

### **CHAPTER XXIII. LADY JANET AT BAY.**

THE narrative leaves Julian and Mercy for a while, and, ascending to the upper regions of the house, follows the march of events in Lady Janet's room.

The maid had delivered her mistress's note to Mercy, and had gone away again on her second errand to Grace Roseberry in her boudoir. Lady Janet was seated at her writing-table, waiting for the appearance of the woman whom she had summoned to her presence. A single lamp diffused its mild light over the books, pictures, and busts round her, leaving the further end of the room, in which the bed was placed, almost lost in obscurity. The works of art were all portraits; the books were all presentation copies from the authors. It was Lady Janet's fancy to associate her bedroom with memorials of the various persons whom she had known in the long course of her life--all of them more or less distinguished, most of them, by this time, gathered with the dead.

She sat near her writing-table, lying back in her easy-chair--the living realization of the picture which Julian's description had drawn. Her eyes were fixed on a photographic likeness of Mercy, which was so raised upon a little gilt easel as to enable her to contemplate it under the full light of the lamp. The bright, mobile old face was strangely and sadly changed. The brow was fixed; the mouth was rigid; the whole face would have been like a mask, molded in the hardest forms of passive resistance and suppressed rage, but for the light and life still thrown over it by the eyes. There was something unutterably touching in the keen hungering tenderness of the look which they fixed on the portrait, intensified by an underlying expression of fond and patient reproach. The danger which Julian so wisely dreaded was in the rest of the face; the love which he had so truly described was in the eyes alone. They still spoke of the cruelly profaned affection which had been the one immeasurable joy, the one inexhaustible hope of Lady Janet's closing life. The brow expressed nothing but her obstinate determination to stand by the wreck of that joy, to rekindle the dead ashes of that hope. The lips were only eloquent of her unflinching resolution to ignore the hateful present and to save the sacred past. "My idol may be shattered, but none of you shall know it. I stop the march of discovery; I extinguish the light of truth. I am deaf to your words; am blind to your proofs. At seventy years old, my idol is my life. It shall be my idol still."

The silence in the bedroom was broken by a murmuring of women's voices outside the door.

Lady Janet instantly raised herself in the chair and snatched the photograph off the easel. She laid the portrait face downward, among some papers on the table, then abruptly changed her mind, and hid it among the thick folds of lace which clothed her neck and bosom. There was a world of love in the action itself, and in the sudden softening of the eyes which accompanied it. The next moment Lady Janet's mask was on. Any superficial observer who had seen her now would have said, "This is a hard woman!"

The door was opened by the maid. Grace Roseberry entered the room.

She advanced rapidly, with a defiant assurance in her manner, and a lofty carriage of her head. She sat down in the chair, to which Lady Janet silently pointed, with a thump; she returned Lady Janet's grave bow with a nod and a smile. Every movement and every look of the little, worn, white-faced, shabbily dressed woman expressed insolent triumph, and said, as if in words, "My turn has come!"

"I am glad to wait on your ladyship," she began, without giving Lady Janet an opportunity of speaking first. "Indeed, I should have felt it my duty to request an interview, if you had not sent your maid to invite me up here."

"You would have felt it your duty to request an interview?" Lady Janet repeated, very quietly. "Why?"

The tone in which that one last word was spoken embarrassed Grace at the outset. It established as great a distance between Lady Janet and herself as if she had been lifted in her chair and conveyed bodily to the other end of the room.

"I am surprised that your ladyship should not understand me," she said, struggling to conceal her confusion. "Especially after your kind offer of your own boudoir."

Lady Janet remained perfectly unmoved. "I do not understand you," she answered, just as quietly as ever.

Grace's temper came to her assistance. She recovered the assurance which had marked her first appearance on the scene.

