

CHAPTER XXVI. GREAT HEART AND LITTLE HEART.

THERE was a pause.

The moments passed--and not one of the three moved. The moments passed--and not one of the three spoke. Insensibly the words of supplication died away on Julian's lips. Even his energy failed to sustain him, tried as it now was by the crushing oppression of suspense. The first trifling movement which suggested the idea of change, and which so brought with it the first vague sense of relief, came from Mercy. Incapable of sustaining the prolonged effort of standing, she drew back a little and took a chair. No outward manifestation of emotion escaped her. There she sat--with the death-like torpor of resignation in her face--waiting her sentence in silence from the man at whom she had hurled the whole terrible confession of the truth in one sentence!

Julian lifted his head as she moved. He looked at Horace, and advancing a few steps, looked again. There was fear in his face, as he suddenly turned it toward Mercy.

"Speak to him!" he said, in a whisper. "Rouse him, before it's too late!"

She moved mechanically in her chair; she looked mechanically at Julian.

"What more have I to say to him?" she asked, in faint, weary tones. "Did I not tell him everything when I told him my name?"

The natural sound of her voice might have failed to affect Horace. The altered sound of it roused him. He approached Mercy's chair, with a dull surprise in his face, and put his hand, in a weak, wavering way, on her shoulder. In that position he stood for a while, looking down at her in silence.

The one idea in him that found its way outward to expression was the idea of Julian. Without moving his hand, without looking up from Mercy, he spoke for the first time since the shock had fallen on him.

"Where is Julian?" he asked, very quietly.

"I am here, Horace--close by you."

"Will you do me a service?"

"Certainly. How can I help you?"

He considered a little before he replied. His hand left Mercy's shoulder, and went up to his head--then dropped at his side. His next words were spoken in a sadly helpless, bewildered way.

"I have an idea, Julian, that I have been somehow to blame. I said some hard words to you. It was a little while since. I don't clearly remember what it was all about. My temper has been a good deal tried in this house; I have never been used to the sort of thing that goes on here--secrets and mysteries, and hateful low-lived quarrels. We have no secrets and mysteries at home. And as for quarrels--ridiculous! My mother and my sisters are highly bred women (you know them); gentlewomen, in the best sense of the word. When I am with them I have no anxieties. I am not harassed at home by doubts of who people are, and confusion about names, and so on. I suspect the contrast weighs a little on my mind and upsets it. They make me over-suspicious among them here, and it ends in my feeling doubts and fears that I can't get over: doubts about you and fears about myself. I have got a fear about myself now. I want you to help me. Shall I make an apology first?"

"Don't say a word. Tell me what I can do."

He turned his face toward Julian for the first time.

"Just look at me," he said. "Does it strike you that I am at all wrong in my mind? Tell me the truth, old fellow."

"Your nerves are a little shaken, Horace. Nothing more."

He considered again after that reply, his eyes remaining anxiously fixed on Julian's face.

"My nerves are a little shaken," he repeated. "That is true; I feel they are shaken. I should like, if you don't mind, to make sure that it's no worse. Will you help me to try if my memory is all right?"

"I will do anything you like."

"Ah! you are a good fellow, Julian--and a clear-headed fellow too, which is very important just now. Look here! I say it's about a week since the

troubles began in this house. Do you say so too?"

"Yes."

"The troubles came in with the coming of a woman from Germany, a stranger to us, who behaved very violently in the dining-room there. Am I right, so far?"

"Quite right."

"The woman carried matters with a high hand. She claimed Colonel Roseberry--I wish to be strictly accurate--she claimed the late Colonel Roseberry as her father. She told a tiresome story about her having been robbed of her papers and her name by an impostor who had personated her. She said the name of the impostor was Mercy Merrick. And she afterward put the climax to it all: she pointed to the lady who is engaged to be my wife, and declared that she was Mercy Merrick. Tell me again, is that right or wrong?"

Julian answered him as before. He went on, speaking more confidently and more excitedly than he had spoken yet.

"Now attend to this, Julian. I am going to pass from my memory of what happened a week ago to my memory of what happened five minutes since. You were present; I want to know if you heard it too." He paused, and, without taking his eyes off Julian, pointed backward to Mercy. "There is the lady who is engaged to marry me," he resumed. "Did I, or did I not, hear her say that she had come out of a Refuge, and that she was going back to a Refuge? Did I, or did I not, hear her own to my face that her name was Mercy Merrick? Answer me, Julian. My good friend, answer me, for the sake of old times."

His voice faltered as he spoke those imploring words. Under the dull blank of his face there appeared the first signs of emotion slowly forcing its way outward. The stunned mind was reviving faintly. Julian saw his opportunity of aiding the recovery, and seized it. He took Horace gently by the arm, and pointed to Mercy.

"There is your answer!" he said. "Look!--and pity her."

She had not once interrupted them while they had been speaking: she had changed her position again, and that was all. There was a writing-table at the side of her chair; her outstretched arms rested on it. Her head had

dropped on her arms, and her face was hidden. Julian's judgment had not misled him; the utter self-abandonment of her attitude answered Horace as no human language could have answered him. He looked at her. A quick spasm of pain passed across his face. He turned once more to the faithful friend who had forgiven him. His head fell on Julian's shoulder, and he burst into tears.

