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Chapter 28 - Sentence Is Pronounced On Her

IT was done. The last tones of her voice died away in silence.

Her eyes still rested on Horace. After hearing what he had heard could he resist that gentle, pleading look? Would he forgive her? A while since Julian had seen tears on his cheeks, and had believed that he felt for her. Why was he now silent? Was it possible that he only felt for himself?

For the last time--at the crisis of her life--Julian spoke for her. He had never loved her as he loved her at that moment; it tried even his generous nature to plead her cause with Horace against himself. But he had promised her, without reserve, all the help that her truest friend could offer. Faithfully and manfully he redeemed his promise.

"Horace!" he said.

Horace slowly looked up. Julian rose and approached him.

"She has told you to thank _me_, if her conscience has spoken. Thank the noble nature which answered when I called upon it! Own the priceless value of a woman who can speak the truth. Her heartfelt repentance is a joy in heaven. Shall it not plead for her on earth? Honor her, if you are a Christian! Feel for her, if you are a man!"

He waited. Horace never answered him.

Mercy's eyes turned tearfully on Julian. _His_ heart was the heart that felt for her! _His_ words were the words which comforted and pardoned her! When she looked back again at Horace, it was with an effort. His last hold on her was lost. In her inmost mind a thought rose unbidden--a thought which was not to be repressed. "Can I ever have loved this man?"

She advanced a step toward him ; it was not possible, even yet, to completely forget the past. She held out her hand.

He rose on his side--without looking at her.

"Before we part forever," she said to him, "will you take my hand as a token that you forgive me?"

He hesitated. He half lifted his hand. The next moment the generous impulse died away in him. In its place came the mean fear of what might happen if he trusted himself to the dangerous fascination of her touch. His hand dropped again at his side; he turned away quickly.

"I can't forgive her!" he said.

With that horrible confession--without even a last look at her--he left the room.

At the moment when he opened the door Julian's contempt for him burst its way through all restraints.

"Horace," he said, "I pity you!"

As the words escaped him he looked back at Mercy. She had turned aside from both of them--she had retired to a distant part of the library The first bitter foretaste of what was in store for her when she faced the world again had come to her from Horace! The energy which had sustained her thus far quailed before the dreadful prospect--doubly dreadful to a woman--of obloquy and contempt. She sank on her knees before a little couch in the darkest corner of the room. "O Christ, have mercy on me!" That was her prayer--no more.

Julian followed her. He waited a little. Then his kind hand touched her; his friendly voice fell consolingly on her ear.

"Rise, poor wounded heart! Beautiful, purified soul, God's angels rejoice over you! Take your place among the noblest of God's creatures!"

He raised her as he spoke. All her heart went out to him. She caught his hand--she pressed it to her bosom; she pressed it to her lips-- then dropped it suddenly, and stood before him trembling like a frightened child.

"Forgive me!" was all she could say. "I was so lost and lonely--and you are so good to me!"

She tried to leave him. It was useless--her strength was gone; she caught at the head of the couch to support herself. He looked at her. The confession of his love was just rising to his lips--he looked again, and checked it. No, not at that moment; not when she was helpless and ashamed; not when her weakness might make her yield, only to regret it at a later time. The great heart which had spared her and felt for her from the first spared her and felt for her now.

He, too, left her--but not without a word at parting.

"Don't think of your future life just yet," he said, gently. "I have something to propose when rest and quiet have restored you." He opened the nearest door--the door of the dining-room--and went out.

The servants engaged in completing the decoration of the dinner-table noticed, when "Mr. Julian" entered the room, that his eyes were "brighter than ever." He looked (they remarked) like a man who "expected good news." They were inclined to suspect--though he was certainly rather young for it--that her ladyship's nephew was in a fair way of preferment in the Church.

Mercy seated herself on the couch.

There are limits, in the physical organization of man, to the action of pain. When suffering has reached a given point of intensity the nervous sensibility becomes incapable of feeling more. The rule of Nature, in this respect, applies not only to sufferers in the body, but to sufferers in the mind as well. Grief, rage, terror, have also their appointed limits. The moral sensibility, like the nervous sensibility, reaches its period of absolute exhaustion, and feels no more.

The capacity for suffering in Mercy had attained its term. Alone in the library, she could feel the physical relief of repose; she could vaguely recall Julian's parting words to her, and sadly wonder what they meant--she could do no more.

An interval passed; a brief interval of perfect rest.

She recovered herself sufficiently to be able to look at her watch and to estimate the lapse of time that might yet pass before Julian returned to her as he had promised. While her mind was still languidly following this train of thought she was disturbed by the ringing of a bell in the hall, used to summon the servant whose duties were connected with that part of the house. In leaving the library, Horace had gone out by the door which led into the hall, and had failed to close it. She plainly heard the bell--and a moment later (more plainly still) she heard Lady Janet's voice!

She started to her feet. Lady Janet's letter was still in the pocket of her apron--the letter which imperatively commanded her to abstain from making the very confession that had just passed her lips! It was near the dinner hour, and the library was the favorite place in which the mistress of the house and her guests assembled at that time. It was no matter of doubt; it was an absolute certainty that Lady Janet had only stopped in the hall on her way into the room.

The alternative for Mercy lay between instantly leaving the library by the dining-room door--or remaining where she was, at the risk of being sooner or later compelled to own that she had deliberately disobeyed her benefactress. Exhausted by what she had already suffered, she stood trembling and irresolute, incapable of deciding which alternative she should choose.

Lady Janet's voice, clear and resolute, penetrated into the room. She was reprimanding the servant who had answered the bell.

"Is it your duty in my house to look after the lamps?"