"In that case," she resumed, "I must enter into particulars, in justice to myself. I can place but one interpretation on the extraordinary change in your ladyship's behavior to me downstairs. The conduct of that abominable woman has at last opened your eyes to the deception that has been practiced on you. For some reason of your own, however, you have not yet chosen to recognize me openly. In this painful position something is due to my own self-respect. I cannot, and will not, permit Mercy Merrick to claim the merit of restoring me to my proper place in this house. After what I have suffered it is quite impossible for me to endure that. I should have requested an interview (if you had not sent for me) for the express purpose of claiming this person's immediate expulsion from the house. I claim it now as a proper concession to Me. Whatever you or Mr. Julian Gray may do, I will not tamely permit her to exhibit herself as an interesting penitent. It is really a little too much to hear this brazen adventuress appoint her own time for explaining herself. It is too deliberately insulting to see her sail out of the room--with a clergyman of the Church of England opening the door for her--as if she was laying me under an obligation! I can forgive much, Lady Janet--including the terms in which you thought it decent to order me out of your house. I am quite willing to accept the offer of your boudoir, as the expression on your part of a better frame of mind. But even Christian Charity has its limits. The continued presence of that wretch under your roof is, you will permit me to remark, not only a monument of your own weakness, but a perfectly insufferable insult to Me."

There she stopped abruptly--not for want of words, but for want of a listener.

Lady Janet was not even pretending to attend to her. Lady Janet, with a deliberate rudeness entirely foreign to her usual habits, was composedly busying herself in arranging the various papers scattered about the table. Some she tied together with little morsels of string; some she placed under paper-weights; some she deposited in the fantastic pigeon-holes of a little Japanese cabinet--working with a placid enjoyment of her own orderly occupation, and perfectly unaware, to all outward appearance, that any second person was in the room. She looked up, with her papers in both hands, when Grace stopped, and said, quietly,

"Have you done?"

"Is your ladyship's purpose in sending for me to treat me with studied rudeness?" Grace retorted, angrily.

"My purpose in sending for you is to say something as soon as you will allow me the opportunity."

The impenetrable composure of that reply took Grace completely by surprise. She had no retort ready. In sheer astonishment she waited silently with her eyes riveted on the mistress of the house.

Lady Janet put down her papers, and settled herself comfortably in the easy-chair, preparatory to opening the interview on her side.

"The little that I have to say to you," she began, "may be said in a question. Am I right in supposing that you have no present employment, and that a little advance in money (delicately offered) would be very acceptable to you?"

"Do you mean to insult me, Lady Janet?"

"Certainly not. I mean to ask you a question."

"Your question is an insult."

"My question is a kindness, if you will only understand it as it is intended. I don't complain of your not understanding it. I don't even hold you responsible for any one of the many breaches of good manners which you have committed since you have been in this room. I was honestly anxious to be of some service to you, and you have repelled my advances. I am sorry. Let us drop the subject."

Expressing herself in the most perfect temper in those terms, Lady Janet resumed the arrangement of her papers, and became unconscious once more of the presence of any second person in the room.

Grace opened her lips to reply with the utmost intemperance of an angry woman, and thinking better of it, controlled herself. It was plainly useless to take the violent way with Lady Janet Roy. Her age and her social position were enough of themselves to repel any violence. She evidently knew that, and trusted to it. Grace resolved to meet the enemy on the neutral ground of politeness, as the most promising ground that she could occupy under present circumstances.

"If I have said anything hasty, I beg to apologize to your ladyship," she began. "May I ask if your only object in sending for me was to inquire into my pecuniary affairs, with a view to assisting me?"

"That," said Lady Janet, "was my only object."

"You had nothing to say to me on the subject of Mercy Merrick?"

"Nothing whatever. I am weary of hearing of Mercy Merrick. Have you any more questions to ask me?"

"I have one more."

"Yes?"

"I wish to ask your ladyship whether you propose to recognize me in the presence of your household as the late Colonel Roseberry's daughter?"

"I have already recognized you as a lady in embarrassed circumstances, who has peculiar claims on my consideration and forbearance. If you wish me to repeat those words in the presence of the servants (absurd as it is), I am ready to comply with your request."

Grace's temper began to get the better of her prudent resolutions.

"Lady Janet!" she said; "this won't do. I must request you to express yourself plainly. You talk of my peculiar claims on your forbearance. What claims do you mean?"

"It will be painful to both of us if we enter into details," replied Lady Janet. "Pray don't let us enter into details."

"I insist on it, madam."

"Pray don't insist on it."

Grace was deaf to remonstrance.

"I ask you in plain words," she went on, "do you acknowledge that you have been deceived by an adventuress who has personated me? Do you mean to restore me to my proper place in this house?"

Lady Janet returned to the arrangement of her papers.

