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[Authors](#)
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[The New Magdalen](#)

[Wilkie Collins](#)

This Book:

[Contents](#)
[Previous Chapter](#)
[Next Chapter](#)

Chapter 19 - The Evil Genius

RECOVERING from the first overpowering sensation of surprise, Mercy rapidly advanced, eager to say her first penitent words. Grace stopped her by a warning gesture of the hand. "No nearer to me," she said, with a look of contemptuous command. "Stay where you are."

Mercy paused. Grace's reception had startled her. She instinctively took the chair nearest to her to support herself. Grace raised a warning hand for the second time, and issued another command: "I forbid you to be seated in my presence. You have no right to be in this house at all. Remember, if you please, who you are, and who I am."

The tone in which those words were spoken was an insult in itself. Mercy suddenly lifted her head; the angry answer was on her lips. She checked it, and submitted in silence. "I will be worthy of Julian Gray's confidence in me," she thought, as she stood patiently by the chair. "I will bear anything from the woman whom I have wronged."

In silence the two faced each other; alone together, for the first time since they had met in the French cottage. The contrast between them was strange to see. Grace Roseberry, seated in her chair, little and lean, with her dull white complexion, with her hard, threatening face, with her shrunken figure clad in its plain and poor black garments, looked like a being of a lower sphere, compared with Mercy Merrick, standing erect in her rich silken dress; her tall, shapely figure towering over the little creature before her; her grand head bent in graceful submission; gentle, patient, beautiful; a woman whom it was a privilege to look at and a distinction to admire. If a stranger had been told that those two had played their parts in a romance of real life--that one of them was really connected by the ties of relationship with Lady Janet Roy, and that the other had successfully attempted to personate her--he would inevitably, if it had been left to him to guess which was which, have picked out Grace as the counterfeit and Mercy as the true woman.

Grace broke the silence. She had waited to open her lips until she had eyed her conquered victim all over, with disdainfully minute attention, from head to foot

"Stand there. I like to look at you," she said, speaking with a spiteful relish of her own cruel words. "It's no use fainting this time. You have not got Lady Janet Roy to bring you to. There are no gentlemen here to-day to pity you and pick you up. Mercy Merrick, I have got you at last. Thank God, my turn has come! You can't escape me now!"

All the littleness of heart and mind which had first shown itself in Grace at the meeting in the cottage, when Mercy told the sad story of her life, now revealed itself once more. The woman who in those past times, had felt no impulse to take a suffering and a penitent fellow-creature by the hand was the same woman who could feel no pity, who could spare no insolence of triumph, now. Mercy's sweet voice answered her patiently, in low, pleading tones.

"I have not avoided you," she said. "I would have gone to you of my own accord if I had known that you were here. It is my heartfelt wish to own that I have sinned against you, and to make all the atonement that I can. I am too anxious to deserve your forgiveness to have any fear of seeing you."

Conciliatory as the reply was, it was spoken with a simple and modest dignity of manner which roused Grace Roseberry to fury.

"How dare you speak to me as if you were any equal?" she burst out. "You stand there and answer me as if you had your right and your place in this house. You audacious woman! _I_ have my right and my place here--and what am I obliged to do? I am obliged to hang about in the grounds, and fly from the sight of the servants, and hide like a thief, and wait like a beggar, and all for what? For the chance of having a word with _you_. Yes! you, madam! with the air of the Refuge and the dirt of the streets on you!"

Mercy's head sank lower; her hand trembled as it held by the back of the chair.

It was hard to bear the reiterated insults heaped on her, but Julian's influence still made itself felt. She answered as patiently as ever.

"If it is your pleasure to use hard words to me," she said, "I have no right to resent them."

"You have no right to anything!" Grace retorted. "You have no right to the gown on your back. Look at yourself, and look at Me!" Her eyes traveled with a tigerish stare over Mercy's costly silk dress. "Who gave you that dress? who gave you those jewels? I know! Lady Janet gave them to Grace Roseberry. Are _you_ Grace Roseberry? That dress is mine. Take off your bracelets and your brooch. They were meant for me."

"You may soon have the m, Miss Roseberry. They will not be in my possession many hours longer."

"What do you mean?"

