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Chapter 6 - Lady Janet's Companion

IT is a glorious winter's day. The sky is clear, the frost is hard, the ice bears for skating.

The dining-room of the ancient mansion called Mablethorpe House, situated in the London suburb of Kensington, is famous among artists and other persons of taste for the carved wood-work, of Italian origin, which covers the walls on three sides. On the fourth side the march of modern improvement has broken in, and has varied and brightened the scene by means of a conservatory, forming an entrance to the room through a winter-garden of rare plants and flowers. On your right hand, as you stand fronting the conservatory, the monotony of the paneled wall is relieved by a quaintly patterned door of old inlaid wood, leading into the library, and thence, across the great hall, to the other reception-rooms of the house. A corresponding door on the left hand gives access to the billiard-room, to the smoking-room next to it, and to a smaller hall commanding one of the secondary entrances to the building. On the left side also is the ample fireplace, surmounted by its marble mantelpiece, carved in the profusely and confusedly ornate style of eighty years since. To the educated eye the dining-room, with its modern furniture and conservatory, its ancient walls and doors, and its lofty mantelpiece (neither very old nor very new), presents a startling, almost a revolutionary, mixture of the decorative workmanship of widely differing schools. To the ignorant eye the one result produced is an impression of perfect luxury and comfort, united in the friendliest combination, and developed on the largest scale.

The clock has just struck two. The table is spread for luncheon.

The persons seated at the table are three in number. First, Lady Janet Roy. Second, a young lady who is her reader and companion. Third, a guest staying in the house, who has already appeared in these pages under the name of Horace Holmcraft--attached to the German army as war correspondent of an English newspaper.

Lady Janet Roy needs but little introduction. Everybody with the slightest pretension to experience in London society knows Lady Janet Roy.

Who has not heard of her old lace and her priceless rubies? Who has not admired her commanding figure, her beautifully dressed white hair, her wonderful black eyes, which still preserve their youthful brightness, after first opening on the world seventy years since? Who has not felt the charm of her frank, easily flowing talk, her inexhaustible spirits, her good-humored, gracious sociability of manner? Where is the modern hermit who is not familiarly acquainted, by hearsay at least, with the fantastic novelty and humor of her opinions; with her generous encouragement of rising merit of any sort, in all ranks, high or low; with her charities, which know no distinction between abroad and at home; with her large indulgence, which no ingratitude can discourage, and no servility pervert? Everybody has heard of the popular old lady--the childless widow of a long-forgotten lord. Everybody knows Lady Janet Roy.

But who knows the handsome young woman sitting on her right hand, playing with her luncheon instead of eating it? Nobody really knows her.

She is prettily dressed in gray poplin, trimmed with gray velvet, and set off by a ribbon of deep red tied in a bow at the throat. She is nearly as tall as Lady Janet herself, and possesses a grace and beauty of figure not always seen in women who rise above the medium height. Judging by a certain innate grandeur in the carriage of her head and in the expression of her large melancholy gray eyes, believers in blood and breeding will be apt to guess that this is another noble lady. Alas! she is nothing but Lady Janet's companion and reader. Her head, crowned with its lovely light brown hair, bends with a gentle respect when Lady Janet speaks. Her fine firm hand is easily and incessantly watchful to supply Lady Janet's slightest wants. The old lady--affectionately familiar with her--speaks to her as she might speak to an adopted child. But the gratitude of the beautiful companion has always the same restraint in its acknowledgment of kindness; the smile of the beautiful companion has always the same underlying sadness when it responds to Lady Janet's hearty laugh. Is there something wrong here, under the surface? Is she suffering in mind, or suffering in body? What is the matter with her?

The matter with her is secret remorse. This delicate and beautiful creature pines under the slow torment of constant self-reproach.

To the mistress of the house, and to all who inhabit it or enter it, she is known as Grace Roseberry, the orphan relative by marriage of Lady Janet Roy. To herself alone she is known as the outcast of the London streets; the inmate of the London Refuge; the lost woman who has stolen her way back--after vainly trying to fight her way back--to Home and Name. There she sits in the grim shadow of her own terrible secret, disguised in another person's identity, and established in another person's place. Mercy Merrick had only to dare, and to become Grace Roseberry if she pleased. She has dared, and she has been Grace Roseberry for nearly four months past.

At this moment, while Lady Janet is talking to Horace Holmcraft, something that has passed between them has set her thinking of the day when she took the first fatal step which committed her to the fraud.

How marvelously easy of accomplishment the act of personation had been! At first sight Lady Janet had yielded to the fascination of the noble and interesting face. No need to present the stolen letter; no need to repeat the ready-made story. The old lady had put the letter aside unopened, and had stopped the story at the first words. "Your face is your introduction, my dear; your father can say nothing for you which you have not already said for yourself." There was the welcome which established her firmly in her false identity at the outset. Thanks to her own experience, and thanks to the "Journal" of events at Rome, questions about her life in Canada and questions about Colonel Roseberry's illness found her ready with answers which (even if suspicion had existed) would have disarmed suspicion on the spot. While the true Grace was slowly and painfully winning her way back to life on her bed in a German hospital, the false Grace was presented to Lady Janet's friends as the relative by marriage of the Mistress of Mablethorpe House. From that time forward nothing had happened to rouse in her the faintest suspicion that Grace Roseberry was other than a dead-and-buried woman. So far as she now knew--so far as any one now knew--she might live out her life in perfect security (if her conscience would let her), respected, distinguished, and beloved, in the position which she had usurped.

