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[Authors](#)
[Contact](#)

[The New Magdalen](#)

[Wilkie Collins](#)

This Book:
[Contents](#)
[Previous Chapter](#)
[Next Chapter](#)

Chapter 25 - The Confession

HE stopped just inside the door. His first look was for Mercy; his second look was for Julian.

"I knew it!" he said, with an assumption of sardonic composure. "If I could only have persuaded Lady Janet to bet, I should have won a hundred pounds." He advanced toward Julian, with a sudden change from irony to anger. "Would you like to hear what the bet was?" he asked.

"I should prefer seeing you able to control yourself in the presence of this lady," Julian answered, quietly.

"I offered to lay Lady Janet two hundred pounds to one," Horace proceeded, "that I should find you here, making love to Miss Roseberry behind my back."

Mercy interfered before Julian could reply.

"If you cannot speak without insulting one of us," she said, "permit me to request that you will _not_ address yourself to Mr. Julian Gray."

Horace bowed to her with a mockery of respect.

"Pray don't alarm yourself--I am pledged to be scrupulously civil to both of you," he said. "Lady Janet only allowed me to leave her on condition of my promising to behave with perfect politeness. What else can I do? I have two privileged people to deal with--a parson and a woman. The parson's profession protects him, and the woman's sex protects her. You have got me at a disadvantage, and you both of you know it. I beg to apologize if I have forgotten the clergyman's profession and the lady's sex."

"You have forgotten more than that," said Julian. "You have forgotten that you were born a gentleman and bred a man of honor. So far as I am concerned, I don't ask you to remember that I am a clergyman--I obtrude my profession on nobody--I only ask you to remember your birth and your breeding. It is quite bad enough to cruelly and unjustly suspect an old friend who has never forgotten what he owes to you and to himself. But it is still more unworthy of you to acknowledge those suspicions in the hearing of a woman whom your own choice has doubly bound you to respect."

He stopped. The two eyed each other for a moment in silence.

It was impossible for Mercy to look at them, as she was looking now, without drawing the inevitable comparison between the manly force and dignity of Julian and the womanish malice and irritability of Horace. A last faithful impulse of loyalty toward the man to whom she had been betrothed impelled her to part them, before Horace had hopelessly degraded himself in her estimation by contrast with Julian.

"You had better wait to speak to me," she said to him, "until we are alone."

"Certainly," Horace answered with a sneer, "if Mr. Julian Gray will permit it."

Mercy turned to Julian, with a look which said plainly, "Pity us both, and leave us!"

"Do you wish me to go?" he asked.

"Add to all your other kindnesses to me," she answered. "Wait for me in that room."

She pointed to the door that led into the dining-room. Julian hesitated.

"You promise to let me know it if I can be of the smallest service to you?" he said.

"Yes, yes!" She followed him as he withdrew, and added, rapidly, in a whisper, "Leave the door ajar!"

He made no answer. As she returned to Horace he entered the dining-room. The one concession he could make to her he did make. He closed the door so noiselessly that not even her quick hearing could detect that he had shut it.

Mercy spoke to Horace, without waiting to let him speak first.

"I have promised you an explanation of my conduct," she said, in accents that trembled a little in spite of herself. "I am ready to perform my promise."

"I have a question to ask you before you do that," he rejoined. "Can you speak the truth?"

"I am waiting to speak the truth."

"I will give you an opportunity. Are you or are you not in love with Julian Gray?"

"You ought to be ashamed to ask the question!"

"Is that your only answer?"

"I have never been unfaithful to you, Horace, even in thought. If I had _not_ been true to you, should I feel my position as you see I feel it now?"

He smiled bitterly. "I have my own opinion of your fidelity and of his honor," he said. "You couldn't even send him into the next room without whispering to him first. Never mind that now. At least you know that Julian Gray is in love with you."

"Mr. Julian Gray has never breathed a word of it to me."

"A man can show a woman that he loves her, without saying it in words."

Mercy's power of endurance began to fail her. Not even Grace Roseberry had spoken more insultingly to her of Julian than Horace was speaking now. "Whoever says that of Mr. Julian Gray, lies!" she answered, warmly.

"Then Lady Janet lies," Horace retorted.

