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Chapter 9 - News From Mannheim

LADY JANET'S curiosity was by this time thoroughly aroused. Summoned to explain who the nameless lady mentioned in his letter could possibly be, Julian had looked at her adopted daughter. Asked next to explain what her adopted daughter had got to do with it, he had declared that he could not answer while Miss Roseberry was in the room.

What did he mean? Lady Janet determined to find out.

"I hate all mysteries," she said to Julian. "And as for secrets, I consider them to be one of the forms of ill-breeding. People in our rank of life ought to be above whispering in corners. If you _must_ have your mystery, I can offer you a corner in the library. Come with me."

Julian followed his aunt very reluctantly. Whatever the mystery might be, he was plainly embarrassed by being called upon to reveal it at a moment's notice. Lady Janet settled herself in her chair, prepared to question and cross-question her nephew, when an obstacle appeared at the other end of the library, in the shape of a man-servant with a message. One of Lady Janet's neighbors had called by appointment to take her to the meeting of a certain committee which assembled that day. The servant announced that the neighbor--an elderly lady--was then waiting in her carriage at the door.

Lady Janet's ready invention set the obstacle aside without a moment's delay. She directed the servant to show her visitor into the drawing-room, and to say that she was unexpectedly engaged, but that Miss Roseberry would see the lady immediately. She then turned to Julian, and said, with her most satirical emphasis of tone and manner: "Would it be an additional convenience if Miss Roseberry was not only out of the room before you disclose your secret, but out of the house?"

Julian gravely answered: "It may possibly be quite as well if Miss Roseberry is out of the house."

Lady Janet led the way back to the dining-room.

"My dear Grace," she said, "you looked flushed and feverish when I saw you asleep on the sofa a little while since. It will do you no harm to have a drive in the fresh air. Our friend has called to take me to the committee meeting. I have sent to tell her that I am engaged--and I shall be much obliged if you will go in my place."

Mercy looked a little alarmed. "Does your ladyship mean the committee meeting of the Samaritan Convalescent Home? The members, as I understand it, are to decide to-day which of the plans for the new building they are to adopt. I cannot surely presume to vote in your place?"

"You can vote, my dear child, just as well as I can," replied the old lady. "Architecture is one of the lost arts. You know nothing about it; I know nothing about it; the architects themselves know nothing about it. One plan is, no doubt, just as bad as the other. Vote, as I should vote, with the majority. Or as poor dear Dr. Johnson said, 'Shout with the loudest mob.' Away with you--and don't keep the committee waiting."

Horace hastened to open the door for Mercy.

"How long shall you be away?" he whispered, confidentially. "I had a thousand things to say to you, and they have interrupted us."

"I shall be back in an hour."

"We shall have the room to ourselves by that time. Come here when you return. You will find me waiting for you."

Mercy pressed his hand significantly and went out. Lady Janet turned to Julian, who had thus far remained in the background, still, to all appearance, as unwilling as ever to enlighten his aunt.

"Well?" she said. "What is tying your tongue now? Grace is out of the room; why won't you begin? Is Horace in the way?"

"Not in the least. I am only a little uneasy--"

"Uneasy about what?"

"I am afraid you have put that charming creature to some inconvenience in sending her away just at this time."

Horace looked up suddenly, with a flush on his face.

"When you say 'that charming creature,'" he asked, sharply, "I suppose you mean Miss Roseberry?"

"Certainly," answered Julian. "Why not?"

Lady Janet interposed. "Gently, Julian," she said. "Grace has only been introduced to you hitherto in the character of my adopted daughter--"

"And it seems to be high time," Horace added, haughtily, "that I should present her next in the character of my engaged wife."

Julian looked at Horace as if he could hardly credit the evidence of his own ears. "Your wife!" he exclaimed, with an irrepressible outburst of disappointment and surprise.

"Yes. My wife," returned Horace. "We are to be married in a fortnight. May I ask," he added, with angry humility, "if you disapprove of the marriage?"

Lady Janet interposed once more. "Nonsense, Horace," she said. "Julian congratulates you, of course."

Julian coldly and absently echoed the words. "Oh, yes! I congratulate you, of course."

Lady Janet returned to the main object of the interview.