Mercy started wildly to her feet, and looked at the two men.

"O God" she cried, "what have I done!"

Julian quieted her by a motion of his hand.

"You have helped me to save him," he said. "Let his tears have their way. Wait."

He put one arm round Horace to support him. The manly tenderness of the action, the complete and noble pardon of past injuries which it implied, touched Mercy to the heart. She went back to her chair. Again shame and sorrow overpowered her, and again she hid her face from view.

Julian led Horace to a seat, and silently waited by him until he had recovered his self-control. He gratefully took the kind hand that had sustained him: he said, simply, almost boyishly, "Thank you, Julian. I am better now."

"Are you composed enough to listen to what is said to you?" Julian asked.

"Yes. Do you wish to speak to me?"

Julian left him without immediately replying, and returned to Mercy.

"The time has come," he said. "Tell him all--truly, unreservedly, as you would tell it to me."

She shuddered as he spoke. "Have I not told him enough?" she asked. "Do you want me to break his heart? Look at him! Look what I have done already!"

Horace shrank from the ordeal as Mercy shrank from it.

"No, no! I can't listen to it! I daren't listen to it!" he cried, and rose to leave the room.

Julian had taken the good work in hand: he never faltered over it for an instant. Horace had loved her--how dearly Julian now knew for the first time. The bare possibility that she might earn her pardon if she was allowed to plead her own cause was a possibility still left. To let her win on Horace to forgive her, was death to the love that still filled his heart in secret. But he never hesitated. With a resolution which the weaker man was powerless to resist, he took him by the arm and led him back to his place.

"For her sake, and for your sake, you shall not condemn her unheard," he said to Horace, firmly. "One temptation to deceive you after another has tried her, and she has resisted them all. With no discovery to fear, with a letter from the benefactress who loves her commanding her to be silent, with everything that a woman values in this world to lose, if she owns what she has done--this woman, for the truth's sake, has spoken the truth. Does she deserve nothing at your hands in return for that? Respect her, Horace--and hear her."

Horace yielded. Julian turned to Mercy.

"You have allowed me to guide you so far," he said. "Will you allow me to guide you still?"

Her eyes sank before his; her bosom rose and fell rapidly. His influence over her maintained its sway. She bowed her head in speechless submission.

"Tell him," Julian proceeded, in accents of entreaty, not of command--"tell him what your life has been. Tell him how you were tried and tempted, with no friend near to speak the words which might have saved you. And then," he added, raising her from the chair, "let him judge you--if he can!"

He attempted to lead her across the room to the place which Horace occupied. But her submission had its limits. Half-way to the place she stopped, and refused to go further. Julian offered her a chair. She declined to take it. Standing with one hand on the back of the chair, she waited for the word from Horace which would permit her to speak. She was resigned to the ordeal. Her face was calm; her mind was clear. The hardest of all humiliations to endure--the humiliation of acknowledging her name--she had passed through. Nothing remained but to show her gratitude to Julian by acceding to his wishes, and to ask pardon of Horace before they parted forever. In a little while the Matron would arrive at the house--and then it would be over.

Unwillingly Horace looked at her. Their eyes met. He broke out suddenly with something of his former violence.

"I can't realize it even now!" he cried. "Is it true that you are not Grace Roseberry? Don't look at me! Say in one word--Yes or No!"

She answered him, humbly and sadly, "Yes."

"You have done what that woman accused you of doing? Am I to believe that?"

"You are to believe it, sir."

All the weakness of Horace's character disclosed itself when she made that reply.

"Infamous!" he exclaimed. "What excuse can you make for the cruel deception you have practiced on me? Too bad! too bad! There can be no excuse for you!"

She accepted his reproaches with unshaken resignation. "I have deserved it!" was all she said to herself, "I have deserved it!"

Julian interposed once more in Mercy's defense.

"Wait till you are sure there is no excuse for her, Horace," he said, quietly. "Grant her justice, if you can grant no more. I leave you together."

He advanced toward the door of the dining-room. Horace's weakness disclosed itself once more.

"Don't leave me alone with her!" he burst out. "The misery of it is more than I can bear!"

Julian looked at Mercy. Her face brightened faintly. That momentary expression of relief told him how truly he would be befriending her if he consented to remain in the room. A position of retirement was offered to him by a recess formed by the central bay-window of the library. If he occupied this place, they could see or not see that he was present, as their own inclinations might decide them.

"I will stay with you, Horace, as long as you wish me to be here." Having answered in those terms, he stopped as he passed Mercy, on his way to the

window. His quick and kindly insight told him that he might still be of some service to her. A hint from him might show her the shortest and the easiest way of making her confession. Delicately and briefly he gave her the hint. "The first time I met you," he said, "I saw that your life had had its troubles. Let us hear how those troubles began."

He withdrew to his place in the recess. For the first time, since the fatal evening when she and Grace Roseberry had met in the French cottage, Mercy Merrick looked back into the purgatory on earth of her past life, and told her sad story simply and truly in these words.