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Chapter 11 - The Dead Alive

JUST inside the door there appeared the figure of a small woman dressed in plain and poor black garments. She silently lifted her black net veil and disclosed a dull, pale, worn, weary face. The forehead was low and broad; the eyes were unusually far apart; the lower features were remarkably small and delicate. In health (as the consul at Mannheim had remarked) this woman must have possessed, if not absolute beauty, at least rare attractions peculiarly her own. As it was now, suffering--sullen, silent, self-contained suffering--had marred its beauty. Attention and even curiosity it might still rouse. Admiration or interest it could excite no longer.

The small, thin, black figure stood immovably inside the door. The dull, worn, white face looked silently at the three persons in the room.

The three persons in the room, on their side, stood for a moment without moving, and looked silently at the stranger on the threshold. There was something either in the woman herself, or in the sudden and stealthy manner of her appearance in the room, which froze, as if with the touch of an invisible cold hand, the sympathies of all three. Accustomed to the world, habitually at their ease in every social emergency, they were now silenced for the first time in their lives by the first serious sense of embarrassment which they had felt since they were children in the presence of a stranger.

Had the appearance of the true Grace Roseberry aroused in their minds a suspicion of the woman who had stolen her name, and taken her place in the house?

Not so much as the shadow of a suspicion of Mercy was at the bottom of the strange sense of uneasiness which had now deprived them alike of their habitual courtesy and their habitual presence of mind. It was as practically impossible for any one of the three to doubt the identity of the adopted daughter of the house as it would be for you who read these lines to doubt the identity of the nearest and dearest relative you have in the world. Circumstances had fortified Mercy behind the strongest of all natural rights--the right of first possession. Circumstances had armed her with the most irresistible of all natural forces--the force of previous association and previous habit. Not by so much as a hair-breadth was the position of the false Grace Roseberry shaken by the first appearance of the true Grace Roseberry within the doors of Mablethorpe House. Lady Janet felt suddenly repelled, without knowing why. Julian and Horace felt suddenly repelled, without knowing why. Asked to describe their own sensations at the moment, they would have shaken their heads in despair, and would have answered in those words. The vague presentiment of some misfortune to come had entered the room with the entrance of the woman in black. But it moved invisibly; and it spoke as all presentiments speak, in the Unknown Tongue.

A moment passed. The crackling of the fire and the ticking of the clock were the only sounds audible in the room.

The voice of the visitor--hard, clear, and quiet--was the first voice that broke the silence.

"Mr. Julian Gray?" she said, looking interrogatively from one of the two gentlemen to the other.

Julian advanced a few steps, instantly recovering his self-possession. "I am sorry I was not at home," he said, "when you called with your letter from the consul. Pray take a chair."

By way of setting the example, Lady Janet seated herself at some little distance, with Horace in attendance standing near. She bowed to the stranger with studious politeness, but without uttering a word, before she settled herself in her chair. "I am obliged to listen to this person," thought the old lady. "But I am not obliged to speak to her. That is Julian's business--not mine. Don't stand, Horace! You fidget me. Sit down." Armed beforehand in her policy of silence, Lady Janet folded her handsome hands as usual, and waited for the proceedings to begin, like a judge on the bench.

"Will you take a chair?" Julian repeated, observing that the visitor appeared neither to heed nor to hear his first words of welcome to her.

At this second appeal she spoke to him. "Is that Lady Janet Roy?" she asked, with her eyes fixed on the mistress of the house.

Julian answered, and drew back to watch the result.

The woman in the poor black garments changed her position for the first time. She moved slowly across the room to the place at which Lady Janet was sitting, and addressed her respectfully with perfect self-possession of manner. Her whole demeanor, from the moment when she had appeared at the door, had expressed--at once plainly and becomingly--confidence in the reception that awaited her.

"Almost the last words my father said to me on his death-bed," she began, "were words, madam, which told me to expect protection and kindness from you."

It was not Lady Janet's business to speak. She listened with the blandest attention. She waited with the most exasperating silence to hear more.

Grace Roseberry drew back a step--not intimidated--only mortified and surprised. "Was my father wrong?" she asked, with a simple dignity of tone and manner which forced Lady Janet to abandon her policy of silence, in spite of herself.

"Who was your father?" she asked, coldly.

Grace Roseberry answered the question in a tone of stern surprise.

"Has the servant not given you my card?" she said. "Don't you know my name?"

"Which of your names?" rejoined Lady Janet.

"I don't understand your ladyship."

"I will make myself understood. You asked me if I knew your name. I ask you, what name it is? The name marked on your card is 'Miss Roseberry.' The name marked on your clothes, when you were in the hospital, was 'Mercy Merrick.'"

The self-possession which Grace had maintained from the moment when she had entered the dining-room, seemed now, for the first time, to be on the point of failing her. She turned, and looked appealingly at Julian, who had thus far kept his place apart, listening attentively.

"Surely," she said, "your friend, the consul, has told you in his letter about the mark on the clothes?"