"However badly you may use me, it is my duty to undo the harm that I have done. I am bound to do you justice--I am determined to confess the truth."

Grace smiled scornfully.

"You confess!" she said. "Do you think I am fool enough to believe that? You are one shameful brazen lie from head to foot! Are _you_ the woman to give up your silks and your jewels, and your position in this house, and to go back to the Refuge of your own accord? Not you-- not you!"

A first faint flush of color showed itself, stealing slowly over Mercy's face; but she still held resolutely by the good influence which Julian had left behind him. She could still say to herself, "Anything rather than disappoint Julian Gray." Sustained by the courage which _he_ had called to life in her, she submitted to her martyrdom as bravely as ever. But there was an ominous change in her now: she could only submit in silence; she could no longer trust herself to answer.

The mute endurance in her face additionally exasperated Grace Roseberry.

"_You_ won't confess," she went on. "You have had a week to confess in, and you have not done it yet. No, no! you are of the sort that cheat and lie to the last. I am glad of it; I shall have the joy of exposing you myself before the whole house. I shall be the blessed means of casting you back on the streets. Oh! it will be almost worth all I have gone through to see you with a policeman's hand on your arm, and the mob pointing at you and mocking you on your way to jail!"

This time the sting struck deep; the outrage was beyond endurance. Mercy gave the woman who had again and again deliberately insulted her a first warning.

"Miss Roseberry," she said, "I have borne without a murmur the bitterest words you could say to me. Spare me any more insults. Indeed, indeed, I am eager to restore you to your just rights. With my whole heart I say it to you--I am resolved to confess everything!"

She spoke with trembling earnestness of tone. Grace listened with a hard smile of incredulity and a hard look of contempt.

"You are not far from the bell," she said; "ring it."

Mercy looked at her in speechless surprise.

"You are a perfect picture of repentance--you are dying to own the truth," pursued the other, satirically. "Own it before everybody, and own it at once. Call in Lady Janet--call in Mr. Gray and Mr. Holmcroft--call in the servants. Go down on your knees and acknowledge yourself an impostor before them all. Then I will believe you--not before."

"Don't, don't turn me against you!" cried Mercy, entreatingly.

"What do I care whether you are against me or not?"

"Don't--for your own sake, don't go on provoking me much longer!"

"For my own sake? You insolent creature! Do you mean to threaten me?"

With a last desperate effort, her heart beating faster and faster, the blood burning hotter and hotter in her cheeks, Mercy still controlled herself.

"Have some compassion on me!" she pleaded. "Badly as I have behaved to you, I am still a woman like yourself. I can't face the shame of acknowledging what I have done before the whole house. Lady Janet treats me like a daughter; Mr. Holmcroft has engaged himself to marry me. I can't tell Lady Janet and Mr. Holmcroft to their faces that I have cheated them out of their love. But they shall know it, for all that. I can, and will, before I rest to-night, tell the whole truth to Mr. Julian Gray."

Grace burst out laughing. "Aha!" she exclaimed, with a cynical outburst of glee. "Now we have come to it at last!"

"Take care!" said Mercy. "Take care!"

"Mr. Julian Gray! I was behind the billiard-room door--I saw you coax Mr. Julian Gray to come in! Confession loses all its horrors, and becomes quite a luxury, with Mr. Julian Gray!"

"No more, Miss Roseberry! no more! For God's sake, don't put me beside myself! You have tortured me enough already."

"You haven't been on the streets for nothing. You are a woman with resources; you know the value of having two strings to your bow. If Mr. Holmcroft fails you, you have got Mr. Julian Gray. Ah! you sicken me. _I'll_ see that Mr. Holmcroft's eyes are opened; he shall know what a woman he might have married but for Me--"

She checked herself; the next refinement of insult remained suspended on her lips.

The woman whom she had outraged suddenly advanced on her. Her eyes, staring helplessly upward, saw Mercy Merrick's face, white with the terrible anger which drives the blood back on the heart, bending threateningly over her.

"You will see that Mr. Holmcroft's eyes are opened," Mercy slowly repeated; "he shall know what a woman he might have married but for you!"

