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Chapter 8 - The Man Appears

After an interval of rest Mercy was aroused by the shutting of a glass door at the far end of the conservatory. This door, leading into the garden, was used only by the inmates of the house, or by old friends privileged to enter the reception-rooms by that way. Assuming that either Horace or Lady Janet was returning to the dining-room, Mercy raised herself a little on the sofa and listened.

The voice of one of the men-servants caught her ear. It was answered by another voice, which instantly set her trembling in every limb.

She started up, and listened again in speechless terror. Yes! there was no mistaking it. The voice that was answering the servant was the unforgotten voice which she had heard at the Refuge. The visitor who had come in by the glass door was--Julian Gray!

His rapid footsteps advanced nearer and nearer to the dining-room. She recovered herself sufficiently to hurry to the library door. Her hand shook so that she failed at first to open it. She had just succeeded when she heard him again--speaking to her.

"Pray don't run away! I am nothing very formidable. Only Lady Janet's nephew--Julian Gray."

She turned slowly, spell-bound by his voice, and confronted him in silence.

He was standing, hat in hand, at the entrance to the conservatory, dressed in black, and wearing a white cravat, but with a studious avoidance of anything specially clerical in the make and form of his clothes. Young as he was, there were marks of care already on his face, and the hair was prematurely thin and scanty over his forehead. His slight, active figure was of no more than the middle height. His complexion was pale. The lower part of his face, without beard or whiskers, was in no way remarkable. An average observer would have passed him by without notice but for his eyes. These alone made a marked man of him. The unusual size of the orbits in which they were set was enough of itself to attract attention; it gave a grandeur to his head, which the head, broad and firm as it was, did not possess. As to the eyes themselves, the soft, lustrous brightness of them defied analysis. No two people could agree about their color; divided opinion declaring alternately that they were dark gray or black. Painters had tried to reproduce them, and had given up the effort, in despair of seizing any one expression in the bewildering variety of expressions which they presented to view. They were eyes that could charm at one moment and terrify at another; eyes that could set people laughing or crying almost at will. In action and in repose they were irresistible alike. When they first descried Mercy running to the door, they brightened gayly with the merriment of a child. When she turned and faced him, they changed instantly, softening and glowing as they mutely owned the interest and the admiration which the first sight of her had roused in him. His tone and manner altered at the same time. He addressed her with the deepest respect when he spoke his next words.

"Let me entreat you to favor me by resuming your seat," he said. "And let me ask your pardon if I have thoughtlessly intruded on you."

He paused, waiting for her reply before he advanced into the room. Still spell-bound by his voice, she recovered self-control enough to bow to him and to resume her place on the sofa. It was impossible to leave him now. After looking at her for a moment, he entered the room without speaking to her again. She was beginning to perplex as well as to interest him. "No common sorrow," he thought, "has set its mark on that woman's face; no common heart beats in that woman's breast. Who can she be?"

Mercy rallied her courage, and forced herself to speak to him.

"Lady Janet is in the library, I believe," she said, timidly. "Shall I tell her you are here?"

"Don't disturb Lady Janet, and don't disturb yourself." With that answer he approached the luncheon-table, delicately giving her time to feel more at her ease. He took up what Horace had left of the bottle of claret, and poured it into a glass. "My aunt's claret shall represent my aunt for the present," he said, smiling, as he turned toward her once more. "I have had a long walk, and I may venture to help myself in this house without invitation. Is it useless to offer you anything?"

Mercy made the necessary reply. She was beginning already, after her remarkable experience of him, to wonder at his easy manners and his light way of talking.

He emptied his glass with the air of a man who thoroughly understood and enjoyed good wine. "My aunt's claret is worthy of my aunt," he said, with comic gravity, as he set down the glass. "Both are the genuine products of Nature." He seated himself at the table and looked critically at the different dishes left on it. One dish especially attracted his attention. "What is this?" he went on. "A French pie! It seems grossly unfair to taste French wine and to pass over French pie without notice." He took up a knife and fork, and enjoyed the pie as critically as he had enjoyed the wine. "Worthy of the Great Nation!" he exclaimed, with enthusiasm. "_Vive la France!_"

Mercy listened and looked, in inexpressible astonishment. He was utterly unlike the picture which her fancy had drawn of him in everyday life. Take off his white cravat, and nobody would have discovered that this famous preacher was a clergyman!

He helped himself to another plateful of the pie, and spoke more directly to Mercy, alternately eating and talking as composedly and pleasantly as if they had known each other for years.