"Does your ladyship refuse to listen to me?"

Lady Janet looked up from her papers as blandly as ever.

"If you persist in returning to your delusion," she said, "you will oblige me to persist in returning to my papers."

"What is my delusion, if you please?"

"Your delusion is expressed in the questions you have just put to me. Your delusion constitutes your peculiar claim on my forbearance. Nothing you can say or do will shake my forbearance. When I first found you in the dining-room, I acted most improperly; I lost my temper. I did worse; I was foolish enough and imprudent enough to send for a police officer. I owe you every possible atonement (afflicted as you are) for treating you in that cruel manner. I offered you the use of my boudoir, as part of my atonement. I sent for you, in the hope that you would allow me to assist you, as part of my atonement. You may behave rudely to me, you may speak in the most abusive terms of my adopted daughter; I will submit to anything, as part of my atonement. So long as you abstain from speaking on one painful subject, I will listen to you with the greatest pleasure. Whenever you return to that subject I shall return to my papers."

Grace looked at Lady Janet with an evil smile.

"I begin to understand your ladyship," she said. "You are ashamed to acknowledge that you have been grossly imposed upon. Your only alternative, of course, is to ignore everything that has happened. Pray count on my forbearance. I am not at all offended--I am merely amused. It is not every day that a lady of high rank exhibits herself in such a position as yours to an obscure woman like me. Your humane consideration for me dates, I presume, from the time when your adopted daughter set you the example, by ordering the police officer out of the room?"

Lady Janet's composure was proof even against this assault on it. She gravely accepted Grace's inquiry as a question addressed to her in perfect good faith.

"I am not at all surprised," she replied, "to find that my adopted daughter's interference has exposed her to misrepresentation. She ought to have remonstrated with me privately before she interfered. But she has one fault--she is too impulsive. I have never, in all my experience, met with such a warm-hearted person as she is. Always too considerate of others; always too forgetful of herself! The mere appearance of the police officer placed you in a situation to appeal to her compassion, and her impulses carried her away as usual. My fault! All my fault!"

Grace changed her tone once more. She was quick enough to discern that Lady Janet was a match for her with her own weapons.

"We have had enough of this," she said. "It is time to be serious. Your adopted daughter (as you call her) is Mercy Merrick, and you know it."

Lady Janet returned to her papers.

"I am Grace Roseberry, whose name she has stolen, and you know that."

Lady Janet went on with her papers.

Grace got up from her chair.

"I accept your silence, Lady Janet," she said, "as an acknowledgment of your deliberate resolution to suppress the truth. You are evidently determined to receive the adventuress as the true woman; and you don't scruple to face the consequences of that proceeding, by pretending to my face to believe that I am mad. I will not allow myself to be impudently cheated out of my rights in this way. You will hear from me again madam, when the Canadian mail arrives in England."

She walked toward the door. This time Lady Janet answered, as readily and as explicitly as it was possible to desire.

"I shall refuse to receive your letters," she said.

Grace returned a few steps, threateningly.

"My letters shall be followed by my witnesses," she proceeded.

"I shall refuse to receive your witnesses."

"Refuse at your peril. I will appeal to the law."

Lady Janet smiled.

"I don't pretend to much knowledge of the subject," she said; "but I should be surprised indeed if I discovered that you had any claim on me which the law could enforce. However, let us suppose that you can set the law in action. You know as well as I do that the only motive power which can do that is--money. I am rich; fees, costs, and all the rest of it are matters of no

sort of consequence to me. May I ask if you are in the same position?"

The question silenced Grace. So far as money was concerned, she was literally at the end of her resources. Her only friends were friends in Canada. After what she had said to him in the boudoir, it would be quite useless to appeal to the sympathies of Julian Gray. In the pecuniary sense, and in one word, she was absolutely incapable of gratifying her own vindictive longings. And there sat the mistress of Mablethorpe House, perfectly well aware of it.

Lady Janet pointed to the empty chair.

"Suppose you sit down again?" she suggested. "The course of our interview seems to have brought us back to the question that I asked you when you came into my room. Instead of threatening me with the law, suppose you consider the propriety of permitting me to be of some use to you. I am in the habit of assisting ladies in embarrassed circumstances, and nobody knows of it but my steward--who keeps the accounts--and myself. Once more, let me inquire if a little advance of the pecuniary sort (delicately offered) would be acceptable to you?"