She rose abruptly from the table. The effort of her life was to shake herself free of the remembrances which haunted her perpetually as they were haunting her now. Her memory was her worst enemy; her one refuge from it was in change of occupation and change of scene.

"May I go into the conservatory, Lady Janet?" she asked.

"Certainly, my dear."

She bent her head to her protectress, looked for a moment with a steady, compassionate attention at Horace Holmcraft, and, slowly crossing the room, entered the

winter-garden. The eyes of Horace followed her, as long as she was in view, with a curious contradictory expression of admiration and disapproval. When she had passed out of sight the admiration vanished, but the disapproval remained. The face of the young man contracted into a frown: he sat silent, with his fork in his hand, playing absently with the fragments on his plate.

"Take some French pie, Horace," said Lady Janet.

"No, thank you."

"Some more chicken, then?"

"No more chicken."

"Will nothing tempt you?"

"I will take some more wine, if you will allow me."

He filled his glass (for the fifth or sixth time) with claret, and emptied it sullenly at a draught. Lady Janet's bright eyes watched him with sardonic attention; Lady Janet's ready tongue spoke out as freely as usual what was passing in her mind at the time.

"The air of Kensington doesn't seem to suit you, my young friend," she said. "The longer you have been my guest, the oftener you fill your glass and empty your cigar-case. Those are bad signs in a young man. When you first came here you arrived invalided by a wound. In your place, I should not have exposed myself to be shot, with no other object in view than describing a battle in a newspaper. I suppose tastes differ. Are you ill? Does your wound still plague you?"

"Not in the least."

"Are you out of spirits?"

Horace Holmcroft dropped his fork, rested his elbows on the table, and answered:

"Awfully."

Even Lady Janet's large toleration had its limits. It embraced every human offense except a breach of good manners. She snatched up the nearest weapon of correction at hand--a tablespoon--and rapped her young friend smartly with it on the arm that was nearest to her.

"My table is not the club table," said the old lady. "Hold up your head. Don't look at your fork--look at me. I allow nobody to be out of spirits in My house. I consider it to be a reflection on Me. If our quiet life here doesn't suit you, say so plainly, and find something else to do. There is employment to be had, I suppose--if you choose to apply for it? You needn't smile. I don't want to see your teeth--I want an answer."

Horace admitted, with all needful gravity, that there was employment to be had. The war between France and Germany, he remarked, was still going on: the newspapers had offered to employ him again in the capacity of correspondent.

"Don't speak of the newspapers and the war!" cried Lady Janet, with a sudden explosion of anger, which was genuine anger this time. "I detest the newspapers! I won't allow the newspapers to enter this house. I lay the whole blame of the blood shed between France and Germany at their door."

Horace's eyes opened wide in amazement. The old lady was evidently in earnest. "What can you possibly mean?" he asked. "Are the newspapers responsible for the war?"

"Entirely responsible," answered Lady Janet. "Why, you don't understand the age you live in! Does anybody do anything nowadays (fighting included) without wishing to see it in the newspapers? _I_ subscribe to a charity; _thou_ art presented with a testimonial; _he_ preaches a sermon; _we_ suffer a grievance; _you_ make a discovery; _they_ go to church and get married. And I, thou, he; we, you, they, all want one and the same thing--we want to see it in the papers. Are kings, soldiers, and diplomatists exceptions to the general rule of humanity? Not they! I tell you seriously, if the newspapers of Europe had one and all decided not to take the smallest notice in print of the war between France and Germany, it is my firm conviction the war would have come to an end for want of encouragement long since. Let the pen cease to advertise the sword, and I, for one, can see the result. No report--no fighting."

"Your views have the merit of perfect novelty, ma'am," said Horace. "Would you object to see them in the newspapers?"

Lady Janet worsted her young friend with his own weapons.

"Don't I live in the latter part of the nineteenth century?" she asked. "In the newspapers, did you say? In large type, Horace, if you love me!"

Horace changed the subject.

"You blame me for being out of spirits," he said; "and you seem to think it is because I am tired of my pleasant life at Mablethorpe House. I am not in the least tired, Lady Janet." He looked toward the conservatory: the frown showed itself on his face once more. "The truth is," he resumed, "I am not satisfied with Grace Roseberry."

"What has Grace done?"

"She persists in prolonging our engagement. Nothing will persuade her to fix the day for our marriage."

