. The door was closed; the servant recrossed the hall; the carriage was driven away. Judging by sounds alone, no one had arrived at the house, and no one had left the house.

Julian looked at Mercy. "Do you understand this?" he asked.

She silently shook her head.

"If any person has gone away in the carriage," Julian went on, "that person can hardly have been a man, or we must have heard him in the hall."

The conclusion which her companion had just drawn from the noiseless departure of the supposed visitor raised a sudden doubt in Mercy's mind.

"Go and inquire!" she said, eagerly.

Julian left the room, and returned again, after a brief absence, with signs of grave anxiety in his face and manner.

"I told you I dreaded the most trifling events that were passing about us," he said. "An event, which is far from being trifling, has just happened. The carriage which we heard approaching along the drive turns out to have been a cab sent for from the house. The person who has gone away in it--"

"Is a woman, as you supposed?"

"Yes."

Mercy rose excitedly from her chair.

"It can't be Grace Roseberry?" she exclaimed.

"It is Grace Roseberry."

"Has she gone away alone?"

"Alone--after an interview with Lady Janet."

"Did she go willingly?"

"She herself sent the servant for the cab."

"What does it mean?"

"It is useless to inquire. We shall soon know."

They resumed their seats, waiting, as they had waited already, with their eyes on the library door.