Grace returned slowly to the chair that she had left. She stood by it, with one hand grasping the top rail, and with her eyes fixed in mocking scrutiny on Lady Janet's face.

"At last your ladyship shows your hand," she said. "Hush-money!"

"You will send me back to my papers," rejoined Lady Janet. "How obstinate you are!"

Grace's hand closed tighter and tighter round the rail of the chair. Without witnesses, without means, without so much as a refuge--thanks to her own coarse cruelties of language and conduct--in the sympathies of others, the sense of her isolation and her helplessness was almost maddening at that final moment. A woman of finer sensibilities would have instantly left the room. Grace's impenetrably hard and narrow mind impelled her to meet the emergency in a very different way. A last base vengeance, to which Lady Janet had voluntarily exposed herself, was still within her reach. "For the present," she thought, "there is but one way of being even with your ladyship. I can cost you as much as possible."

"Pray make some allowances for me," she said. "I am not obstinate--I am only a little awkward at matching the audacity of a lady of high rank. I shall improve with practice. My own language is, as I am painfully aware, only

plain English. Permit me to withdraw it, and to substitute yours. What advance is your ladyship (delicately) prepared to offer me?"

Lady Janet opened a drawer, and took out her check-book.

The moment of relief had come at last! The only question now left to discuss was evidently the question of amount. Lady Janet considered a little. The question of amount was (to her mind) in some sort a question of conscience as well. Her love for Mercy and her loathing for Grace, her horror of seeing her darling degraded and her affection profaned by a public exposure, had hurried her--there was no disputing it--into treating an injured woman harshly. Hateful as Grace Roseberry might be, her father had left her, in his last moments, with Lady Janet's full concurrence, to Lady Janet's care. But for Mercy she would have been received at Mablethorpe House as Lady Janet's companion, with a salary of one hundred pounds a year. On the other hand, how long (with such a temper as she had revealed) would Grace have remained in the service of her protectress? She would probably have been dismissed in a few weeks, with a year's salary to compensate her, and with a recommendation to some suitable employment. What would be a fair compensation now? Lady Janet decided that five years' salary immediately given, and future assistance rendered if necessary, would represent a fit remembrance of the late Colonel Roseberry's claims, and a liberal pecuniary acknowledgment of any harshness of treatment which Grace might have sustained at her hands. At the same time, and for the further satisfying of her own conscience, she determined to discover the sum which Grace herself would consider sufficient by the simple process of making Grace herself propose the terms.

"It is impossible for me to make you an offer," she said, "for this reason--your need of money will depend greatly on your future plans. I am quite ignorant of your future plans."

"Perhaps your ladyship will kindly advise me?" said Grace, satirically.

"I cannot altogether undertake to advise you," Lady Janet replied. "I can only suppose that you will scarcely remain in England, where you have no friends. Whether you go to law with me or not, you will surely feel the necessity of communicating personally with your friends in Canada. Am I right?"

Grace was quite quick enough to understand this as it was meant. Properly interpreted, the answer signified--"If you take your compensation in money, it is understood, as part of the bargain that you don't remain in England to

annoy me."

"Your ladyship is quite right," she said. "I shall certainly not remain in England. I shall consult my friends--and," she added, mentally, "go to law with you afterward, if I possibly can, with your own money!"

"You will return to Canada," Lady Janet proceeded; "and your prospects there will be, probably, a little uncertain at first. Taking this into consideration, at what amount do you estimate, in your own mind, the pecuniary assistance which you will require?"

"May I count on your ladyship's, kindness to correct me if my own ignorant calculations turn out to be wrong?" Grace asked, innocently.

Here again the words, properly interpreted, had a special signification of their own: "It is stipulated, on my part, that I put myself up to auction, and that my estimate shall be regulated by your ladyship's highest bid." Thoroughly understanding the stipulation, Lady Janet bowed, and waited gravely.

Gravely, on her side, Grace began.

"I am afraid I should want more than a hundred pounds," she said.

Lady Janet made her first bid. "I think so too."

"More, perhaps, than two hundred?"

Lady Janet made her second bid. "Probably."

