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Chapter 18 - The Search In The Grounds

GRACE ROSEBERRY, still listening in the conservatory, saw the door open, and recognized the mistress of the house. She softly drew back, and placed herself in safer hiding, beyond the range of view from the dining-room.

Lady Janet advanced no further than the threshold. She stood there and looked at her nephew and her adopted daughter in stern silence.

Mercy dropped into the chair at her side. Julian kept his place by her. His mind was still stunned by the discovery that had burst on it; his eyes still rested on her in mute terror of inquiry. He was as completely absorbed in the one act of looking at her as if they had been still alone together in the room.

Lady Janet was the first of the three who spoke. She addressed herself to her nephew.

"You were right, Mr. Julian Gray," she said, with her bitterest emphasis of tone and manner. "You ought to have found nobody in this room on your return but _me_. I detain you no longer. You are free to leave my house."

Julian looked round at his aunt. She was pointing to the door. In the excited state of his sensibilities at that moment the action stung him to the quick. He answered without his customary consideration for his aunt's age and his aunt's position toward him.

"You apparently forget, Lady Janet, that you are not speaking to one of your footmen," he said. "There are serious reasons (of which you know nothing) for my remaining in your house a little longer. You may rely upon my trespassing on your hospitality as short a time as possible."

He turned again to Mercy as he said those words, and surprised her timidly looking up at him. In the instant when their eyes met, the tumult of emotions struggling in him became suddenly stilled. Sorrow for her--compassionating sorrow--rose in the new calm and filled his heart. Now, and now only, he could read in the wasted and noble face how she had suffered. The pity which he had felt for the unnamed woman grew to a tenfold pity for _her_. The faith which he professed--honestly professed--in the better nature of the unnamed woman strengthened into a tenfold faith in _her_. He addressed himself again to his aunt, in a gentler tone. "This lady," he resumed, "has something to say to me in private which she has not said yet. That is my reason and my apology for not immediately leaving the house."

Still under the impression of what she had seen on entering the room, Lady Janet looked at him in angry amazement. Was Julian actually ignoring Horace Holmcroft's claims, in the presence of Horace Holmcroft's betrothed wife? She appealed to her adopted daughter. "Grace!" she exclaimed, "have you heard him? Have you nothing to say? Must I remind you--"

She stopped. For the first time in Lady Janet's experience of her young companion, she found herself speaking to ears that were deaf to her. Mercy was incapable of listening. Julian's eyes had told her that Julian understood her at last!

Lady Janet turned to her nephew once more, and addressed him in the hardest words that she had ever spoken to her sister's son.

"If you have any sense of decency," she said --"I say nothing of a sense of honor--you will leave this house, and your acquaintance with that lady will end here. Spare me your protests and excuses; I can place but one interpretation on what I saw when I opened that door."

"You entirely misunderstand what you saw when you opened that door," Julian answered, quietly.

"Perhaps I misunderstand the confession which you made to me not an hour ago?" retorted Lady Janet.

Julian cast a look of alarm at Mercy. "Don't speak of it!" he said, in a whisper. "She might hear you."

"Do you mean to say she doesn't know you are in love with her?"

"Thank God, she has not the faintest suspicion of it!"

There was no mistaking the earnestness with which he made that reply. It proved his innocence as nothing else could have proved it. Lady Janet drew back a step--utterly bewildered; completely at a loss what to say or what to do next.

The silence that followed was broken by a knock at the library door. The man-servant--with news, and bad news, legibly written in his disturbed face and manner--entered the room. In the nervous irritability of the moment, Lady Janet resented the servant's appearance as a positive offense on the part of the harmless man. "Who sent for you?" she asked, sharply. "What do you mean by interrupting us?"

The servant made his excuses in an oddly bewildered manner.

"I beg your ladyship's pardon. I wished to take the liberty--I wanted to speak to Mr. Julian Gray."

"What is it?" asked Julian.

The man looked uneasily at Lady Janet, hesitated, and glanced at the door, as if he wished himself well out of the room again.

"I hardly know if I can tell you, sir, before her ladyship," he answered.

Lady Janet instantly penetrated the secret of her servant's hesitation.

"I know what has happened," she said; "that abominable woman has found her way here again. Am I right?"

