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Chapter 4 - The Temptation

Some letters, tied together with a ribbon, attracted Mercy's attention first. The ink in which the addresses were written had faded with age. The letters, directed alternately to Colonel Roseberry and to the Honorable Mrs. Roseberry, contained a correspondence between the husband and wife at a time when the Colonel's military duties had obliged him to be absent from home. Mercy tied the letters up again, and passed on to the papers that lay next in order under her hand.

These consisted of a few leaves pinned together, and headed (in a woman's handwriting) "My Journal at Rome." A brief examination showed that the journal had been written by Miss Roseberry, and that it was mainly devoted to a record of the last days of her father's life.

After replacing the journal and the correspondence in the case, the one paper left on the table was a letter. The envelope, which was unclosed, bore this address: "Lady Janet Roy, Mablethorpe House, Kensington, London." Mercy took the inclosure from the open envelope. The first lines she read informed her that she had found the Colonel's letter of introduction, presenting his daughter to her protectress on her arrival in England

Mercy read the letter through. It was described by the writer as the last efforts of a dying man. Colonel Roseberry wrote affectionately of his daughter's merits, and regretfully of her neglected education--ascribing the latter to the pecuniary losses which had forced him to emigrate to Canada in the character of a poor man. Fervent expressions of gratitude followed, addressed to Lady Janet. "I owe it to you," the letter concluded, "that I am dying with my mind at ease about the future of my darling girl. To your generous protection I commit the one treasure I have left to me on earth. Through your long lifetime you have nobly used your high rank and your great fortune as a means of doing good. I believe it will not be counted among the least of your virtues hereafter that you comforted the last hours of an old soldier by opening your heart and your home to his friendless child."

So the letter ended. Mercy laid it down with a heavy heart. What a chance the poor girl had lost! A woman of rank and fortune waiting to receive her--a woman so merciful and so generous that the father's mind had been easy about the daughter on his deathbed--and there the daughter lay, beyond the reach of Lady Janet's kindness, beyond the need of Lady Janet's help!

The French captain's writing-materials were left on the table. Mercy turned the letter over so that she might write the news of Miss Roseberry's death on the blank page at the end. She was still considering what expressions she should use, when the sound of complaining voices from the next room caught her ear. The wounded men left behind were moaning for help--the deserted soldiers were losing their fortitude at last.

She entered the kitchen. A cry of delight welcomed her appearance--the mere sight of her composed the men. From one straw bed to another she passed with comforting words that gave them hope, with skilled and tender hands that soothed their pain. They kissed the hem of her black dress, they called her their guardian angel, as the beautiful creature moved among them, and bent over their hard pillows her gentle, compassionate face. "I will be with you when the Germans come," she said, as she left them to return to her unwritten letter. "Courage, my poor fellows! you are not deserted by your nurse."

"Courage, madam!" the men replied; "and God bless you!"

If the firing had been resumed at that moment--if a shell had struck her dead in the act of succoring the afflicted, what Christian judgment would have hesitated to declare that there was a place for this woman in heaven? But if the war ended and left her still living, where was the place for her on earth? Where were her prospects? Where was her home?

She returned to the letter. Instead, however, of seating herself to write, she stood by the table, absently looking down at the morsel of paper.

A strange fancy had sprung to life in her mind on re-entering the room; she herself smiled faintly at the extravagance of it. What if she were to ask Lady Janet Roy to let her supply Miss Roseberry's place? She had met with Miss Roseberry under critical circumstances, and she had done for her all that one woman could do to help another. There was in this circumstance some little claim to notice, perhaps, if Lady Janet had no other companion and reader in view. Suppose she ventured to plead her own cause--what would the noble and merciful lady do? She would write back, and say, "Send me references to your character, and I will see what can be done." Her character! Her references! Mercy laughed bitterly, and sat down to write in the fewest words all that was needed from her--a plain statement of the facts.

No! Not a line could she put on the paper. That fancy of hers was not to be dismissed at will. Her mind was perversely busy now with an imaginative picture of the beauty of Mablethorpe House and the comfort and elegance of the life that was led there. Once more she thought of the chance which Miss Roseberry had lost. Unhappy creature! what a home would have been open to her if the shell had only fallen on the side of the window, instead of on the side of the yard!

Mercy pushed the letter away from her, and walked impatiently to and fro in the room.

The perversity in her thoughts was not to be mastered in that way. Her mind only abandoned one useless train of reflection to occupy itself with another. She was now looking by anticipation at her own future. What were her prospects (if she lived through it) when the war was over? The experience of the past delineated with pitiless fidelity the dreary scene. Go where she might, do what she might, it would always end in the same way. Curiosity and admiration excited by her beauty; inquiries made about her; the story of the past discovered; Society charitably sorry for her; Society generously subscribing for her; and still, through all the years of her life, the same result in the end--the shadow of the old disgrace surrounding her as with a pestilence, isolating her among other women, branding her, even when she had earned her pardon in the sight of God, with the mark of an indelible disgrace in the sight of man: there was the prospect! And she was only five-and-twenty last birthday; she was in the prime of her health and her strength; she might live, in the course of nature, fifty years more!

