

He had never moved. His head was down; his face was hidden. She went back to him a few steps.

"The others have gone from me without one kind word. Can you forgive me?"

He held out his hand to her without looking up. Soberly as she had wounded him, his generous nature understood her. True to her from the first, he was true to her still.

"God bless, and comfort you," he said in broken tones. "The earth holds no nobler woman than you."

She knelt and kissed the kind hand that pressed hers for the last time. "It doesn't end with this world," she whispered, "there is a better world to come!" Then she rose, and went back to the child. Hand-in-hand, the two citizens of the Government of God—outcasts of the Government of Man—passed slowly down the length of the room. Then, out into the hall. Then, out into the night. The heavy clang of the closing door tolled the knell of their departure. They were gone.

But the orderly routine of the house—inexorable as death—pursued its appointed course. As the clock struck the hour the dinner-bell rang. An interval of a minute passed, and marked the limit of delay. The butler appeared at the dining-room door.

"Dinner is served, sir."

Julian looked up. The empty room met his eyes. Something white lay on the carpet close by him. It was her handkerchief—wet with her tears. He took it up, and pressed it to his lips. Was that to be the last of her? Had she left him for ever?

The native energy of the man, arming itself with all the might of his love, kindled in him again. No! While life was in him, while time was before him, there was the hope of winning her yet!

He turned to the servant, reckless of what his face might betray.

"Where is Lady Janet?"

"In the dining-room, sir."

He reflected for a moment. His own influence had failed. Through what other influence could he now hope to reach her? As the question crossed his mind, the light broke on him. He saw the way back to her—through the influence of Lady Janet.

"Her ladyship is waiting, sir."

Julian entered the dining-room.

EPILOGUE:

CONTAINING SELECTIONS FROM THE CORRESPONDENCE OF MISS GRACE ROSEBERRY AND MR. HORACE HOLMCROFT; TO WHICH ARE ADDED EXTRACTS FROM THE DIARY OF THE REVEREND JULIAN GRAY.

I.

"From Mr. HORACE HOLMCROFT to Miss GRACE ROSEBERRY.

"I hasten to thank you, dear Miss Roseberry, for your last kind letter, received by yesterday's mail from Canada. Believe me, I appreciate your generous readiness to pardon and forget what I so rudely said to you at a time when the arts of an adventuress had blinded me to the truth. In the grace which has forgiven me I recognise the inbred sense of justice of a true lady. Birth and breeding can never fail to assert themselves; I believe in them, thank God, more firmly than ever.

"You ask me to keep you informed of the progress of Julian Gray's infatuation, and of the course of conduct pursued towards him by Mercy Merrick.

"If you had not favoured me by explaining your object, I might have felt some surprise at receiving, from a lady in your position, such a request as this. But the motives by which you describe yourself as being actuated are beyond dispute. The existence of Society, as you truly say, is threatened by the present lamentable prevalence of Liberal ideas throughout the length and breadth of the land. We can only hope to protect ourselves against impostors interested in gaining a position among persons of our rank, by becoming in some sort (unpleasant as it may be) familiar with the arts by which imposture too frequently succeeds. If we wish to know to what daring lengths cunning can go, to what pitiable self-delusion credulity can consent, we must watch the proceedings—even while we shrink from them—of a Mercy Merrick and a Julian Gray.

"In taking up my narrative again, where my last letter left off, I must venture to set you right on one point.

"Certain expressions which have escaped your pen suggest to me that you blame Julian Gray as the cause of Lady Janet's regrettable visit to the Refuge, the day after Mercy Merrick had left her house. This is not quite correct. Julian, as you will presently see, has enough to answer for without being held responsible for errors of judgment in which he has had no share. Lady Janet (as she herself told me) went to the Refuge of her own free will, to ask Mercy Merrick's pardon for the language which she had used on the previous day. I passed a night of such misery as no words can describe—this, I assure you, is

what her ladyship really said to me—thinking over what my vile pride and selfishness and obstinacy had made me say and do. I would have gone down on my knees to beg her pardon if she would have let me. My first happy moment was when I won her consent to come and visit me sometimes at Mablethorpe House."

"You will, I am sure, agree with me that such extravagance as this is to be pitied rather than blamed. How sad to see the decay of the faculties with advancing age! It is a matter of grave anxiety to consider how much longer poor Lady Janet can be trusted to manage her own affairs. I shall take an opportunity of touching on the matter delicately when I next see her lawyer.

"I am straying from my subject. And—is it not strange?—I am writing to you as confidently as if we were old friends.