The man's eyes helplessly consulted Julian.

"Yes, or no?" cried Lady Janet, imperatively.

"Yes, my lady."

Julian at once assumed the duty of asking the necessary questions.

"Where is she?" he began.

"Somewhere in the grounds, as we suppose, sir."

"Did _you_ see her?"

"No, sir."

"Who saw her?"

"The lodge-keeper's wife."

This looked serious. The lodge-keeper's wife had been present while Julian had given his instructions to her husband. She was not likely to have mistaken the identity of the person whom she had discovered.

"How long since?" Julian asked next.

"Not very long, sir."

"Be more particular. _How_ long?"

"I didn't hear, sir."

"Did the lodge-keeper's wife speak to the person when she saw her?"

"No, sir: she didn't get the chance, as I understand it. She is a stout woman, if you remember. The other was too quick for her-- discovered her, sir, and (as the saying is) gave her the slip."

"In what part of the grounds did this happen?"

The servant pointed in the direction of the side hall. "In that part, sir. Either in the Dutch garden or the shrubbery. I am not sure which."

It was plain, by this time, that the man's information was too imperfect to be practically of any use. Julian asked if the lodge-keeper's wife was in the house.

"No, sir. Her husband has gone out to search the grounds in her place, and she is minding the gate. They sent their boy with the message. From what I can make out from the lad, they would be thankful if they could get a word more of advice from you, sir."

Julian reflected for a moment.

So far as he could estimate them, the probabilities were that the stranger from Mannheim had already made her way into the house; that she had been listening in the billiard-room; that she had found time enough to escape him on his approaching to open the door; and that she was now (in the servant's phrase) "somewhere in the grounds," after eluding the pursuit of the lodgekeeper's wife.

The matter was serious. Any mistake in dealing with it might lead to very painful results.

If Julian had correctly anticipated the nature of the confession which Mercy had been on the point of addressing to him, the person whom he had been the means of introducing into the house was--what she had vainly asserted herself to be--no other than the true Grace Roseberry.

Taking this for granted, it was of the utmost importance that he should speak to Grace privately, before she committed herself to any rashly renewed assertion of her claims, and before she could gain access to Lady Janet's adopted daughter. The landlady at her lodgings had already warned him that the object which she held steadily in view was to find her way to "Miss Roseberry" when Lady Janet was not present to take her part, and when no gentleman were at hand to protect her. "Only let me meet her face to face" (she had said), "and I will make her confess herself the impostor that she is!" As matters now stood, it was impossible to estimate too seriously the mischief which might ensue from such a meeting as this. Everything now depended on Julian's skillful management of an exasperated woman; and nobody, at that moment, knew where the woman was.

In this position of affairs, as Julian understood it, there seemed to be no other alternative than to make his inquiries instantly at the lodge and then to direct the search in person.

He looked toward Mercy's chair as he arrived at this resolution. It was at a cruel sacrifice of his own anxieties and his own wishes that he deferred continuing the conversation with her from the critical point at which Lady Janet's appearance had interrupted it.

Mercy had risen while he had been questioning the servant. The attention which she had failed to accord to what had passed between his aunt and himself she had given to the imperfect statement which he had extracted from the man. Her face plainly showed that she had listened as eagerly as Lady Janet had listened; with this remarkable difference between them, that Lady Janet looked frightened, and that Lady Janet's companion showed no signs of alarm. She appeared to be interested; perhaps anxious--nothing more.

Julian spoke a parting word to his aunt.

"Pray compose yourself," he said "I have little doubt, when I can learn the particulars, that we shall easily find this person in the grounds. There is no reason to be uneasy. I am going to superintend the search myself. I will return to you as soon as possible."

Lady Janet listened absently. There was a certain expression in her eyes which suggested to Julian that her mind was busy with some project of its own. He stopped as he passed Mercy, on his way out by the billiard-room door. It cost him a hard effort to control the contending emotions which the mere act of looking at her now awakened in him. His heart beat fast, his voice sank low, as he spoke to her.

"You shall see me again," he said. "I never was more in earnest in promising you my truest help and sympathy than I am now."

She understood him. Her bosom heaved painfully; her eyes fell to the ground--she made no reply. The tears rose in Julian's eyes as he looked at her. He hurriedly left the room.