Something of the girlish hesitation and timidity which had marked her demeanor at her interview with Mercy in the French cottage re-appeared in her tone and manner as she spoke those words. The changes--mostly changes for the worse--wrought in her by the suffering through which she had passed since that time were now (for the moment) effaced. All that was left of the better and simpler side of her character asserted itself in her brief appeal to Julian. She had hitherto repelled him. He began to feel a certain compassionate interest in her now.

"The consul has informed me of what you said to him," he answered, kindly. "But, if you will take my advice, I recommend you to tell your story to Lady Janet in your own words."

Grace again addressed herself with submissive reluctance to Lady Janet.

"The clothes your ladyship speaks of," she said, "were the clothes of another woman. The rain was pouring when the soldiers detained me on the frontier. I had been exposed for hours to the weather--I was wet to the skin. The clothes marked 'Mercy Merrick' were the clothes lent to me by Mercy Merrick herself while my own things were drying. I was struck by the shell in those clothes. I was carried away insensible in those clothes after the operation had been performed on me."

Lady Janet listened to perfection--and did no more. She turned confidentially to Horace, and said to him, in her gracefully ironical way: "She is ready with her explanation."

Horace answered in the same tone: "A great deal too ready."

Grace looked from one of them to the other. A faint flush of color showed itself in her face for the first time.

"Am I to understand," she asked, with proud composure, "that you don't believe me?"

Lady Janet maintained her policy of silence. She waved one hand courteously toward Julian, as if to say, "Address your inquiries to the gentleman who introduces you." Julian, noticing the gesture, and observing the rising color in Grace's cheeks, interfered directly in the interests of peace.

"Lady Janet asked you a question just now," he said; "Lady Janet inquired who your father was."

"My father was the late Colonel Roseberry."

Lady Janet made another confidential remark to Horace. "Her assurance amazes me!" she exclaimed.

Julian interposed before his aunt could add a word more. "Pray let us hear her," he said, in a tone of entreaty which had something of the imperative in it this time. He turned to Grace. "Have you any proof to produce," he added, in his gentler voice, "which will satisfy us that you are Colonel Roseberry's daughter?"

Grace looked at him indignantly. "Proof!" she repeated. "Is my word not enough?"

Julian kept his temper perfectly. "Pardon me," he rejoined, "you forget that you and Lady Janet meet now for the first time. Try to put yourself in my aunt's place. How is she to know that you are the late Colonel Roseberry's daughter?"

Grace's head sunk on her breast; she dropped into the nearest chair. The expression of her face changed instantly from anger to discouragement. "Ah," she exclaimed, bitterly, "if I only had the letters that have been stolen from me!"

"Letters," asked Julian, "introducing you to Lady Janet?"

"Yes." She turned suddenly to Lady Janet. "Let me tell you how I lost them," she said, in the first tones of entreaty which had escaped her yet.

Lady Janet hesitated. It was not in her generous nature to resist the appeal that had just been made to her. The sympathies of Horace were far less easily reached. He lightly launched a new shaft of satire--intended for the private amusement of Lady Janet. "Another explanation!" he exclaimed, with a look of comic resignation.

Julian overheard the words. His large lustrous eyes fixed themselves on Horace with a look of unmeasured contempt.

"The least you can do," he said, sternly, "is not to irritate her. It is so easy to irritate her!" He addressed himself again to Grace, endeavoring to help her through her difficulty in a new way. "Never mind explaining yourself for the moment," he said. "In the absence of your letters, have you any one in London who can speak to your identity?"

Grace shook her head sadly. "I have no friends in London," she answered.

It was impossible for Lady Janet--who had never in her life heard of anybody without friends in London--to pass this over without notice. "No friends in London!" she repeated, turning to Horace.

Horace shot another shaft of light satire. "Of course not!" he rejoined.

Grace saw them comparing notes. "My friends are in Canada," she broke out, impetuously. "Plenty of friends who could speak for me, if I could only bring them here."

As a place of reference--mentioned in the capital city of England--Canada, there is no denying it, is open to objection on the ground of distance. Horace was ready with another shot. "Far enough off, certainly," he said.

"Far enough off, as you say," Lady Janet agreed.

Once more Julian's inexhaustible kindness strove to obtain a hearing for the stranger who had been confided to his care. "A little patience, Lady Janet," he pleaded. "A

little consideration, Horace, for a friendless woman."

"Thank you, sir," said Grace. "It is very kind of you to try and help me, but it is useless. They won't even listen to me." She attempted to rise from her chair as she pronounced the last words. Julian gently laid his hand on her shoulder and obliged her to resume her seat.

"_I_ will listen to you," he said. "You referred me just now to the consul's letter. The consul tells me you suspected some one of taking your papers and your clothes."

"I don't suspect," was the quick reply; "I am certain! I tell you positively Mercy Merrick was the thief. She was alone with me when I was struck down by the shell. She was the only person who knew that I had letters of introduction about me. She confessed to my face that she had been a bad woman--she had been in a prison--she had come out of a refuge--"

Julian stopped her there with one plain question, which threw a doubt on the whole story.

"The consul tells me you asked him to search for Mercy Merrick," he said. "Is it not true that he caused inquiries to be made, and that no trace of any such person was to be heard of?"

"The consul took no pains to find her," Grace answered, angrily. "He was, like everybody else, in a conspiracy to neglect and misjudge me."