"More than three hundred? Four hundred? Five hundred?"

Lady Janet made her highest bid. "Five hundred pounds will do," she said.

In spite of herself, Grace's rising color betrayed her ungovernable excitement. From her earliest childhood she had been accustomed to see shillings and sixpences carefully considered before they were parted with. She had never known her father to possess so much as five golden sovereigns at his own disposal (unencumbered by debt) in all her experience of him. The atmosphere in which she had lived and breathed was the all-stifling one of genteel poverty. There was something horrible in the greedy eagerness of her eyes as they watched Lady Janet, to see if she was really sufficiently in earnest to give away five hundred pounds sterling with a

stroke of her pen.

Lady Janet wrote the check in a few seconds, and pushed it across the table.

Grace's hungry eyes devoured the golden line, "Pay to myself or bearer five hundred pounds," and verified the signature beneath, "Janet Roy." Once sure of the money whenever she chose to take it, the native meanness of her nature instantly asserted itself. She tossed her head, and let the check lie on the table, with an overacted appearance of caring very little whether she took it or not.

"Your ladyship is not to suppose that I snap at your check," she said.

Lady Janet leaned back in her chair and closed her eyes. The very sight of Grace Roseberry sickened her. Her mind filled suddenly with the image of Mercy. She longed to feast her eyes again on that grand beauty, to fill her ears again with the melody of that gentle voice.

"I require time to consider--in justice to my own self-respect," Grace went on.

Lady Janet wearily made a sign, granting time to consider.

"Your ladyship's boudoir is, I presume, still at my disposal?"

Lady Janet silently granted the boudoir.

"And your ladyship's servants are at my orders, if I have occasion to employ them?"

Lady Janet suddenly opened her eyes. "The whole household is at your orders," she cried, furiously. "Leave me!"

Grace was far from being offended. If anything, she was gratified--there was a certain triumph in having stung Lady Janet into an open outbreak of temper. She insisted forthwith on another condition.

"In the event of my deciding to receive the check," she said, "I cannot, consistently with my own self-respect, permit it to be delivered to me otherwise than inclosed. Your ladyship will (if necessary) be so kind as to inclose it. Good-evening."

She sauntered to the door, looking from side to side, with an air of supreme disparagement, at the priceless treasures of art which adorned the walls. Her eyes dropped superciliously on the carpet (the design of a famous French painter), as if her feet condescended in walking over it. The audacity with which she had entered the room had been marked enough; it shrank to nothing before the infinitely superior proportions of the insolence with which she left it.

The instant the door was closed Lady Janet rose from her chair. Reckless of the wintry chill in the outer air, she threw open one of the windows. "Pah!" she exclaimed, with a shudder of disgust, "the very air of the room is tainted by her!"

She returned to her chair. Her mood changed as she sat down again--her heart was with Mercy once more. "Oh, my love!" she murmured "how low I have stooped, how miserably I have degraded myself--and all for You!" The bitterness of the retrospect was unendurable. The inbred force of the woman's nature took refuge from it in an outburst of defiance and despair. "Whatever she has done, that wretch deserves it! Not a living creature in this house shall say she has deceived me. She has not deceived me--she loves me! What do I care whether she has given me her true name or not! She has given me her true heart. What right had Julian to play upon her feelings and pry into her secrets? My poor, tempted, tortured child! I won't hear her confession. Not another word shall she say to any living creature. I am mistress--I will forbid it at once!" She snatched a sheet of notepaper from the case; hesitated, and threw it from her on the table. "Why not send for my darling?" she thought. "Why write?" She hesitated once more, and resigned the idea. "No! I can't trust myself! I daren't see her yet!"

She took up the sheet of paper again, and wrote her second message to Mercy. This time the note began fondly with a familiar form of address.

"MY DEAR CHILD--I have had time to think and compose myself a little, since I last wrote, requesting you to defer the explanation which you had promised me. I already understand (and appreciate) the motives which led you to interfere as you did downstairs, and I now ask you to entirely abandon the explanation. It will, I am sure, be painful to you (for reasons of your own into which I have no wish to inquire) to produce the person of whom you spoke, and as you know already, I myself am weary of hearing of her. Besides, there is really no need now for you to explain anything. The stranger whose visits here have caused us so much pain and anxiety will trouble us no more. She leaves England of her own free will, after a conversation with me which has perfectly succeeded in composing and

satisfying her. Not a word more, my dear, to me, or to my nephew, or to any other human creature, of what has happened in the dining-room to-day. When we next meet, let it be understood between us that the past is henceforth and forever buried to oblivion. This is not only the earnest request--it is, if necessary, the positive command, of your mother and friend,

"JANET ROY.

