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Chapter 7 - The Man Is Coming

"You look very pale this morning, my child."

Mercy sighed wearily. "I am not well," she answered. "The slightest noises startle me. I feel tired if I only walk across the room."

Lady Janet patted her kindly on the shoulder. "We must try what a change will do for you. Which shall it be? the Continent or the sea-side?"

"Your ladyship is too kind to me."

"It is impossible to be too kind to you."

Mercy started. The color flowed charmingly over her pale face. "Oh!" she exclaimed, impulsively. "Say that again!"

"Say it again?" repeated Lady Janet, with a look of surprise.

"Yes! Don't think me presuming; only think me vain. I can't hear you say too often that you have learned to like me. Is it really a pleasure to you to have me in the house? Have I always behaved well since I have been with you?"

(The one excuse for the act of personation--if excuse there could be--lay in the affirmative answer to those questions. It would be something, surely, to say of the false Grace that the true Grace could not have been worthier of her welcome, if the true Grace had been received at Mablethorpe House!)

Lady Janet was partly touched, partly amused, by the extraordinary earnestness of the appeal that had been made to her.

"Have you behaved well?" she repeated. "My dear, you talk as if you were a child!" She laid her hand caressingly on Mercy's arm, and continued, in a graver tone: "It is hardly too much to say, Grace, that I bless the day when you first came to me. I do believe I could be hardly fonder of you if you were my own daughter."

Mercy suddenly turned her head aside, so as to hide her face. Lady Janet, still touching her arm, felt it tremble. "What is the matter with you?" she asked, in her abrupt, downright manner.

"I am only very grateful to your ladyship--that is all." The words were spoken faintly, in broken tones. The face was still averted from Lady Janet's view. "What have I said to provoke this?" wondered the old lady. "Is she in the melting mood to-day? If she is, now is the time to say a word for Horace!" Keeping that excellent object in view, Lady Janet approached the delicate topic with all needful caution at starting.

"We have got on so well together," she resumed, "that it will not be easy for either of us to feel reconciled to a change in our lives. At my age, it will fall hardest on me. What shall I do, Grace, when the day comes for parting with my adopted daughter?"

Mercy started, and showed her face again. The traces of tears were in her eyes. "Why should I leave you?" she asked, in a tone of alarm.

"Surely you know!" exclaimed Lady Janet.

"Indeed I don't. Tell me why."

"Ask Horace to tell you."

The last allusion was too plain to be misunderstood. Mercy's head drooped. She began to tremble again. Lady Janet looked at her in blank amazement.

"Is there anything wrong between Horace and you?" she asked.

"No."

"You know your own heart, my dear child? You have surely not encouraged Horace without loving him?"

"Oh no!"

"And yet--"

For the first time in their experience of each other Mercy ventured to interrupt her benefactress. "Dear Lady Janet," she interposed, gently, "I am in no hurry to be married. There will be plenty of time in the future to talk of that. You had something you wished to say to me. What is it?"

It was no easy matter to disconcert Lady Janet Roy. But that last question fairly reduced her to silence. After all that had passed, there sat her young companion, innocent of the faintest suspicion of the subject that was to be discussed between them! "What are the young women of the present time made of?" thought the old lady, utterly at a loss to know what to say next. Mercy waited, on her side, with an impenetrable patience which only aggravated the difficulties of the position. The silence was fast threatening to bring the interview to a sudden and untimely end, when the door from the library opened, and a man-servant, bearing a little silver salver, entered the room.

Lady Janet's rising sense of annoyance instantly seized on a victim. "What do you want?" she asked, sharply. "I never rang for you."

"A letter, my lady. The messenger waits for an answer."

The man presented his salver with the letter on it, and withdrew.

Lady Janet recognized the handwriting on the address with a look of surprise. "Excuse me, my dear," she said, pausing, with her old-fashioned courtesy, before she opened the envelope. Mercy made the necessary acknowledgment, and moved away to the other end of the room, little thinking that the arrival of the letter marked a crisis in her life. Lady Janet put on her spectacles. "Odd that he should have come back already!" she said to herself, as she threw the empty envelope on the table.

The letter contained these lines, the writer of them being no other than the man who had preached in the chapel of the Refuge:

"DEAR AUNT--I am back again in London before my time. My friend the rector has shortened his holiday, and has resumed his duties in the country. I am afraid you will blame me when you hear of the reasons which have hastened his return. The sooner I make my confession, the easier I shall feel. Besides, I have a special object in wishing to see you as soon as possible. May I follow my letter to Mablethorpe House? And may I present a lady to you--a perfect stranger--in whom I am interested? Pray say Yes, by the bearer, and oblige your affectionate nephew,

"JULIAN GRAY."