It was true! Mercy had been mad enough to listen to him, and to love him. But Mercy was not vile enough to marry him under her false character, and in her false name. Between three and four months had elapsed since Horace had been sent home from the war, wounded, and had found the beautiful Englishwoman whom he had befriended in France established at Mablethorpe House. Invited to become Lady Janet's guest (he had passed his holidays as a school-boy under Lady Janet's roof)--free to spend the idle time of his convalescence from morning to night in Mercy's society--the impression originally produced on him in a French cottage soon strengthened into love. Before the month was out Horace had declared himself, and had discovered that he spoke to willing ears. From that moment it was only a question of persisting long enough in the resolution to gain his point. The marriage engagement was ratified--most reluctantly on the lady's side--and there the further progress of Horace Holmcroft's suit came to an end. Try as he might, he failed to persuade his betrothed wife to fix the day for the marriage. There were no obstacles in her way. She had no near relations of her own to consult. As a connection of Lady Janet's by marriage, Horace's mother and sisters were ready to receive her with all the honors due to a new member of the family. No pecuniary considerations made it necessary, in this case, to wait for a favorable time. Horace was an only son; and he had succeeded to his father's estate with an ample income to support it. On both sides alike there was absolutely nothing to prevent the two young people from being married as soon as the

settlements could be drawn. And yet, to all appearance, here was a long engagement in prospect, with no better reason than the lady's incomprehensible perversity to explain the delay. "Can you account for Grace's conduct?" asked Lady Janet. Her manner changed as she put the question. She looked and spoke like a person who was perplexed and annoyed.

"I hardly like to own it," Horace answered, "but I am afraid she has some motive for deferring our marriage which she cannot confide either to you or to me."

Lady Janet started.

"What makes you think that?" she asked.

"I have once or twice caught her in tears. Every now and then--sometimes when she is talking quite gayly--she suddenly changes color and becomes silent and depressed. Just now, when she left the table (didn't you notice it?), she looked at me in the strangest way--almost as if she was sorry for me. What do these things mean?"

Horace's reply, instead of increasing Lady Janet's anxiety, seemed to relieve it. He had observed nothing which she had not noticed herself. "You foolish boy!" she said, "the meaning is plain enough. Grace has been out of health for some time past. The doctor recommends change of air. I shall take her away with me."

"It would be more to the purpose," Horace rejoined, "if I took her away with me. She might consent, if you would only use your influence. Is it asking too much to ask you to persuade her? My mother and my sisters have written to her, and have produced no effect. Do me the greatest of all kindnesses--speak to her to-day!" He paused, and possessing himself of Lady Janet's hand, pressed it entreatingly. "You have always been so good to me," he said, softly, and pressed it again.

The old lady looked at him. It was impossible to dispute that there were attractions in Horace Holmcroft's face which made it well worth looking at. Many a woman might have envied him his clear complexion, his bright blue eyes, and the warm amber tint in his light Saxon hair. Men--especially men skilled in observing physiognomy--might have noticed in the shape of his forehead and in the line of his upper lip the signs indicative of a moral nature deficient in largeness and breadth--of a mind easily accessible to strong prejudices, and obstinate in maintaining those prejudices in the face of conviction itself.

To the observation of women these remote defects were too far below the surface to be visible. He charmed the sex in general by his rare personal advantages, and by the graceful deference of his manner. To Lady Janet he was endeared, not by his own merits only, but by old associations that were connected with him. His father had been one of her many admirers in her young days. Circumstances had parted them. Her marriage to another man had been a childless marriage. In past times, when the boy Horace had come to her from school, she had cherished a secret fancy (too absurd to be communicated to any living creature) that he ought to have been _her_ son, and might have been her son, if she had married his father! She smiled charmingly, old as she was--she yielded as his mother might have yielded--when the young man took her hand and entreated her to interest herself in his marriage. "Must I really speak to Grace?" she asked, with a gentleness of tone and manner far from characteristic, on ordinary occasions, of the lady of Mablethorpe House. Horace saw that he had gained his point. He sprang to his feet; his eyes turned eagerly in the direction of the conservatory; his handsome face was radiant with hope. Lady Janet (with her mind full of his father) stole a last look at him, sighed as she thought of the vanished days, and recovered herself.

"Go to the smoking-room," she said, giving him a push toward the door. "Away with you, and cultivate the favorite vice of the nineteenth century." Horace attempted to express his gratitude. "Go and smoke!" was all she said, pushing him out. "Go and smoke!"

Left by herself, Lady Janet took a turn in the room, and considered a little.

Horace's discontent was not unreasonable. There was really no excuse for the delay of which he complained. Whether the young lady had a special motive for hanging back, or whether she was merely fretting because she did not know her own mind, it was, in either case, necessary to come to a distinct understanding, sooner or later, on the serious question of the marriage. The difficulty was, how to approach the subject without giving offense. "I don't understand the young women of the present generation," thought Lady Janet. "In my time, when we were fond of a man, we were ready to marry him at a moment's notice. And this is an age of progress! They ought to be readier still."

Arriving, by her own process of induction, at this inevitable conclusion, she decided to try what her influence could accomplish, and to trust to the inspiration of the moment for exerting it in the right way. "Grace!" she called out, approaching the conservatory door. The tall, lithe figure in its gray dress glided into view, and stood relieved against the green background of the winter-garden.

"Did your ladyship call me?"

"Yes; I want to speak to you. Come and sit down by me."

With those words Lady Janet led the way to a sofa, and placed her companion by her side.