She paused, and followed those words by a question which struck a creeping terror through Grace Roseberry, from the hair of her head to the soles of her feet:

"_Who are you?_"

The suppressed fury of look and tone which accompanied that question told, as no violence could have told it, that the limits of Mercy's endurance had been found at last. In the guardian angel's absence the evil genius had done its evil work. The better nature which Julian Gray had brought to life sank, poisoned by the vile venom of a womanly spiteful tongue. An easy and a terrible means of avenging the outrages heaped on her was within Mercy's reach, if she chose to take it. In the frenzy of her indignation she never hesitated--she took it.

"Who are you?" she asked for the second time.

Grace roused herself and attempted to speak. Mercy stopped her with a scornful gesture of her hand.

"I remember!" she went on, with the same fiercely suppressed rage. "You are the madwoman from the German hospital who came here a week ago. I am not afraid of you this time. Sit down and rest yourself, Mercy Merrick."

Deliberately giving her that name to her face, Mercy turned from her and took the chair which Grace had forbidden her to occupy when the interview began. Grace started to her feet.

"What does this mean?" she asked.

"It means," answered Mercy, contemptuously, "that I recall every word I said to you just now. It means that I am resolved to keep my place in this house."

"Are you out of your senses?"

"You are not far from the bell. Ring it. Do what you asked _me_ to do. Call in the whole household, and ask them which of us is mad--you or I."

"Mercy Merrick! you shall repent this to the last hour of your life!"

Mercy rose again, and fixed her flashing eyes on the woman who still defied her.

"I have had enough of you!" she said. "Leave the house while you can leave it. Stay here, and I will send for Lady Janet Roy."

"You can't send for her! You daren't send for her!"

"I can and I dare. You have not a shadow of a proof against me. I have got the papers; I am in possession of the place; I have established myself in Lady Janet's confidence. I mean to deserve your opinion of me--I will keep my dresses and my jewels and my position in the house. I deny that I have done wrong. Society has used me cruelly; I owe nothing to Society. I have a right to take any advantage of it if I can. I deny that I have injured you. How was I to know that you would come to life again? Have I degraded your name and your character? I have done honor to both. I have won everybody's liking and everybody's respect. Do you think Lady Janet would have loved you as she loves me? Not she! I tell you to your face I have filled the false position more creditably than you could have filled the true one, and I mean to keep it. I won't give up your name; I won't restore your character! Do your worst; I defy you!"

She poured out those reckless words in one headlong flow which defied interruption. There was no answering her until she was too breathless to say more. Grace seized her opportunity the moment it was within her reach.

"You defy me?" she returned, resolutely. "You won't defy me long. I have written to Canada. My friends will speak for me."

"What of it, if they do? Your friends are strangers here. I am Lady Janet's adopted daughter. Do you think she will believe your friends? She will believe me. She will burn their letters if they write. She will forbid the house to them if they come. I shall be Mrs. Horace Holmcroft in a week's time. Who can shake _my_ position? Who can injure Me?"

"Wait a little. You forget the matron at the Refuge."

"Find her, if you can. I never told you her name. I never told you where the Refuge was."

"I will advertise your name, and find the matron in that way."

"Advertise in every newspaper in London. Do you think I gave a stranger like you the name I really bore in the Refuge? I gave you the name I assumed when I left England. No such person as Mercy Merrick is known to the matron. No such person is known to Mr. Holmcroft. He saw me at the French cottage while you were senseless on the bed. I had my gray cloak on; neither he nor any of them saw me in my nurse's dress. Inquiries have been made about me on the Continent--and (I happen to know from the person who made them) with no result. I am safe in your place; I am known by your name. I am Grace Roseberry; and you are Mercy Merrick. Disprove it, if you can!"

Summing up the unassailable security of her false position in those closing words, Mercy pointed significantly to the billiard-room door.

"You were hiding there, by your own confession," she said. "You know your way out by that door. Will you leave the room?"

"I won't stir a step!"

Mercy walked to a side-table, and struck the bell placed on it.

At the same moment the billiard-room door opened. Julian Gray appeared--returning from his unsuccessful search in the grounds.

He had barely crossed the threshold before the library door was thrown open next by the servant posted in the room. The man drew back respectfully, and gave admission to Lady Janet Roy. She was followed by Horace Holmcroft with his mother's wedding present to Mercy in his hand.