Lady Janet referred again suspiciously to the sentence in the letter which alluded to the "lady."

Julian Gray was her only surviving nephew, the son of a favorite sister whom she had lost. He would have held no very exalted position in the estimation of his aunt--who regarded his views in politics and religion with the strongest aversion--but for his marked resemblance to his mother. This pleaded for him with the old lady, aided as it was by the pride that she secretly felt in the early celebrity which the young clergyman had achieved as a writer and a preacher. Thanks to these mitigating circumstances, and to Julian's inexhaustible good-humor, the aunt and the nephew generally met on friendly terms. Apart from what she called "his detestable opinions," Lady Janet was sufficiently interested in Julian to feel some curiosity about the mysterious "lady" mentioned in the letter. Had he determined to settle in life? Was his choice already made? And if so, would it prove to be a choice acceptable to the family? Lady Janet's bright face showed signs of doubt as she asked herself that last question. Julian's liberal views were capable of leading him to dangerous extremes. His aunt shook her head ominously as she rose from the sofa and advanced to the library door.

"Grace," she said, pausing and turning round, "I have a note to write to my nephew. I shall be back directly."

Mercy approached her, from the opposite extremity of the room, with an exclamation of surprise.

"Your nephew?" she repeated. "Your ladyship never told me you had a nephew."

Lady Janet laughed. "I must have had it on the tip of my tongue to tell you, over and over again," she said. "But we have had so many things to talk about--and, to own the truth, my nephew is not one of my favorite subjects of conversation. I don't mean that I dislike him; I detest his principles, my dear, that's all. However, you shall form your own opinion of him; he is coming to see me to-day. Wait here till I return; I have something more to say about Horace."

Mercy opened the library door for her, closed it again, and walked slowly to and fro alone in the room, thinking.

Was her mind running on Lady Janet's nephew? No. Lady Janet's brief allusion to her relative had not led her into alluding to him by his name. Mercy was still as ignorant as ever that the preacher at the Refuge and the nephew of her benefactress were one and the same man. Her memory was busy now with the tribute which Lady Janet had paid to her at the outset of the interview between them: "It is hardly too much to say, Grace, that I bless the day when you first came to me." For the moment there was balm for her wounded spirit in the remembrance of those words. Grace Roseberry herself could surely have earned no sweeter praise than the praise that she had won. The next instant she was seized with a sudden horror of her own successful fraud. The sense of her degradation had never been so bitterly present to her as at that moment. If she could only confess the truth--if she could innocently enjoy her harmless life at Mablethorpe House--what a grateful, happy woman she might be! Was it possible (if she made the confession) to trust to her own good conduct to plead her excuse? No! Her calmer sense warned her that it was hopeless. The place she had won--honestly won--in Lady Janet's estimation had been obtained by a trick. Nothing could alter, nothing could excuse, _that_. She took out her handkerchief and dashed away the useless tears that had gathered in her eyes, and tried to turn her thoughts some other way. What was it Lady Janet had said on going into the library? She had said she was coming back to speak about Horace. Mercy guessed what the object was; she knew but too well what Horace wanted of her. How was she to meet the emergency? In the name of Heaven, what was to be done? Could she let the man who loved her--the man whom she loved--drift blindfold into marriage with such a woman as she had been? No! it was her duty to warn him. How? Could she break his heart, could she lay his life waste by speaking the cruel words which might part them forever? "I can't tell him! I won't tell him!" she burst out, passionately. "The disgrace of it would kill me!" Her varying mood changed as the words escaped her. A reckless defiance of her own better nature--that saddest of all the forms in which a woman's misery can express itself--filled her heart with its poisoning bitterness. She sat down again on the sofa with eyes that glittered and cheeks suffused with an angry red. "I am no worse than another woman!" she thought. "Another woman might have married him for his money." The next moment the miserable insufficiency of her own excuse for deceiving him showed its hollowness, self-exposed. She covered her face with her hands, and found refuge--where she had often found refuge before--in the helpless resignation of despair. "Oh, that I had died before I entered this house! Oh, that I could die and have done with it at this moment!" So the struggle had ended with her hundreds of times already. So it ended now.

The door leading into the billiard-room opened softly. Horace Holmcroft had waited to hear the result of Lady Janet's interference in his favor until he could wait no longer.