"I came here by way of Kensington Gardens," he said. "For some time past I have been living in a flat, ugly, barren, agricultural district. You can't think how pleasant I found the picture presented by the Gardens, as a contrast. The ladies in their rich winter dresses, the smart nursery maids, the lovely children, the ever moving crowd skating on the ice of the Round Pond; it was all so exhilarating after what I have been used to, that I actually caught myself whistling as I walked through the brilliant scene! (In my time boys used always to whistle when they were in good spirits, and I have not got over the habit yet.) Who do you think I met when I was in full song?"

As well as her amazement would let her, Mercy excused herself from guessing. She had never in all her life before spoken to any living being so confusedly and so unintelligently as she now spoke to Julian Gray!

He went on more gayly than ever, without appearing to notice the effect that he had produced on her.

"Whom did I meet," he repeated, "when I was in full song? My bishop! If I had been whistling a sacred melody, his lordship might perhaps have excused my vulgarity out of consideration for my music. Unfortunately, the composition I was executing at the moment (I am one of the loudest of living whistlers) was by Verdi--" La Donna e Mobile"--familiar, no doubt, to his lordship on the street organs. He recognized the tune, poor man, and when I took off my hat to him he looked the other way. Strange, in a world that is bursting with sin and sorrow, to treat such a trifle seriously as a cheerful clergyman whistling a tune!" He pushed away his plate as he said the last words, and went on simply and earnestly in an altered tone. "I have never been able," he said, "to see why we should assert ourselves among other men as belonging to a particular caste, and as being forbidden, in any harmless thing, to do as other people do. The disciples of old set us no such example; they were wiser and better than we are. I venture to say that one of the worst obstacles in the way of our doing good among our fellow-creatures is raised by the mere assumption of the clerical manner and the clerical voice. For my part, I set up no claim to be more sacred and more reverend than any other Christian man who does what good he can." He glanced brightly at Mercy, looking at him in helpless perplexity. The spirit of fun took possession of him again. "Are you a Radical?" he asked, with a humorous twinkle in his large lustrous eyes. "I am!"

Mercy tried hard to understand him, and tried in vain. Could this be the preacher whose words had charmed, purified, ennobled her? Was this the man whose sermon had drawn tears from women about her whom she knew to be shameless and hardened in crime? Yes! The eyes that now rested on her humorously were the beautiful eyes which had once looked into her soul. The voice that had just addressed a jesting question to her was the deep and mellow voice which had once thrilled her to the heart. In the pulpit he was an angel of mercy; out of the pulpit he was a boy let loose from school.

"Don't let me startle you," he said, good-naturedly, noticing her confusion. "Public opinion has called me by harder names than the name of 'Radical.' I have been spending my time lately--as I told you just now--in an agricultural district. My business there was to perform the duty for the rector of the place, who wanted a holiday. How do you think the experiment has ended? The Squire of the parish calls me a Communist; the farmers denounce me as an Incendiary; my friend the rector has been recalled in a hurry, and I have now the honor of speaking to you in the character of a banished man who has made a respectable neighborhood too hot to hold him."

With that frank avowal he left the luncheon table, and took a chair near Mercy.

"You will naturally be anxious," he went on, "to know what my offense was. Do you understand Political Economy and the Laws of Supply and Demand?"

Mercy owned that she did not understand them.

"No more do I--in a Christian country," he said. "That was my offense. You shall hear my confession (just as my aunt will hear it) in two words." He paused for a little while; his variable manner changed again. Mercy, shyly looking at him, saw a new expression in his eyes--an expression which recalled her first remembrance of him as nothing had recalled it yet. "I had no idea," he resumed, "of what the life of a farm-laborer really was, in some parts of England, until I undertook the rector's duties. Never before had I seen such dire wretchedness as I saw in the cottages. Never before had I met with such noble patience under suffering as I found among the people. The martyrs of old could endure, and die. I asked myself if they could endure, and live, like the martyrs whom I saw round me?--live, week after week, month after month, year after year, on the brink of starvation; live, and see their pining children growing up round them, to work and want in their turn; live, with the poor man's parish prison to look to as the end, when hunger and labor have done their worst! Was God's beautiful earth made to hold such misery as this? I can hardly think of it, I can hardly speak of it, even now, with dry eyes!"

His head sank on his breast. He waited--mastering his emotion before he spoke again. Now, at last, she knew him once more. Now he was the man, indeed, whom she had expected to see. Unconsciously she sat listening, with her eyes fixed on his face, with his heart hanging on his words, in the very attitude of the by-gone day when she had heard him for the first time!