"P.S.--I shall find opportunities (before you leave your room) of speaking separately to my nephew and to Horace Holmcroft. You need dread no embarrassment, when you next meet them. I will not ask you to answer my note in writing. Say yes to the maid who will bring it to you, and I shall know we understand each other."

After sealing the envelope which inclosed these lines, Lady Janet addressed it, as usual, to "Miss Grace Roseberry." She was just rising to ring the bell, when the maid appeared with a message from the boudoir. The woman's tones and looks showed plainly that she had been made the object of Grace's insolent self-assertion as well as her mistress.

"If you please, my lady, the person downstairs wishes--"

Lady Janet, frowning contemptuously, interrupted the message at the outset. "I know what the person downstairs wishes. She has sent you for a letter from me?"

"Yes, my lady."

"Anything more?"

"She has sent one of the men-servants, my lady, for a cab. If your ladyship had only heard how she spoke to him!"

Lady Janet intimated by a sign that she would rather not hear. She at once inclosed the check in an undirected envelope.

"Take that to her," she said, "and then come back to me."

Dismissing Grace Roseberry from all further consideration, Lady Janet sat, with her letter to Mercy in her hand, reflecting on her position, and on the efforts which it might still demand from her. Pursuing this train of thought, it now occurred to her that accident might bring Horace and Mercy together at any moment, and that, in Horace's present frame of mind, he would

certainly insist on the very explanation which it was the foremost interest of her life to suppress. The dread of this disaster was in full possession of her when the maid returned.

"Where is Mr. Holmcroft?" she asked, the moment the woman entered the room.

"I saw him open the library door, my lady, just now, on my way upstairs."

"Was he alone?"

"Yes, my lady."

"Go to him, and say I want to see him here immediately."

The maid withdrew on her second errand. Lady Janet rose restlessly, and closed the open window. Her impatient desire to make sure of Horace so completely mastered her that she left her room, and met the woman in the corridor on her return. Receiving Horace's message of excuse, she instantly sent back the peremptory rejoinder, "Say that he will oblige me to go to him, if he persists in refusing to come to me. And, stay!" she added, remembering the undelivered letter. "Send Miss Roseberry's maid here; I want her."

Left alone again, Lady Janet paced once or twice up and down the corridor--then grew suddenly weary of the sight of it, and went back to her room. The two maids returned together. One of them, having announced Horace's submission, was dismissed. The other was sent to Mercy's room with Lady Janet's letter. In a minute or two the messenger appeared again, with the news that she had found the room empty.

"Have you any idea where Miss Roseberry is?"

"No, my lady."

Lady Janet reflected for a moment. If Horace presented himself without any needless delay, the plain inference would be that she had succeeded in separating him from Mercy. If his appearance was suspiciously deferred, she decided on personally searching for Mercy in the reception rooms on the lower floor of the house.

"What have you done with the letter?" she asked.

"I left it on Miss Roseberry's table, my lady."

"Very well. Keep within hearing of the bell, in case I want you again."

Another minute brought Lady Janet's suspense to an end. She heard the welcome sound of a knock at her door from a man's hand. Horace hurriedly entered the room.

"What is it you want with me, Lady Janet?" he inquired, not very graciously.

"Sit down, Horace, and you shall hear."

Horace did not accept the invitation. "Excuse me," he said, "if I mention that I am rather in a hurry."

"Why are you in a hurry?"

"I have reasons for wishing to see Grace as soon as possible."

"And I have reasons," Lady Janet rejoined, "for wishing to speak to you about Grace before you see her; serious reasons. Sit down."

Horace started. "Serious reasons?" he repeated. "You surprise me."

"I shall surprise you still more before I have done."

Their eyes met as Lady Janet answered in those terms. Horace observed signs of agitation in her, which he now noticed for the first time. His face darkened with an expression of sullen distrust--and he took the chair in silence.