"Now we thoroughly understand one another," she said, "let us speak of a lady who has dropped out of the conversation for the last minute or two. I mean, Julian, the mysterious lady of your letter. We are alone, as you desired. Lift the veil, my reverend nephew, which hides her from mortal eyes! Blush, if you like--and can. Is she the future Mrs. Julian Gray?"

"She is a perfect stranger to me," Julian answered, quietly.

"A perfect stranger! You wrote me word you were interested in her."

"I _am_ interested in her. And, what is more, you are interested in her, too."

Lady Janet's fingers drummed impatiently on the table. "Have I not warned you, Julian, that I hate mysteries? Will you, or will you not, explain yourself?"

Before it was possible to answer, Horace rose from his chair. "Perhaps I am in the way?" he said.

Julian signed to him to sit down again.

"I have already told Lady Janet that you are not in the way," he answered. "I now tell you--as Miss Roseberry's future husband--that you, too, have an interest in hearing what I have to say."

Horace resumed his seat with an air of suspicious surprise. Julian addressed himself to Lady Janet.

"You have often heard me speak," he began, "of my old friend and school-fellow, John Cressingham?"

"Yes. The English consul at Mannheim?"

"The same. When I returned from the country I found among my other letters a long letter from the consul. I have brought it with me, and I propose to read certain passages from it, which tell a very strange story more plainly and more credibly than I can tell it in my own words."

"Will it be very long?" inquired Lady Janet, looking with some alarm at the closely written sheets of paper which her nephew spread open before him.

Horace followed with a question on his side.

"You are sure I am interested in it?" he asked. "The consul at Mannheim is a total stranger to me."

"I answer for it," replied Julian, gravely, "neither my aunt's patience nor yours, Horace, will be thrown away if you will favor me by listening attentively to what I am about to read."

With those words he began his first extract from the consul's letter.

* * * "My memory is a bad one for dates. But full three months must have passed since information was sent to me of an English patient, received at the hospital here, whose case I, as English consul, might feel an interest in investigating.

"I went the same day to the hospital, and was taken to the bedside.

"The patient was a woman--young, and (when in health), I should think, very pretty. When I first saw her she looked, to my uninstructed eye, like a dead woman. I noticed that her head had a bandage over it, and I asked what was the nature of the injury that she had received. The answer informed me that the poor creature had been present, nobody knew why or wherefore, at a skirmish or night attack between the Germans and the French, and that the injury to her head had been inflicted by a fragment of a German shell."

Horace--thus far leaning back carelessly in his chair--suddenly raised himself and exclaimed, "Good heavens! can this be the woman I saw laid out for dead in the French cottage?"

"It is impossible for me to say," replied Julian. "Listen to the rest of it. The consul's letter may answer your question."

He went on with his reading:

"The wounded woman had been reported dead, and had been left by the French in their retreat, at the time when the German forces took possession of the enemy's position. She was found on a bed in a cottage by the director of the German ambulance--"

"Ignatius Wetzel?" cried Horace.

"Ignatius Wetzel," repeated Julian, looking at the letter.

"It _is_ the same!" said Horace. "Lady Janet, we are really interested in this. You remember my telling you how I first met with Grace? And you have heard more about it since, no doubt, from Grace herself?"

"She has a horror of referring to that part of her journey home," replied Lady Janet. "She mentioned her having been stopped on the frontier, and her finding herself accidentally in the company of another Englishwoman, a perfect stranger to her. I naturally asked questions on my side, and was shocked to hear that she had seen the woman killed by a German shell almost close at her side. Neither she nor I have had any relish for returning to the subject since. You were quite right, Julian, to avoid speaking of it while she was in the room. I understand it all now. Grace, I suppose, mentioned my name to her fellow-traveler. The woman is, no doubt, in want of assistance, and she applies to me through you. I will help her; but she must not come here until I have prepared Grace for seeing her again, a living woman. For the present

there is no reason why they should meet."

"I am not sure about that," said Julian, in low tones, without looking up at his aunt.

"What do you mean? Is the mystery not at an end yet?"

"The mystery has not even begun yet. Let my friend the consul proceed."