"I did all I could to plead for the helpless ones," he resumed. "I went round among the holders of the land to say a word for the tillers of the land. 'These patient people don't want much' (I said); 'in the name of Christ, give them enough to live on!' Political Economy shrieked at the horrid proposal; the Laws of Supply and Demand veiled their majestic faces in dismay. Starvation wages were the right wages, I was told. And why? Because the laborer was obliged to accept them! I determined, so far as one man could do it, that the laborer should not be obliged to accept them. I collected my own resources--I wrote to my friends--and I removed some of the poor fellows to parts of England where their work was better paid. Such was the conduct which made the neighborhood too hot to hold me. So let it be! I mean to go on. I am known in London; I can raise subscriptions. The vile Laws of Supply and Demand shall find labor scarce in that agricultural district; and pitiless Political Economy shall spend a few extra shillings on the poor, as certainly as I am that Radical, Communist, and Incendiary--Julian Gray!"

He rose--making a little gesture of apology for the warmth with which he had spoken--and took a turn in the room. Fired by his enthusiasm, Mercy followed him. Her purse was in her hand, when he turned and faced her.

"Pray let me offer my little tribute--such as it is!" she said, eagerly.

A momentary flush spread over his pale cheeks as he looked at the beautiful compassionate face pleading with him.

"No! no!" he said, smiling; "though I am a parson, I don't carry the begging-box everywhere." Mercy attempted to press the purse on him. The quaint humor began to twinkle again in his eyes as he abruptly drew back from it. "Don't tempt me!" he said. "The frailest of all human creatures is a clergyman tempted by a subscription." Mercy persisted, and conquered; she made him prove the truth of his own profound observation of clerical human nature by taking a piece of money from the purse. "If I must take it--I must!" he remarked. "Thank you for setting the good example! thank you for giving the timely help! What name shall I put down on my list?"

Mercy's eyes looked confusedly away from him. "No name," she said, in a low voice. "My subscription is anonymous."

As she replied, the library door opened. To her infinite relief--to Julian's secret disappointment--Lady Janet Roy and Horace Holmcraft entered the room together.

"Julian!" exclaimed Lady Janet, holding up her hands in astonishment.

He kissed his aunt on the cheek. "Your ladyship is looking charmingly." He gave his hand to Horace. Horace took it, and passed on to Mercy. They walked away together slowly to the other end of the room. Julian seized on the chance which left him free to speak privately to his aunt.

"I came in through the conservatory," he said. "And I found that young lady in the room. Who is she?"

"Are you very much interested in her?" asked Lady Janet, in her gravely ironical way.

Julian answered in one expressive word. "Indescribably!"

Lady Janet called to Mercy to join her.

"My dear," she said, "let me formally present my nephew to you. Julian, this is Miss Grace Roseberry--" She suddenly checked herself. The instant she pronounced the name, Julian started as if it was a surprise to him. "What is it?" she asked, sharply.

"Nothing," he answered, bowing to Mercy, with a marked absence of his former ease of manner. She returned the courtesy a little restrainedly on her side. She, too, had seen him start when Lady Janet mentioned the name by which she was known. The start meant something. What could it be? Why did he turn aside, after bowing to her, and address himself to Horace, with an absent look in his face, as if his thoughts were far away from his words? A complete change had come over him; and it dated from the moment when his aunt had pronounced the name that was not _her_ name---the name that she had stolen!

Lady Janet claimed Julian's attention, and left Horace free to return to Mercy. "Your room is ready for you," she said. "You will stay here, of course?" Julian accepted the invitation---still with the air of a man whose mind was preoccupied. Instead of looking at his aunt when he made his reply, he looked round at Mercy with a troubled curiosity in his face, very strange to see. Lady Janet tapped him impatiently on the shoulder. "I expect people to look at me when people speak to me," she said. "What are you staring at my adopted daughter for?"

"Your adopted daughter?" Julian repeated--looking at his aunt this time, and looking very earnestly.

"Certainly! As Colonel Roseberry's daughter, she is connected with me by marriage already. Did you think I had picked up a foundling?"

Julian's face cleared; he looked relieved. "I had forgotten the Colonel," he answered. "Of course the young lady is related to us, as you say."

"Charmed, I am sure, to have satisfied you that Grace is not an impostor," said Lady Janet, with satirical humility. She took Julian's arm and drew him out of hearing of Horace and Mercy. "About that letter of yours?" she proceeded. "There is one line in it that rouses my curiosity. Who is the mysterious 'lady' whom you wish to present to me?"

Julian started, and changed color.

"I can't tell you now," he said, in a whisper.

"Why not?"

To Lady Janet's unutterable astonishment, instead of replying, Julian looked round at her adopted daughter once more.

"What has _she_ got to do with it?" asked the old lady, out of all patience with him.

"It is impossible for me to tell you," he answered, gravely, "while Miss Roseberry is in the room."