He looked in cautiously, ready to withdraw again unnoticed if the two were still talking together. The absence of Lady Janet suggested that the interview had come to an end. Was his betrothed wife waiting alone to speak to him on his return to the room? He advanced a few steps. She never moved; she sat heedless, absorbed in her thoughts. Were they thoughts of _him?_ He advanced a little nearer, and called to her.

"Grace!"

She sprang to her feet, with a faint cry. "I wish you wouldn't startle me," she said, irritably, sinking back on the sofa. "Any sudden alarm sets my heart beating as if it would choke me."

Horace pleaded for pardon with a lover's humility. In her present state of nervous irritation she was not to be appeased. She looked away from him in silence. Entirely ignorant of the paroxysm of mental suffering through which she had just passed, he seated himself by her side, and asked her gently if she had seen Lady Janet. She made an affirmative answer with an unreasonable impatience of tone and manner which would have warned an older and more experienced man to give her time before he spoke again. Horace was young, and weary of the suspense that he had endured in the other room. He unwisely pressed her with another question.

"Has Lady Janet said anything to you--"

She turned on him angrily before he could finish the sentence. "You have tried to make her hurry me into marrying you," she burst out. "I see it in your face!"

Plain as the warning was this time, Horace still failed to interpret it in the right way. "Don't be angry!" he said, good-humoredly. "Is it so very inexcusable to ask Lady Janet to intercede for me? I have tried to persuade you in vain. My mother and my sisters have pleaded for me, and you turn a deaf ear--"

She could endure it no longer. She stamped her foot on the door with hysterical vehemence. "I am weary of hearing of your mother and your sisters!" she broke in violently. "You talk of nothing else."

It was just possible to make one more mistake in dealing with her--and Horace made it. He took offense, on his side, and rose from the sofa. His mother and sisters were high authorities in his estimation; they variously represented his ideal of perfection in women. He withdrew to the opposite extremity of the room, and administered the severest reproof that he could think of on the spur of the moment.

"It would be well, Grace, if you followed the example set you by my mother and my sisters," he said. "_They_ are not in the habit of speaking cruelly to those who love them."

To all appearance the rebuke failed to produce the slightest effect. She seemed to be as indifferent to it as if it had not reached her ears. There was a spirit in her--a miserable spirit, born of her own bitter experience--which rose in revolt against Horace's habitual glorification of the ladies of his family. "It sickens me," she thought to herself, "to hear of the virtues of women who have never been tempted! Where is the merit of living reputably, when your life is one course of prosperity and enjoyment? Has his mother known starvation? Have his sisters been left forsaken in the street?" It hardened her heart--it almost reconciled her to deceiving him--when he set his relatives up as patterns for her. Would he never understand that women detested having other women exhibited as examples to them? She looked round at him with a sense of impatient wonder. He was sitting at the luncheon-table, with his back turned on her, and his head resting on his hand. If he had attempted to rejoin her, she would have repelled him; if he had spoken, she would have met him with a sharp reply. He sat apart from her, without uttering a word. In a man's hands silence is the most terrible of all protests to the woman who loves him. Violence she can endure. Words she is always ready to meet by words on her side. Silence conquers her. After a moment's hesitation, Mercy left the sofa and advanced submissively toward the table. She had offended him--and she alone was in fault. How should he know it, poor fellow, when he innocently mortified her? Step by step she drew closer and closer. He never looked round; he never moved. She laid her hand timidly on his shoulder. "Forgive me, Horace," she whispered in his ear. "I am suffering this morning; I am not myself. I didn't mean what I said. Pray forgive me." There was no resisting the caressing tenderness of voice and manner which accompanied those words. He looked up; he took her hand. She bent over him, and touched his forehead with her lips. "Am I forgiven?" she asked.

"Oh, my darling," he said, "if you only knew how I loved you!"

"I do know it," she answered, gently, twining his hair round her finger, and arranging it over his forehead where his hand had ruffled it.

They were completely absorbed in each other, or they must, at that moment, have heard the library door open at the other end of the room.

Lady Janet had written the necessary reply to her nephew, and had returned, faithful to her engagement, to plead the cause of Horace. The first object that met her view was her client pleading, with conspicuous success, for himself! "I am not wanted, evidently," thought the old lady. She noiselessly closed the door again and left the lovers by themselves.

Horace returned, with unwise persistency, to the question of the deferred marriage. At the first words that he spoke she drew back directly--sadly, not angrily.