Lady Janet and Horace exchanged looks. This time it was impossible for Julian to blame them. The further the stranger's narrative advanced, the less worthy of serious attention he felt it to be. The longer she spoke, the more disadvantageously she challenged comparison with the absent woman, whose name she so obstinately and so audaciously persisted in assuming as her own.

"Granting all that you have said," Julian resumed, with a last effort of patience, "what use could Mercy Merrick make of your letters and your clothes?"

"What use?" repeated Grace, amazed at his not seeing the position as she saw it. "My clothes were marked with my name. One of my papers was a letter from my father, introducing me to Lady Janet. A woman out of a refuge would be quite capable of presenting herself here in my place."

Spoken entirely at random, spoken without so much as a fragment of evidence to support them, those last words still had their effect. They cast a reflection on Lady Janet's adopted daughter which was too outrageous to be borne. Lady Janet rose instantly. "Give me your arm, Horace," she said, turning to leave the room. "I have heard enough."

Horace respectfully offered his arm. "Your ladyship is quite right," he answered. "A more monstrous story never was invented."

He spoke, in the warmth of his indignation, loud enough for Grace to hear him. "What is there monstrous in it?" she asked, advancing a step toward him, defiantly.

Julian checked her. He too--though he had only once seen Mercy--felt an angry sense of the insult offered to the beautiful creature who had interested him at his first sight of her. "Silence!" he said, speaking sternly to Grace for the first time. "You are offending--justly offending--Lady Janet. You are talking worse than absurdly--you are talking offensively--when you speak of another woman presenting herself here in your place."

Grace's blood was up. Stung by Julian's reproof, she turned on him a look which was almost a look of fury.

"Are you a clergyman? Are you an educated man?" she asked. "Have you never read of cases of false personation, in newspapers and books? I blindly confided in Mercy Merrick before I found out what her character really was. She left the cottage--I know it, from the surgeon who brought me to life again--firmly persuaded that the shell had killed me. My papers and my clothes disappeared at the same time. Is there nothing suspicious in these circumstances? There were people at the Hospital who thought them highly suspicious--people who warned me that I might find an impostor in my place." She suddenly paused. The rustling sound of a silk dress had caught her ear. Lady Janet was leaving the room, with Horace, by way of the conservatory. With a last desperate effort of resolution, Grace sprung forward and placed herself in front of them.

"One word, Lady Janet, before you turn your back on me," she said, firmly. "One word, and I will be content. Has Colonel Roseberry's letter found its way to this house or not? If it has, did a woman bring it to you?"

Lady Janet looked--as only a great lady can look, when a person of inferior rank has presumed to fail in respect toward her.

"You are surely not aware," she said, with icy composure, "that these questions are an insult to Me?"

"And worse than an insult," Horace added, warmly, "to Grace!"

The little resolute black figure (still barring the way to the conservatory) was suddenly shaken from head to foot. The woman's eyes traveled backward and forward between Lady Janet and Horace with the light of a new suspicion in them.

"Grace!" she exclaimed. "What Grace? That's my name. Lady Janet, you _have_ got the letter! The woman is here!"

Lady Janet dropped Horace's arm, and retraced her steps to the place at which her nephew was standing.

"Julian," she said. "You force me, for the first time in my life, to remind you of the respect that is due to me in my own house. Send that woman away."

Without waiting to be answered, she turned back again, and once more took Horace's arm.

"Stand back, if you please," she said, quietly, to Grace.

Grace held her ground.

"The woman is here!" she repeated. "Confront me with her--and then send me away, if you like."

Julian advanced, and firmly took her by the arm. "You forget what is due to Lady Janet," he said, drawing her aside. "You forget what is due to yourself."

With a desperate effort, Grace broke away from him, and stopped Lady Janet on the threshold of the conservatory door.

"Justice!" she cried, shaking her clinched hand with hysterical frenzy in the air. "I claim my right to meet that woman face to face! Where is she? Confront me with her!"

Confront me with her!"

While those wild words were pouring from her lips, the rumbling of carriage wheels became audible on the drive in front of the house. In the all-absorbing agitation of the moment, the sound of the wheels (followed by the opening of the house door) passed unnoticed by the persons in the dining-room. Horace's voice was still raised in angry protest against the insult offered to Lady Janet; Lady Janet herself (leaving him for the second time) was vehemently ringing the bell to summon the servants; Julian had once more taken the infuriated woman by the arms and was trying vainly to compose her--when the library door was opened quietly by a young lady wearing a mantle and a bonnet. Mercy Merrick (true to the appointment which she had made with Horace) entered the room.

The first eyes that discovered her presence on the scene were the eyes of Grace Roseberry. Starting violently in Julian's grasp, she pointed toward the library door. "Ah!" she cried, with a shriek of vindictive delight. "There she is!"

Mercy turned as the sound of the scream rang through the room, and met--resting on her in savage triumph--the living gaze of the woman whose identity she had stolen, whose body she had left laid out for dead. On the instant of that terrible discovery--with her eyes fixed helplessly on the fierce eyes that had found her--she dropped senseless on the floor.