When he turned to close the billiard-room door, he heard Lady Janet say, "I will be with you again in a moment, Grace; don't go away."

Interpreting these words as meaning that his aunt had some business of her own to attend to in the library, he shut the door. He had just advanced into the smoking-room beyond, when he thought he heard the door open again. He turned round. Lady Janet had followed him.

"Do you wish to speak to me?" he asked.

"I want something of you," Lady Janet answered, "before you go."

"What is it?"

"Your card."

"My card?"

"You have just told me not to be uneasy," said the old lady. "I _am_ uneasy, for all that. I don't feel as sure as you do that this woman really is in the grounds. She may be lurking somewhere in the house, and she may appear when your back is turned. Remember what you told me."

Julian understood the allusion. He made no reply.

"The people at the police station close by," pursued Lady Janet, "have instructions to send an experienced man, in plain clothes, to any address indicated on your card the moment they receive it. That is what you told me. For Grace's protection, I want your card before you leave us."

It was impossible for Julian to mention the reasons which now forbade him to make use of his own precautions--in the very face of the emergency which they had been especially intended to meet. How could he declare the true Grace Roseberry to be mad? How could he give the true Grace Roseberry into custody? On the other hand, he had personally pledged himself (when the circumstances appeared to require it) to place the means of legal protection from insult and annoyance at his aunt's disposal. And now, there stood Lady Janet, unaccustomed to have her wishes disregarded by anybody, with her hand extended, waiting for the card!

What was to be done? The one way out of the difficulty appeared to be to submit for the moment. If he succeeded in discovering the missing woman, he could easily take care that she should be subjected to no needless indignity. If she contrived to slip into the house in his absence, he could provide against that contingency by sending a second card privately to the police station, forbidding the officer to stir in the affair until he had received further orders. Julian made one stipulation only before he handed his card to his aunt.

"You will not use this, I am sure, without positive and pressing necessity," he said. "But I must make one condition. Promise me to keep my plan for communicating with the police a strict secret--"

"A strict secret from Grace?" interposed Lady Janet. (Julian bowed.) "Do you suppose I want to frighten her? Do you think I have not had anxiety enough about her already? Of course I shall keep it a secret from Grace!"

Re-assured on this point, Julian hastened out into the grounds. As soon as his back was turned Lady Janet lifted the gold pencil-case which hung at her watch-chain, and wrote on her nephew's card (for the information of the officer in plain clothes), "_You are wanted at Mablethorpe House_." This done, she put the card into the old-fashioned pocket of her dress, and returned to the dining-room.

Grace was waiting, in obedience to the instructions which she had received.

For the first moment or two not a word was spoken on either side. Now that she was alone with her adopted daughter, a certain coldness and hardness began to show itself in Lady Janet's manner. The discovery that she had made on opening the drawing-room door still hung on her mind. Julian had certainly convinced her that she had misinterpreted what she had seen; but he had convinced her against her will. She had found Mercy deeply agitated; suspiciously silent. Julian might be innocent, she admitted--there was no accounting for the vagaries of men. But the case of Mercy was altogether different. Women did not find themselves in the arms of men without knowing what they were about. Acquitting Julian, Lady Janet declined to acquit Mercy. "There is some secret understanding between them," thought the old lady, "and she's to blame; the women always are!"

Mercy still waited to be spoken to; pale and quiet, silent and submissive. Lady Janet--in a highly uncertain state of temper--was obliged to begin.

"My dear!" she called out, sharply.

"Yes, Lady Janet."

"How much longer are you going to sit there with your mouth shut up and your eyes on the carpet? Have you no opinion to offer on this alarming state of things? You heard what the man said to Julian--I saw you listening. Are you horribly frightened?"

"No, Lady Janet."

"Not even nervous?"

"No, Lady Janet."

"Ha! I should hardly have given you credit for so much courage after my experience of you a week ago. I congratulate you on your recovery."

"Thank you, Lady Janet."

"I am not so composed as you are. We were an excitable set in _my_ youth--and I haven't got the better of it yet. I feel nervous. Do you hear? I feel nervous."

"I am sorry, Lady Janet."

"You are very good. Do you know what I am going to do?"