"Lady Janet never said it! Lady Janet is incapable of saying it!"

"She may not have said it in so many words; but she never denied it when _I_ said it. I reminded her of the time when Julian Gray first heard from me that I was going to marry you: he was so overwhelmed that he was barely capable of being civil to me. Lady Janet was present, and could not deny it. I asked her if she had observed, since then, signs of a confidential understanding between you two. She could not deny the signs. I asked if she had ever found you two together. She could not deny that she had found you together, this very day, under circumstances which justified suspicion. Yes! yes! Look as angry as you like! you don't know what has been going on upstairs. Lady Janet is bent on breaking off our engagement--and Julian Gray is at the bottom of it."

As to Julian, Horace was utterly wrong. But as to Lady Janet, he echoed the warning words which Julian himself had spoken to Mercy. She was staggered, but she still held to her own opinion. "I don't believe it," she said, firmly.

He advanced a step, and fixed his angry eyes on her searchingly.

"Do you know why Lady Janet sent for me?" he asked.

"No."

"Then I will tell you. Lady Janet is a staunch friend of yours, there is no denying that. She wished to inform me that she had altered her mind about your promised explanation of your conduct. She said, 'Reflection has convinced me that no explanation is required; I have laid my positive commands on my adopted daughter that no explanation shall take place.' Has she done that?"

"Yes."

"Now observe! I waited till she had finished, and then I said, 'What have I to do with this?' Lady Janet has one merit--she speaks out. 'You are to do as I do,' she answered. 'You are to consider that no explanation is required, and you are to consign the whole matter to oblivion from this time forth.' 'Are you serious?' I asked. 'Quite serious.' 'In that case I have to inform your ladyship that you insist on more than you may suppose: you insist on my breaking my engagement to Miss Roseberry. Either I am to have the explanation that she has promised me, or I refuse to marry her.' How do you think Lady Janet took that? She shut up her lips, and she spread out her hands, and she looked at me as much as to say, 'Just as you please! Refuse if you like; it's nothing to me!'"

He paused for a moment. Mercy remained silent, on her side: she foresaw what was coming. Mistaken in supposing that Horace had left the house, Julian had, beyond all doubt, been equally in error in concluding that he had been entrapped into breaking off the engagement upstairs.

"Do you understand me so far?" Horace asked.

"I understand you perfectly."

"I will not trouble you much longer," he resumed. "I said to Lady Janet, 'Be so good as to answer me in plain words. Do you still insist on closing Miss Roseberry's lips?' 'I still insist,' she answered. 'No explanation is required. If you are base enough to suspect your betrothed wife, I am just enough to believe in my adopted daughter.' I replied--and I beg you will give your best attention to what I am now going to say--I replied to that, 'It is not fair to charge me with suspecting her. I don't understand her confidential relations with Julian Gray, and I don't understand her language and conduct in the presence of the police officer. I claim it as my right to be satisfied on both those points--in the character of the man who is to marry her.' There was my answer. I spare you all that followed. I only repeat what I said to Lady Janet. She has commanded you to be silent. If you obey her commands, I owe it to myself and I owe it to my family to release you from your engagement. Choose between your duty to Lady Janet and your duty to Me."

He had mastered his temper at last: he spoke with dignity, and he spoke to the point. His position was unassailable; he claimed nothing but his right.

"My choice was made," Mercy answered, "when I gave you my promise upstairs."

She waited a little, struggling to control herself on the brink of the terrible revelation that was coming. Her eyes dropped before his; her heart beat faster and faster; but she struggled bravely. With a desperate courage she faced the position. "If you are ready to listen," she went on, "I am ready to tell you why I insisted on having the police officer sent out of the house."

Horace held up his hand warningly.

"Stop!" he said; "that is not all."

His infatuated jealousy of Julian (fatally misinterpreting her agitation) distrusted her at the very outset. She had limited herself to clearing up the one question of her interference with the officer of justice. The other question of her relations with Julian she had deliberately passed over. Horace instantly drew his own ungenerous conclusion.

"Let us not misunderstand one another," he said. "The explanation of your conduct in the other room is only one of the explanations which you owe me. You have something else to account for. Let us begin with _that_, if you please."

She looked at him in unaffected surprise.