"To return to Julian Gray. Innocent of instigating his aunt's first visit to the Refuge, he is guilty of having induced her to go there for the second time, the day after I had despatched my last letter to you. Lady Janet's object on this occasion was neither more nor less than to plead her nephew's cause as humble suitor for the hand of Mercy Merrick. Imagine the descendant of one of the oldest families in England inviting an adventuress in a Refuge to honour a clergyman of the Church of England by becoming his wife! In what times do we live! My dear mother shed tears of shame when she heard of it. How you would love and admire my mother!

"I dined at Mablethorpe House by previous appointment, on the day when Lady Janet returned from her degrading errand.

"Well?" I said, waiting of course until the servant was out of the room.

"Well," Lady Janet answered, "Julian was quite right."

"Quite right in what?"

"In saying that the earth holds no nobler woman than Mercy Merrick."

"Has she refused him again?"

"She has refused him again."

"Thank God!" I felt it fervently, and I said it fervently. Lady Janet laid down her knife and fork, and fixed one of her fierce looks on me.

"It may not be your fault, Horace," she said, "if your nature is incapable of comprehending what is great and generous in other natures higher than yours. But the least you can do is to distrust your own capacity of appreciation. For the future keep your opinions (on questions which you don't understand) modestly to yourself. I have a tenderness for you for your father's sake; and I take the most favourable view of your conduct towards Mercy Merrick. I humanely consider it the conduct of a fool." (Her own words, Miss Roseberry. I assure you once more, her own words.) "But don't trespass too far on my indulgence—don't insinuate again that a woman who is good enough (if she died this night) to go to Heaven, is not good enough to be my nephew's wife."

"I expressed to you my conviction a little way back, that it was doubtful whether poor Lady Janet would be much longer competent to manage her own affairs. Perhaps you thought me hasty, then? What do you think, now?"

"It was of course useless to reply seriously to the extraordinary reprimand that I had received. Besides, I was really shocked by a decay of principle which proceeded but too plainly from decay of the mental powers. I made a soothing and respectful reply; and I was favoured in return with some account of what had really happened at the Refuge. My mother and my sisters were disgusted when I repeated the particulars to them. You will be disgusted too.

"The interesting penitent (expecting Lady Janet's visit), was, of course, discovered in a touching domestic position! She had a foundling baby asleep on her lap; and she was teaching the alphabet to an ugly little vagabond girl, whose acquaintance she had first made in the street. Just the sort of artful *tableau vivant* to impose on an old lady—was it not?"

"You will understand what followed, when Lady Janet opened her matrimonial negotiation. Having perfected herself in her part, Mercy Merrick, to do her justice, was not the woman to play it badly. The most magnanimous sentiments flowed from her lips. She declared that her future life was devoted to acts of charity; typified of course by the foundling infant and the ugly little girl. However she might personally suffer, whatever might be the sacrifice of her own feelings—observe how artfully this was put, to insinuate that she was herself in love with him!—she could not accept from Mr. Julian Gray an honour of which she was unworthy. Her gratitude to him and her interest in him alike forbade her to compromise his brilliant future, by consenting to a marriage which would degrade him in the estimation of all his friends. She thanked him (with tears); she thanked Lady Janet (with more tears); but she dare not, in the interests of his honour and his happiness, accept the hand that he offered to her. God bless and comfort him; and God help her to bear with her hard lot!

"The object of this contemptible comedy is plain enough to my mind. She is simply

holding off (Julian, as you know, is a poor man), until the influence of Lady Janet's persuasion is backed by the opening of Lady Janet's purse. In one word—Settlements! But for the profanity of the woman's language and the really lamentable credulity of the poor old lady, the whole thing would make a fit subject for a burlesque.

"But the saddest part of the story is still to come.

"In due course of time the lady's decision was communicated to Julian Gray. He took leave of his senses on the spot. Can you believe it?—he has resigned his curacy! At a time when the church is thronged every Sunday to hear him preach, this madman shuts the door and walks out of the pulpit. Even Lady Janet was not far enough gone in folly to abet him in this. She remonstrated, like the rest of his friends. Perfectly useless! He had but one answer to everything they could say: 'My career is closed.' What stuff!

"You will ask, naturally enough, what this perverse man is going to do next. I don't scruple to say that he is bent on committing suicide. Pray do not be alarmed! There is no fear of the pistol, the rope, or the river. Julian is simply courting death—within the limits of the law.

"This is strong language, I know. You shall hear what the facts are, and judge for yourself.

"Having resigned his curacy, his next proceeding was to offer his services, as volunteer, to a new missionary enterprise on the West Coast of Africa. The persons at the head of the Mission proved, most fortunately, to have a proper sense of their duty. Expressing their conviction of the value of Julian's assistance in the most handsome terms, they made it nevertheless a condition of entertaining his proposal that he should submit to examination by a competent medical man. After some hesitation he consented to this. The doctor's report was conclusive. In Julian's present state of health the climate of West Africa would in all probability kill him in three months' time.