Julian returned for the second time to his extract from the letter:

"After a careful examination of the supposed corpse, the German surgeon arrived at the conclusion that a case of suspended animation had (in the hurry of the French retreat) been mistaken for a case of death. Feeling a professional interest in the subject, he decided on putting his opinion to the test. He operated on the patient with complete success. After performing the operation he kept her for some days under his own care, and then transferred her to the nearest hospital--the hospital at Mannheim. He was obliged to return to his duties as army surgeon, and he left his patient in the condition in which I saw her, insensible on the bed. Neither he nor the hospital authorities knew anything whatever about the woman. No papers were found on her. All the doctors could do, when I asked them for information with a view to communicating with her friends, was to show me her linen marked with her name. I left the hospital after taking down the name in my pocket-book. It was "Mercy Merrick.""

Lady Janet produced her pocket-book. "Let me take the name down too," she said. "I never heard it before, and I might otherwise forget it. Go on, Julian."

Julian advanced to his second extract from the consul's letter:

"Under these circumstances, I could only wait to hear from the hospital when the patient was sufficiently recovered to be able to speak to me. Some weeks passed without my receiving any communication from the doctors. On calling to make inquiries I was informed that fever had set in, and that the poor creature's condition now alternated between exhaustion and delirium. In her delirious moments the name of your aunt, Lady Janet Roy, frequently escaped her. Otherwise her wanderings were for the most part quite unintelligible to the people at her bedside. I thought once or twice of writing to you, and of begging you to speak to Lady Janet. But as the doctors informed me that the chances of life or death were at this time almost equally balanced, I decided to wait until time should determine whether it was necessary to trouble you or not."

"You know best, Julian," said Lady Janet. "But I own I don't quite see in what way I am interested in this part of the story."

"Just what I was going to say," added Horace. "It is very sad, no doubt. But what have we to do with it?"

"Let me read my third extract," Julian answered, "and you will see."

He turned to the third extract, and read as follows:

"At last I received a message from the hospital informing me that Mercy Merrick was out of danger, and that she was capable (though still very weak) of answering any questions which I might think it desirable to put to her. On reaching the hospital, I was requested, rather to my surprise, to pay my first visit to the head physician in his private room. "I think it right," said this gentleman, "to warn you, before you see the patient, to be very careful how you speak to her, and not to irritate her by showing any surprise or expressing any doubts if she talks to you in an extravagant manner. We differ in opinion about her here. Some of us (myself among the number) doubt whether the recovery of her mind has accompanied the recovery of her bodily powers. Without pronouncing her to be mad--she is perfectly gentle and harmless--we are nevertheless of opinion that she is suffering under a species of insane delusion. Bear in mind the caution which I have given you--and now go and judge for yourself." I obeyed, in some little perplexity and surprise. The sufferer, when I approached her bed, looked sadly weak and worn; but, so far as I could judge, seemed to be in full possession of herself. Her tone and manner were unquestionably the tone and manner of a lady. After briefly introducing myself, I assured her that I should be glad, both officially and personally, if I could be of any assistance to her. In saying these trifling words I happened to address her by the name I had seen marked on her clothes. The instant the words "Miss Merrick" passed my lips a wild, vindictive expression appeared in her eyes. She exclaimed angrily, "Don't call me by that hateful name! It's not my name. All the people here persecute me by calling me Mercy Merrick. And when I am angry with them they show me the clothes. Say what I may, they persist in believing they are my clothes. Don't you do the same, if you want to be friends with me." Remembering what the physician had said to me, I made the necessary excuses and succeeded in soothing her. Without reverting to the irritating topic of the name, I merely inquired what her plans were, and assured her that she might command my services if she required them. "Why do you want to know what my plans are?" she asked, suspiciously. I reminded her in reply that I held the position of English consul, and that my object was, if possible, to be of some assistance to her. "You can be of the greatest assistance to me," she said, eagerly. "Find Mercy Merrick!" I saw the vindictive look come back into her eyes, and an angry flush rising on her white cheeks. Abstaining from showing any surprise, I asked her who Mercy Merrick was. "A vile woman, by her own confession," was the quick reply. "How am I to find her?" I inquired next. "Look for a woman in a black dress, with the Red Geneva Cross on her shoulder; she is a nurse in the French ambulance." "What has she done?" "I have lost my papers; I have lost my own clothes; Mercy Merrick has taken them." "How do you know that Mercy Merrick has taken them?" "Nobody else could have taken them--that's how I know it. Do you believe me or not?" She began to excite herself again; I assured her that I would at once send to make inquiries after Mercy Merrick. She turned round contented on the pillow. "There's a good man!" she said. "Come back and tell me when you have caught her." Such was my first interview with the English patient at the hospital at Mannheim. It is needless to say that I doubted the existence of the absent person described as a nurse. However, it was possible to make inquiries by applying to the surgeon, Ignatius Wetzel, whose whereabouts was known to his friends in Mannheim. I wrote to him, and received his answer in due time. After the night attack of the Germans had made them masters of the French position, he had entered the cottage occupied by the French ambulance. He had found the wounded Frenchmen left behind, but had seen no such person in attendance on them as the nurse in the black dress with the red cross on her shoulder. The only living woman in the place was a young English lady, in a gray traveling cloak, who had been stopped on the frontier, and who was forwarded on her way home by the war correspondent of an English journal."

