

CHAPTER XXIV. LADY JANET'S LETTER.

THE narrative leaves Lady Janet and Horace Holmcroft together, and returns to Julian and Mercy in the library.

An interval passed--a long interval, measured by the impatient reckoning of suspense--after the cab which had taken Grace Roseberry away had left the house. The minutes followed each other; and still the warning sound of Horace's footsteps was not heard on the marble pavement of the hall. By common (though unexpressed) consent, Julian and Mercy avoided touching upon the one subject on which they were now both interested alike. With their thoughts fixed secretly in vain speculation on the nature of the interview which was then taking place in Lady Janet's room, they tried to speak on topics indifferent to both of them--tried, and failed, and tried again. In a last and longest pause of silence between them, the next event happened. The door from the hall was softly and suddenly opened.

Was it Horace? No--not even yet. The person who had opened the door was only Mercy's maid.

"My lady's love, miss; and will you please to read this directly?"

Giving her message in those terms, the woman produced from the pocket of her apron Lady Janet's second letter to Mercy, with a strip of paper oddly pinned round the envelope. Mercy detached the paper, and found on the inner side some lines in pencil, hurriedly written in Lady Janet's hand. They ran thus.

"Don't lose a moment in reading my letter. And mind this, when H. returns to you--meet him firmly: say nothing."

Enlightened by the warning words which Julian had spoken to her, Mercy was at no loss to place the right interpretation on those strange lines. Instead of immediately opening the letter, she stopped the maid at the library door. Julian's suspicion of the most trifling events that were taking place in the house had found its way from his mind to hers. "Wait!" she said. "I don't understand what is going on upstairs; I want to ask you something."

The woman came back--not very willingly.

"How did you know I was here?" Mercy inquired.

"If you please, miss, her ladyship ordered me to take the letter to you some little time since. You were not in your room, and I left it on your table."

"I understand that. But how came you to bring the letter here?"

"My lady rang for me, miss. Before I could knock at her door she came out into the corridor with that morsel of paper in her hand--"

"So as to keep you from entering her room?"

"Yes, miss. Her ladyship wrote on the paper in a great hurry, and told me to pin it round the letter that I had left in your room. I was to take them both together to you, and to let nobody see me. 'You will find Miss Roseberry in the library' (her ladyship says), 'and run, run, run! there isn't a moment to lose!' Those were her own words, miss."

"Did you hear anything in the room before Lady Janet came out and met you?"

The woman hesitated, and looked at Julian.

"I hardly know whether I ought to tell you, miss."

Julian turned away to leave the library. Mercy stopped him by a motion of her hand.

"You know that I shall not get you into any trouble," she said to the maid. "And you may speak quite safely before Mr. Julian Gray."

Thus re-assured, the maid spoke.

"To own the truth, miss, I heard Mr. Holmcraft in my lady's room. His voice sounded as if he was angry. I may say they were both angry--Mr. Holmcraft and my lady." (She turned to Julian.) "And just before her ladyship came out, sir, I heard your name, as if it was you they were having words about. I can't say exactly what it was; I hadn't time to hear. And I didn't listen, miss; the door was ajar; and the voices were so loud nobody could help hearing them."

It was useless to detain the woman any longer. Having given her leave to withdraw, Mercy turned to Julian.

"Why were they quarreling about you?" she asked.

Julian pointed to the unopened letter in her hand.

"The answer to your question may be there," he said. "Read the letter while you have the chance. And if I can advise you, say so at once."

With a strange reluctance she opened the envelope. With a sinking heart she read the lines in which Lady Janet, as "mother and friend," commanded her absolutely to suppress the confession which she had pledged herself to make in the sacred interests of justice and truth. A low cry of despair escaped her, as the cruel complication in her position revealed itself in all its unmerited hardship. "Oh, Lady Janet, Lady Janet!" she thought, "there was but one trial more left in my hard lot--and it comes to me from you!"

She handed the letter to Julian. He took it from her in silence. His pale complexion turned paler still as he read it. His eyes rested on her compassionately as he handed it back.

"To my mind," he said, "Lady Janet herself sets all further doubt at rest. Her letter tells me what she wanted when she sent for Horace, and why my name was mentioned between them."

"Tell me!" cried Mercy, eagerly.

He did not immediately answer her. He sat down again in the chair by her side, and pointed to the letter.

"Has Lady Janet shaken your resolution?" he asked.

"She has strengthened my resolution," Mercy answered. "She has added a new bitterness to my remorse."

She did not mean it harshly, but the reply sounded harshly in Julian's ears. It stirred the generous impulses, which were the strongest impulses in his nature. He who had once pleaded with Mercy for compassionate consideration for herself now pleaded with her for compassionate consideration for Lady Janet. With persuasive gentleness he drew a little nearer, and laid his hand on her arm.

"Don't judge her harshly," he said. "She is wrong, miserably wrong. She has recklessly degraded herself; she has recklessly tempted you. Still, is it generous--is it even just--to hold her responsible for deliberate sin? She is at

the close of her days; she can feel no new affection; she can never replace you. View her position in that light, and you will see (as I see) that it is no base motive which has led her astray. Think of her wounded heart and her wasted life--and say to yourself forgivingly, She loves me!"

Mercy's eyes filled with tears.

"I do say it!" she answered. "Not forgivingly--it is I who have need of forgiveness. I say it gratefully when I think of her--I say it with shame and sorrow when I think of myself."

He took her hand for the first time. He looked, guiltlessly looked, at her downcast face. He spoke as he had spoken at the memorable interview between them which had made a new woman of her.