"Foiled in his first attempt, he addressed himself next to a London Mission. Here it was impossible to raise the question of climate, and here, I grieve to say, he has succeeded.

"He is now working—in other words, he is deliberately risking his life—in the Mission to Green Anchor Fields. The district known by this name is situated in a remote part of London, near the Thames. It is notoriously infested by the most desperate and degraded set of wretches in the whole metropolitan population; and it is so thickly inhabited that it is hardly ever completely free from epidemic diseases. In this horrible place, and among these dangerous people, Julian is now employing himself from morning to night. None of his old friends ever see him. Since he joined the Mission he has not even called on Lady Janet Roy.

"My pledge is redeemed—the facts are before you. Am I wrong in taking my gloomy view of the prospect? I cannot forget that this unhappy man was once my friend; and I really see no hope for him in the future. Deliberately self-exposed to the violence of ruffians and the outbreak of disease, who is to extricate him from his shocking position? The one person who can do it is the person whose association with him would be his ruin—Mercy Merrick. Heaven only knows what disasters it may be my painful duty to communicate to you in my next letter!

"You are so kind as to ask me to tell you something about myself and my plans.

"I have very little to say on either head. After what I have suffered—my feelings trampled on, my confidence betrayed—I am as yet hardly capable of deciding what I shall do. Returning to my old profession—to the army—is out of the question, in these levelling days, when any obscure person who can pass an examination may call himself my brother officer, and may one day, perhaps, command me as my superior in rank. If I think of any career, it is the career of diplomacy. Birth and breeding have not quite disappeared as essential qualifications in *this* branch of the public service. But I have decided nothing as yet.

"My mother and sisters, in the event of your returning to England, desire me to say that it will afford them the greatest pleasure to make your acquaintance. Sympathising with me, they do not forget what you too have suffered. A warm welcome awaits you when you pay your first visit at our house.

Most truly yours,

HORACE HOLMCROFT."

II.

From Miss GRACE ROSEBERRY to Mr. HORACE HOLMCROFT.

"DEAR MR. HOLMCROFT,—I snatch a few moments from my other avocations to thank you for your most interesting and delightful letter. How well you describe, how accurately you judge! If Literature stood a little higher as a profession, I should almost advise you—but not if you entered Literature, how could you associate with the people whom you would be likely to meet?"

"Between ourselves, I always thought Mr. Julian Gray an overrated man. I will not say he has justified my opinion. I will only say I pity him. But, dear Mr. Holmcroft, how can you, with your sound judgment, place the sad alternatives now before him on the same level? To die in Green Anchor Fields, or to fall into the clutches of that vile wretch, is there any comparison between the two? Better a thousand times die at the post of duty than marry Mercy Merrick.

"As I have written the creature's name, I may add—so as to have all the sooner done with the subject—that I shall look with anxiety for your next letter. Do not suppose that I feel the smallest curiosity about this degraded and designing woman. My interest in her is purely religious. To persons of my devout turn of mind, she is a awful warning. When I feel Satan near me—it will be such a means of grace to think of Mercy Merrick!

"Poor Lady Janet! I noticed those signs of mental decay to which you so feelingly allude, at the last interview I had with her in Mablethorpe House. If you can find an opportunity, will you say that I wish her well, here and hereafter? and will you please add that I do not omit to remember her in my prayers?"

"There is just a chance of my visiting England towards the close of the autumn. My fortunes have changed since I wrote last. I have been received as reader and companion by a lady who is the wife of one of our high judicial functionaries in this part of the world. I do not take much interest in *him*; he is what they call 'a self-made man.' His wife is charming. Besides being a person of highly intellectual tastes, she is greatly her husband's superior—as you will understand when I tell you that she is related to the Gommerys of Pommery; *not* the Gommerys of Gommery, who (as your knowledge of our old families will inform you) only claim kindred with the younger branch of that ancient race.

"In the elegant and improving companionship which I now enjoy, I should feel quite happy but for one drawback. The climate of Canada is not favourable to my kind patroness, and her medical advisers recommend her to winter in London. In this event, I am to have the privilege of accompanying her. Is it necessary to add that my first visit will be paid at your house? I feel already united by sympathy to your mother and your sisters. There is a sort of freemasonry among gentlemen, is there not? With best thanks and remembrances, and many delightful anticipations of your next letter, believe me, dear Mr. Holmcroft,

Truly yours,

GRACE ROSEBERRY.

(To be continued.)

R R R.

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