"That was Grace," said Lady Janet.

"And I was the war correspondent," added Horace.

"A few words more," said Julian, "and you will understand my object in claiming your attention."

He returned to the letter for the last time, and concluded his extracts from it as follows:

"Instead of attending at the hospital myself, I communicated by letter the failure of my attempt to discover the missing nurse. For some little time afterward I heard no more of the sick woman, whom I shall still call Mercy Merrick. It was only yesterday that I received another summons to visit the patient. She had by this time sufficiently recovered to claim her discharge, and she had announced her intention of returning forthwith to England. The head physician, feeling a sense of responsibility, had sent for me. It was impossible to detain her on the ground that she was not fit to be trusted by herself at large, in consequence of the difference of opinion among the doctors on the case. All that could be done was to give me due notice, and to leave the matter in my hands. On seeing her for the second time, I found her sullen and reserved. She openly attributed my inability to find the nurse to want of zeal for her interests on my part. I had, on my side, no authority whatever to detain her. I could only inquire whether she had money enough to pay her traveling expenses. Her reply informed me that the chaplain of the hospital had mentioned her forlorn situation in the town,

and that the English residents had subscribed a small sum of money to enable her to return to her own country. Satisfied on this head, I asked next if she had friends to go to in England. "I have one friend," she answered, "who is a host in herself--Lady Janet Roy." You may imagine my surprise when I heard this. I found it quite useless to make any further inquiries as to how she came to know your aunt, whether your aunt expected her, and so on. My questions evidently offended her; they were received in sulky silence. Under these circumstances, well knowing that I can trust implicitly to your humane sympathy for misfortune, I have decided (after careful reflection) to insure the poor creature's safety when she arrives in London by giving her a letter to you. You will hear what she says, and you will be better able to discover than I am whether she really has any claim on Lady Janet Roy. One last word of information, which it may be necessary to add, and I shall close this inordinately long letter. At my first interview with her I abstained, as I have already told you, from irritating her by any inquiries on the subject of her name. On this second occasion, however, I decided on putting the question."

As he read those last words, Julian became aware of a sudden movement on the part of his aunt. Lady Janet had risen softly from her chair and had passed behind him with the purpose of reading the consul's letter for herself over her nephew's shoulder. Julian detected the action just in time to frustrate Lady Janet's intention by placing his hand over the last two lines of the letter.

"What do you do that for?" inquired his aunt, sharply.

"You are welcome, Lady Janet, to read the close of the letter for yourself," Julian replied. "But before you do so I am anxious to prepare you for a very great surprise. Compose yourself and let me read on slowly, with your eye on me, until I uncover the last two words which close my friend's letter."

He read the end of the letter, as he had proposed, in these terms:

"I looked the woman straight in the face, and I said to her, "You have denied that the name marked on the clothes which you wore when you came here was your name. If you are not Mercy Merrick, who are you?" She answered, instantly, "My name is--"

Julian removed his hand from the page. Lady Janet looked at the next two words, and started back with a loud cry of astonishment, which brought Horace instantly to his feet.

"Tell me, one of you!" he cried. "What name did she give?"

Julian told him.

"GRACE ROSEBERRY."