"I can imagine no crueller trial," he said, "than the trial that is now before you. The benefactress to whom you owe everything asks nothing from you but your silence. The person whom you have wronged is no longer present to stimulate your resolution to speak. Horace himself (unless I am entirely mistaken) will not hold you to the explanation that you have promised. The temptation to keep your false position in this house is, I do not scruple to say, all but irresistible. Sister and friend! can you still justify my faith in you? Will you still own the truth, without the base fear of discovery to drive you to it?"

She lifted her head, with the steady light of resolution shining again in her grand, gray eyes. Her low, sweet voice answered him, without a faltering note in it,

"I will!"

"You will do justice to the woman whom you have wronged--unworthy as she is; powerless as she is to expose you?"

"I will!"

"You will sacrifice everything you have gained by the fraud to the sacred duty of atonement? You will suffer anything--even though you offend the second mother who has loved you and sinned for you--rather than suffer the degradation of yourself?"

Her hand closed firmly on his. Again, and for the last time, she answered,

"I will!"

His voice had not trembled yet. It failed him now. His next words were spoken in faint whispering tones--to himself; not to her.

"Thank God for this day!" he said. "I have been of some service to one of the noblest of God's creatures!"

Some subtle influence, as he spoke, passed from his hand to hers. It trembled through her nerves; it entwined itself mysteriously with the finest sensibilities in her nature; it softly opened her heart to a first vague surmising of the devotion that she had inspired in him. A faint glow of color, lovely in its faintness, stole over her face and neck. Her breathing quickened tremblingly. She drew her hand away from him, and sighed when she had released it.

He rose suddenly to his feet and left her, without a word or a look, walking slowly down the length of the room. When he turned and came back to her, his face was composed; he was master of himself again.

Mercy was the first to speak. She turned the conversation from herself by reverting to the proceedings in Lady Janet's room.

"You spoke of Horace just now," she said, "in terms which surprised me. You appeared to think that he would not hold me to my explanation. Is that one of the conclusions which you draw from Lady Janet's letter?"

"Most assuredly," Julian answered. "You will see the conclusion as I see it if we return for a moment to Grace Roseberry's departure from the house."

Mercy interrupted him there. "Can you guess," she asked, "how Lady Janet prevailed upon her to go?"

"I hardly like to own it," said Julian. "There is an expression in the letter which suggests to me that Lady Janet has offered her money, and that she has taken the bribe."

"Oh, I can't think that!"

"Let us return to Horace. Miss Roseberry once out of the house, but one serious obstacle is left in Lady Janet's way. That obstacle is Horace

Holmcroft."

"How is Horace an obstacle?"

"He is an obstacle in this sense. He is under an engagement to marry you in a week's time; and Lady Janet is determined to keep him (as she is determined to keep every one else) in ignorance of the truth. She will do that without scruple. But the inbred sense of honor in her is not utterly silenced yet. She cannot, she dare not, let Horace make you his wife under the false impression that you are Colonel Roseberry's daughter. You see the situation? On the one hand, she won't enlighten him. On the other hand, she cannot allow him to marry you blindfold. In this emergency what is she to do? There is but one alternative that I can discover. She must persuade Horace (or she must irritate Horace) into acting for himself, and breaking off the engagement on his own responsibility."

Mercy stopped him. "Impossible!" she cried, warmly. "Impossible!"

"Look again at her letter," Julian rejoined. "It tells, you plainly that you need fear no embarrassment when you next meet Horace. If words mean anything, those words mean that he will not claim from you the confidence which you have promised to repose in him. On what condition is it possible for him to abstain from doing that? On the one condition that you have ceased to represent the first and foremost interest of his life."

Mercy still held firm. "You are wronging Lady Janet," she said.

Julian smiled sadly.

"Try to look at it," he answered, "from Lady Janet's point of view. Do you suppose she sees anything derogatory to her in attempting to break off the marriage? I will answer for it, she believes she is doing you a kindness. In one sense it would be a kindness to spare you the shame of a humiliating confession, and to save you (possibly) from being rejected to your face by the man you love. In my opinion, the thing is done already. I have reasons of my own for believing that my aunt will succeed far more easily than she could anticipate. Horace's temper will help her."

Mercy's mind began to yield to him, in spite of herself.

"What do you mean by Horace's temper?" she inquired.

"Must you ask me that?" he said, drawing back a little from her.

"I must."

"I mean by Horace's temper, Horace's unworthy distrust of the interest that I feel in you."

She instantly understood him. And more than that, she secretly admired him for the scrupulous delicacy with which he had expressed himself. Another man would not have thought of sparing her in that way. Another man would have said, plainly, "Horace is jealous of me."

Julian did not wait for her to answer him. He considerately went on.

"For the reason that I have just mentioned," he said, "Horace will be easily irritated into taking a course which, in his calmer moments, nothing would induce him to adopt. Until I heard what your maid said to you I had thought (for your sake) of retiring before he joined you here. Now I know that my name has been introduced, and has made mischief upstairs, I feel the necessity (for your sake again) of meeting Horace and his temper face to face before you see him. Let me, if I can, prepare him to hear you without any angry feeling in his mind toward you. Do you object to retire to the next room for a few minutes in the event of his coming back to the library?"

Mercy's courage instantly rose with the emergency. She refused to leave the two men together.

"Don't think me insensible to your kindness," she said. "If I leave you with Horace I may expose you to insult. I refuse to do that. What makes you doubt his coming back?"

"His prolonged absence makes me doubt it," Julian replied. "In my belief, the marriage is broken off. He may go as Grace Roseberry has gone. You may never see him again."

The instant the opinion was uttered, it was practically contradicted by the man himself. Horace opened the library door.