"No, Lady Janet."

"I am going to summon the household. When I say the household, I mean the men; the women are no use. I am afraid I fail to attract your attention?"

"You have my best attention, Lady Janet."

"You are very good again. I said the women were of no use."

"Yes, Lady Janet."

"I mean to place a man-servant on guard at every entrance to the house. I am going to do it at once. Will you come with me?"

"Can I be of any use if I go with your ladyship?"

"You can't be of the slightest use. I give the orders in this house--not you. I had quite another motive in asking you to come with me. I am more considerate of you than you seem to think--I don't like leaving you here by yourself. Do you understand?"

"I am much obliged to your ladyship. I don't mind being left here by myself."

"You don't mind? I never heard of such heroism in my life--out of a novel! Suppose that crazy wretch should find her way in here?"

"She would not frighten me this time as she frightened me before."

"Not too fast, my young lady! Suppose--Good heavens! now I think of it, there is the conservatory. Suppose she should be hidden in there? Julian is searching the grounds. Who is to search the conservatory?"

"With your ladyship's permission, _I_ will search the conservatory."

"You!!!"

"With your ladyship's permission."

"I can hardly believe my own ears! Well, 'Live and learn' is an old proverb. I thought I knew your character. This _is_ a change!"

"You forget, Lady Janet (if I may venture to say so), that the circumstances are changed. She took me by surprise on the last occasion; I am prepared for her now."

"Do you really feel as coolly as you speak?"

"Yes, Lady Janet."

"Have your own way, then. I shall do one thing, however, in case of your having overestimated your own courage. I shall place one of the men in the library. You will only have to ring for him if anything happens. He will give the alarm--and I shall act accordingly. I have my plan," said her Ladyship, comfortably conscious of the card in her pocket. "Don't look as if you wanted to know what it is. I have no intention of saying anything about it--except that it will do. Once more, and for the last time--do you stay here? or do you go with me?"

"I stay here."

She respectfully opened the library door for Lady Janet's departure as she made that reply. Throughout the interview she had been carefully and coldly deferential; she had not once lifted her eyes to Lady Janet's face. The conviction in her that a few hours more would, in all probability, see her dismissed from the house, had of necessity fettered every word that she spoke--had morally separated her already from the injured mistress whose love she had won in disguise. Utterly incapable of attributing the change in her young companion to the true motive, Lady Janet left the room to summon her domestic garrison, thoroughly puzzled and (as a necessary consequence of that condition) thoroughly displeased.

Still holding the library door in her hand, Mercy stood watching with a heavy heart the progress of her benefactress down the length of the room on the way to the front hall beyond. She had honestly loved and respected the warm-hearted, quick-tempered old lady. A sharp pang of pain wrung her as she thought of the time when even the chance utterance of her name would become an unpardonable offense in Lady Janet's house.

But there was no shrinking in her now from the ordeal of the confession. She was not only anxious--she was impatient for Julian's return. Before she slept that night Julian's confidence in her should be a confidence that she had deserved.

"Let her own the truth, without the base fear of discovery to drive her to it. Let her do justice to the woman whom she has wronged, while that woman is still powerless to expose her. Let her sacrifice everything that she has gained by the fraud to the sacred duty of atonement. If she can do that, then her repentance has nobly revealed the noble nature that is in her; then she is a woman to be trusted, respected, beloved." Those words were as vividly present to her as if she still heard them falling from his lips. Those other words which had followed them rang as grandly as ever in her ears: "Rise, poor wounded heart! Beautiful, purified soul, God's angels rejoice over you! Take your place among the noblest of God's creatures!" Did the woman live who could hear Julian Gray say that, and who could hesitate, at any sacrifice, at any loss, to

justify his belief in her? "Oh!" she thought, longingly while her eyes followed Lady Janet to the end of the library, "if your worst fears could only be realized! If I could only see Grace Roseberry in this room, how fearlessly I could meet her now!"

She closed the library door, while Lady Janet opened the other door which led into the hall.

As she turned and looked back into the dining-room a cry of astonishment escaped her.

There--as if in answer to the aspiration which was still in her mind; there, established in triumph on the chair that she had just left--sat Grace Roseberry, in sinister silence, waiting for her.