"Don't press me to-day," she said; "I am not well to-day."

He rose and looked at her anxiously. "May I speak about it to-morrow?"

"Yes, to-morrow." She returned to the sofa, and changed the subject. "What a time Lady Janet is away!" she said. "What can be keeping her so long?"

Horace did his best to appear interested in the question of Lady Janet's prolonged absence. "What made her leave you?" he asked, standing at the back of the sofa and leaning over her.

"She went into the library to write a note to her nephew. By-the-by, who is her nephew?"

"Is it possible you don't know?"

"Indeed, I don't."

"You have heard of him, no doubt," said Horace. "Lady Janet's nephew is a celebrated man." He paused, and stooping nearer to her, lifted a love-lock that lay over her shoulder and pressed it to his lips. "Lady Janet's nephew," he resumed, "is Julian Gray."

She started off her seat, and looked round at him in blank, bewildered terror, as if she doubted the evidence of her own senses.

Horace was completely taken by surprise. "My dear Grace!" he exclaimed; "what have I said or done to startle you this time?"

She held up her hand for silence. "Lady Janet's nephew is Julian Gray," she repeated: "and I only know it now!"

Horace's perplexity increased. "My darling, now you do know it, what is there to alarm you?" he asked.

(There was enough to alarm the boldest woman living--in such a position, and with such a temperament as hers. To her mind the personation of Grace Roseberry had suddenly assumed a new aspect: the aspect of a fatality. It had led her blindfold to the house in which she and the preacher at the Refuge were to meet. He was coming--the man who had reached her inmost heart, who had influenced her whole life! Was the day of reckoning coming with him?)

"Don't notice me," she said, faintly. "I have been ill all the morning. You saw it yourself when you came in here; even the sound of your voice alarmed me. I shall be better directly. I am afraid I startled you?"

"My dear Grace, it almost looked as if you were terrified at the sound of Julian's name! He is a public celebrity, I know; and I have seen ladies start and stare at him when he entered a room. But _you_ looked perfectly panic-stricken."

She rallied her courage by a desperate effort; she laughed--a harsh, uneasy laugh--and stopped him by putting her hand over his mouth. "Absurd!" she said, lightly. "As if Mr.

Julian Gray had anything to do with my looks! I am better already. See for yourself!" She looked round at him again with a ghastly gayety; and returned, with a desperate assumption of indifference, to the subject of Lady Janet's nephew. "Of course I have heard of him," she said. "Do you know that he is expected here to-day? Don't stand there behind me--it's so hard to talk to you. Come and sit down."

He obeyed--but she had not quite satisfied him yet. His face had not lost its expression of anxiety and surprise. She persisted in playing her part, determined to set at rest in him any possible suspicion that she had reasons of her own for being afraid of Julian Gray. "Tell me about this famous man of yours," she said, putting her arm familiarly through his arm. "What is he like?"

The caressing action and the easy tone had their effect on Horace. His face began to clear; he answered her lightly on his side.

"Prepare yourself to meet the most unclerical of clergymen," he said. "Julian is a lost sheep among the parsons, and a thorn in the side of his bishop. Preaches, if they ask him, in Dissenters' chapels. Declines to set up any pretensions to priestly authority and priestly power. Goes about doing good on a plan of his own. Is quite resigned never to rise to the high places in his profession. Says it's rising high enough for _him_ to be the Archdeacon of the afflicted, the Dean of the hungry, and the Bishop of the poor. With all his oddities, as good a fellow as ever lived. Immensely popular with the women. They all go to him for advice. I wish you would go, too."

Mercy changed color. "What do you mean?" she asked, sharply.

"Julian is famous for his powers of persuasion," said Horace, smiling. "If _he_ spoke to you, Grace, he would prevail on you to fix the day. Suppose I ask Julian to plead for me?"

He made the proposal in jest. Mercy's unquiet mind accepted it as addressed to her in earnest. "He will do it," she thought, with a sense of indescribable terror, "if I don't stop him!" There is but one chance for her. The only certain way to prevent Horace from appealing to his friend was to grant what Horace wished for before his friend entered the house. She laid her hand on his shoulder; she hid the terrible anxieties that were devouring her under an assumption of coquetry painful and pitiable to see.

"Don't talk nonsense!" she said, gayly. "What were we saying just now--before we began to speak of Mr. Julian Gray?"

"We were wondering what had become of Lady Janet," Horace replied.

She tapped him impatiently on the shoulder. "No! no! It was something you said before that."