She stopped again at the bedside; she looked again at the face of the corpse.

To what end had the shell struck the woman who had some hope in her life, and spared the woman who had none? The words she had herself spoken to Grace Roseberry came back to her as she thought of it. "If I only had your chance! If I only had your reputation and your prospects!" And there was the chance wasted! there were the enviable prospects thrown away! It was almost maddening to contemplate that result, feeling her own position as she felt it. In the bitter mockery of despair she bent over the lifeless figure, and spoke to it as if it had ears to hear her. "Oh!" she said, longingly, "if you could be Mercy Merrick, and if I could be Grace Roseberry, _now!_"

The instant the words passed her lips she started into an erect position. She stood by the bed with her eyes staring wildly into empty space; with her brain in a flame; with her heart beating as if it would stifle her. "If you could be Mercy Merrick, and if I could be Grace Roseberry, now!" In one breathless moment the thought assumed a new development in her mind. In one breathless moment the conviction struck her like an electric shock. "She might be Grace Roseberry if she dared!_ There was absolutely nothing to stop her from presenting herself to Lady Janet Roy under Grace's name and in Grace's place!

What were the risks? Where was the weak point in the scheme?

Grace had said it herself in so many words--she and Lady Janet had never seen each other. Her friends were in Canada; her relations in England were dead. Mercy knew the place in which she had lived--the place called Port Logan--as well as she had known it herself. Mercy had only to read the manuscript journal to be able to answer any questions relating to the visit to Rome and to Colonel Roseberry's death. She had no accomplished lady to personate: Grace had spoken herself--her father's letter spoke also in the plainest terms--of her neglected education. Everything, literally everything, was in the lost woman's favor. The people with whom she had been connected in the ambulance had gone, to return no more. Her own clothes were on Miss Roseberry at that moment--marked with her own name. Miss Roseberry's clothes, marked with her name, were drying, at Mercy's disposal, in the next room. The way of escape from the unendurable humiliation of her present life lay open before her at last. What a prospect it was! A new identity, which she might own anywhere! a new name, which was beyond reproach! a new past life, into which all the world might search, and be welcome! Her color rose, her eyes sparkled; she had never been so irresistibly beautiful as she looked at the moment when the new future disclosed itself, radiant with new hope.

She waited a minute, until she could look at her own daring project from another point of view. Where was the harm of it? what did her conscience say?

As to Grace, in the first place. What injury was she doing to a woman who was dead? The question answered itself. No injury to the woman. No injury to her relations. Her relations were dead also.

As to Lady Janet, in the second place. If she served her new mistress faithfully, if she filled her new sphere honorably, if she was diligent under instruction and grateful for kindness--if, in one word, she was all that she might be and would be in the heavenly peace and security of that new life--what injury was she doing to Lady Janet? Once more the question answered itself. She might, and would, give Lady Janet cause to bless the day when she first entered the house.

She snatched up Colonel Roseberry's letter, and put it into the case with the other papers. The opportunity was before her; the chances were all in her favor; her conscience said nothing against trying the daring scheme. She decided then and there--"I'll do it!"

Something jarred on her finer sense, something offended her better nature, as she put the case into the pocket of her dress. She had decided, and yet she was not at ease; she was not quite sure of having fairly questioned her conscience yet. What if she laid the letter-case on the table again, and waited until her excitement had all cooled down, and then put the contemplated project soberly on its trial before her own sense of right and wrong?

She thought once--and hesitated. Before she could think twice, the distant tramp of marching footsteps and the distant clatter of horses' hoofs were wafted to her on the night air. The Germans were entering the village! In a few minutes more they would appear in the cottage; they would summon her to give an account of herself. There was no time for waiting until she was composed again. Which should it be--the new life, as Grace Roseberry? or the old life, as Mercy Merrick?

She looked for the last time at the bed. Grace's course was run; Grace's future was at her disposal. Her resolute nature, forced to a choice on the instant, held by the daring alternative. She persisted in the determination to take Grace's place.

The tramping footsteps of the Germans came nearer and nearer. The voices of the officers were audible, giving the words of command.

She seated herself at the table, waiting steadily for what was to come.

The ineradicable instinct of the sex directed her eyes to her dress, before the Germans appeared. Looking it over to see that it was in perfect order, her eyes fell upon the red cross on her left shoulder. In a moment it struck her that her nurse's costume might involve her in a needless risk. It associated her with a public position; it might lead to inquiries at a later time, and those inquiries might betray her.

She looked round. The gray cloak which she had lent to Grace attracted her attention. She took it up, and covered herself with it from head to foot.

The cloak was just arranged round her when she heard the outer door thrust open, and voices speaking in a strange tongue, and arms grounded in the room behind her. Should she wait to be discovered? or should she show herself of her own accord? It was less trying to such a nature as hers to show herself than to wait. She advanced to enter the kitchen. The canvas curtain, as she stretched out her hand to it, was suddenly drawn back from the other side, and three men confronted her in the open doorway.