"What else have I to account for?" she asked.

He again repeated his reply to Lady Janet.

"I have told you already," he said. "I don't understand your confidential relations with Julian Gray."

Mercy's color rose; Mercy's eyes began to brighten.

"Don't return to that!" she cried, with an irrepressible outbreak of disgust. "Don't, for God's sake, make me despise you at such a moment as this!"

His obstinacy only gathered fresh encouragement from that appeal to his better sense.

"I insist on returning to it."

She had resolved to bear anything from him-- as her fit punishment for the deception of which she had been guilty. But it was not in womanhood (at the moment when the first words of her confession were trembling on her lips) to endure Horace's unworthy suspicion of her. She rose from her seat and met his eye firmly.

"I refuse to degrade myself, and to degrade Mr. Julian Gray, by answering you," she said

Consider what you are doing," he rejoined. Change your mind, before it is too late!"

"You have had my reply."

Those resolute words, that steady resistance, seemed to infuriate him. He caught her roughly by the arm.

"You are as false as hell!" he cried. "It's all over between you and me!"

The loud threatening tone in which he had spoken penetrated through the closed door of the dining-room. The door instantly opened. Julian returned to the library.

He had just set foot in the room, when there was a knock at the other door--the door that opened on the hall. One of the men-servants appeared, with a telegraphic message in his hand. Mercy was the first to see it. It was the Matron's answer to the letter which she had sent to the Refuge.

"For Mr. Julian Gray?" she asked.

"Yes, miss."

"Give it to me."

She signed to the man to withdraw, and herself gave the telegram to Julian. "It is addressed to you, at my request," she said. "You will recognize the name of the person who sends it, and you will find a message in it for me."

Horace interfered before Julian could open the telegram.

"Another private understanding between you!" he said. "Give me that telegram."

Julian looked at him with quiet contempt.

"It is directed to Me," he answered--and opened the envelope.

The message inside was expressed in these terms: "I am as deeply interested in her as you are. Say that I have received her letter, and that I welcome her back to the Refuge with all my heart. I have business this evening in the neighborhood. I will call for her myself at Mablethorpe House."

The message explained itself. Of her own free-will she had made the expiation complete! Of her own free-will she was going back to the martyrdom of her old life! Bound as he knew himself to be to let no compromising word or action escape him in the presence of Horace, the irrepressible expression of Julian's admiration glowed in his eyes as they rested on Mercy. Horace detected the look. He sprang forward and tried to snatch the telegram out of Julian's hand.

"Give it to me!" he said. "I will have it!"

Julian silently put him back at arms-length.

Maddened with rage, he lifted his hand threateningly. "Give it to me!" he repeated between his set teeth, "or it will be the worse for you!"

"Give it to _me!_" said Mercy, suddenly placing herself between them.

Julian gave it. She turned, and offered it to Horace, looking at him with a steady eye, holding it out to him with a steady hand.

"Read it," she said.

Julian's generous nature pitied the man who had insulted him. Julian's great heart only remembered the friend of former times.

"Spare him!" he said to Mercy. "Remember he is unprepared."

She neither answered nor moved. Nothing stirred the horrible torpor of her resignation to her fate. She knew that the time had come.

Julian appealed to Horace.

"Don't read it!" he cried. "Hear what she has to say to you first!"

Horace's hand answered him with a contemptuous gesture. Horace's eyes devoured, word by word, the Matron's message.

He looked up when he had read it through. There was a ghastly change in his face as he turned it on Mercy.

She stood between the two men like a statue. The life in her seemed to have died out, except in her eyes. Her eyes rested on Horace with a steady, glittering calmness.

The silence was only broken by the low murmuring of Julian's voice. His face was hidden in his hands--he was praying for them.

Horace spoke, laying his finger on the telegram. His voice had changed with the change in his face. The tone was low and trembling; no one would have recognized it as the tone of Horace's voice.

"What does this mean?" he said to Mercy. "It can't be for you?"

"It _is_ for me."

"What have You to do with a Refuge?"

Without a change in her face, without a movement in her limbs, she spoke the fatal words:

"I have come from a Refuge, and I am going back to a Refuge. Mr. Horace Holmcroft, I am Mercy Merrick."