Her eyes completed what her words had left unsaid. Horace's arm stole round her waist.

"I was saying that I loved you," he answered, in a whisper.

"Only that?"

"Are you tired of hearing it?"

She smiled charmingly. "Are you so very much in earnest about--about--" She stopped, and looked away from him.

"About our marriage?"

"Yes."

"It is the one dearest wish of my life."

"Really?"

"Really."

There was a pause. Mercy's fingers toyed nervously with the trinkets at her watch-chain. "When would you like it to be?" she said, very softly, with her whole attention fixed on the watch-chain.

She had never spoken, she had never looked, as she spoke and looked now. Horace was afraid to believe in his own good fortune. "Oh, Grace!" he exclaimed, "you are not trifling with me?"

"What makes you think I am trifling with you?"

Horace was innocent enough to answer her seriously. "You would not even let me speak of our marriage just now," he said.

"Never mind what I did just now," she retorted, petulantly. "They say women are changeable. It is one of the defects of the sex."

"Heaven be praised for the defects of the sex!" cried Horace, with devout sincerity. "Do you really leave me to decide?"

"If you insist on it."

Horace considered for a moment--the subject being the law of marriage. "We may be married by license in a fortnight," he said. "I fix this day fortnight."

She held up her hands in protest.

"Why not? My lawyer is ready. There are no preparations to make. You said when you accepted me that it was to be a private marriage."

Mercy was obliged to own that she had certainly said that.

"We might be married at once--if the law would only let us. This day fortnight! Say--Yes!" He drew her closer to him. There was a pause. The mask of coquetry--badly worn from the first--dropped from her. Her sad gray eyes rested compassionately on his eager face. "Don't look so serious!" he said. "Only one little word, Grace! Only Yes."

She sighed, and said it. He kissed her passionately. It was only by a resolute effort that she released herself.

"Leave me!" she said, faintly. "Pray leave me by myself!"

She was in earnest--strangely in earnest. She was trembling from head to foot. Horace rose to leave her. "I will find Lady Janet," he said; "I long to show the dear old lady that I have recovered my spirits, and to tell her why." He turned round at the library door. "You won't go away? You will let me see you again when you are more composed?"

"I will wait here," said Mercy.

Satisfied with that reply, he left the room.

Her hands dropped on her lap; her head sank back wearily on the cushions at the head of the sofa. There was a dazed sensation in her: her mind felt stunned. She wondered vacantly whether she was awake or dreaming. Had she really said the word which pledged her to marry Horace Holmcroft in a fortnight? A fortnight! Something might happen in that time to prevent it: she might find her way in a fortnight out of the terrible position in which she stood. Anyway, come what might of it, she had chosen the preferable alternative to a private interview with Julian Gray. She raised herself from her recumbent position with a start, as the idea of the interview--dismissed for the last few minutes--possessed itself again of her mind. Her excited imagination figured Julian Gray as present in the room at that moment, speaking to her as Horace had proposed. She saw him seated close at her side--this man who had shaken her to the soul when he was in the pulpit, and when she was listening to him (unseen) at the other end of the chapel--she saw him close by her, looking her searchingly in the face; seeing her shameful secret in her eyes; hearing it in her voice; feeling it in her trembling hands; forcing it out of her word by word, till she fell prostrate at his feet with the confession of the fraud. Her head dropped again on the cushions; she hid her face in horror of the scene which her excited fancy had conjured up. Even now, when she had made that dreaded interview needless, could she feel sure (meeting him only on the most distant terms) of not betraying herself? She could not feel sure. Something in her shuddered and shrank at the bare idea of finding herself in the same room with him. She felt it, she knew it: her guilty conscience owned and feared its master in Julian Gray!

The minutes passed. The violence of her agitation began to tell physically on her weakened frame.

She found herself crying silently without knowing why. A weight was on her head, a weariness was in all her limbs. She sank lower on the cushions--her eyes closed--the monotonous ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece grew drowsily fainter and fainter on her ear. Little by little she dropped into slumber--slumber so light that she started when a morsel of coal fell into the grate, or when the birds chirped and twittered in their aviary in the winter-garden.

Lady Janet and Horace came in. She was faintly conscious of persons in the room. After an interval she opened her eyes, and half rose to speak to them. The room was empty again. They had stolen out softly and left her to repose. Her eyes closed once more. She dropped back into slumber, and from slumber, in the favoring warmth and quiet of the place, into deep and dreamless sleep.