"Yes, my lady."

"And is it my duty to pay you your wages?"

"If you please, my lady."

"Why do I find the light in the hall dim, and the wick of that lamp smoking? I have not failed in my duty to You. Don't let me find you failing again in your duty to Me."

(Never had Lady Janet's voice sounded so sternly in Mercy's ear as it sounded now. If she spoke with that tone of severity to a servant who had neglected a lamp, what had her adopted daughter to expect when she discovered that her entreaties and her commands had been alike set at defiance?)

Having administered her reprimand, Lady Janet had not done with the servant yet. She had a question to put to him next.

"Where is Miss Roseberry?"

"In the library, my lady."

Mercy returned to the couch. She could stand no longer; she had not even resolution enough left to lift her eyes to the door.

Lady Janet came in more rapidly than usual. She advanced to the couch, and tapped Mercy playfully on the cheek with two of her fingers.

"You lazy child! Not dressed for dinner? Oh, fie, fie!"

Her tone was as playfully affectionate as the action which had accompanied her words. In speechless astonishment Mercy looked up at her.

Always remarkable for the taste and splendor of her dress, Lady Janet had on this occasion surpassed herself. There she stood revealed in her grandest velvet, her richest jewelry, her finest lace--with no one to entertain at the dinner-table but the ordinary members of the circle at Mablethorpe House. Noticing this as strange to begin with, Mercy further observed, for the first time in her experience, that Lady Janet's eyes avoided meeting hers. The old lady took her place companionably on the couch; she ridiculed her "lazy child's" plain dress, without an ornament of any sort on it, with her best grace; she affectionately put her arm round Mercy's waist, and rearranged with her own hand the disordered locks of Mercy's hair--but the instant Mercy herself looked at her, Lady Janet's eyes discovered something supremely interesting in the familiar objects that surrounded her on the library walls.

How were these changes to be interpreted? To what possible conclusion did they point?

Julian's profounder knowledge of human nature, if Julian had been present, might have found a clue to the mystery. _He_ might have surmised (incredible as it was) that Mercy's timidity before Lady Janet was fully reciprocated by Lady Janet's timidity before Mercy. It was even so. The woman whose immovable composure had conquered Grace Roseberry's utmost insolence in the hour of her triumph--the woman who, without once flinching, had faced every other consequence of her resolution to ignore Mercy's true position in the house--quailed for the first time when she found herself face to face with the very person for whom she had suffered and sacrificed so much. She had shrunk from the meeting with Mercy, as Mercy had shrunk from the meeting with _her_. The splendor of her dress meant simply that, when other excuses for delaying the meeting downstairs had all been exhausted, the excuse of a long, and elaborate toilet had been tried next. Even the moments occupied in reprimanding the servant had been moments seized on as the pretext for another delay. The hasty entrance into the room, the nervous assumption of playfulness in language and manner, the evasive and wandering eyes, were all referable to the same cause. In the presence of others, Lady Janet had successfully silenced the protest of her own inbred delicacy and inbred sense of honor. In the presence of Mercy, whom she loved with a mother's love--in the presence of Mercy, for whom she had stooped to deliberate concealment of the truth--all that was high and noble in the woman's nature rose in her and rebuked her. What will the daughter of my adoption, the child of my first and last experience of maternal love, think of me, now that I have made myself an accomplice in the fraud of which she is ashamed? How can I look her in the face, when I have not hesitated, out of selfish consideration for my own tranquillity, to forbid that frank avowal of the truth which her finer sense of duty had spontaneously bound her to make? Those were the torturing questions in Lady Janet's mind, while her arm was wound affectionately round Mercy's waist, while her fingers were busying themselves familiarly with the arrangement of Mercy's hair. Thence, and thence only, sprang the impulse which set her talking, with an uneasy affectation of frivolity, of any topic within the range of conversation, so long as it related to the future, and completely ignored the present and the past.

"The winter here is unendurable," Lady Janet began. "I have been thinking, Grace, about what we had better do next."

Mercy started. Lady Janet had called her "Grace." Lady Janet was still deliberately assuming to be innocent of the faintest suspicion of the truth.

"No," resumed her ladyship, affecting to misunderstand Mercy's movement, "you are not to go up now and dress. There is no time, and I am quite ready to excuse you. You are a foil to me, my dear. You have reached the perfection of shabbiness. Ah! I remember when I had my whims and fancies too, and when I looked well in anything I wore, just as you do. No more of that. As I was saying, I have been thinking and planning what we are to do. We really can't stay here. Cold one day, and hot the next--what a climate! As for society, what do we lose if we go away? There is no such thing as society now. Assemblies of well-dressed mobs meet at each other's houses, tear each other's clothes, tread on each other's toes. If you are particularly lucky, you sit on the staircase, you get a tepid ice, and you hear vapid talk in slang phrases all round you. There is modern society. If we had a good opera, it would be something to stay in London for. Look at the programme for the season on that table--promising as much as possible on paper, and performing as little as possible on the stage. The same works, sung by the same singers year after year, to the same stupid people--in short the dullest musical evenings in Europe. No! the more I think of it, the more plainly I perceive that there is but one sensible choice before us: we must go abroad. Set that pretty head to work; choose north or south, east or west; it's all the same to me. Where shall we go?"

Mercy looked at her quickly as she put the question.

Lady Janet, more quickly yet, looked away at the programme of the opera-house. Still the same melancholy false pretenses! still the same useless and cruel delay! Incapable of enduring the position now forced upon her, Mercy put her hand into the pocket of her apron, and drew from it Lady Janet's letter.

"Will your ladyship forgive me," she began, in faint, faltering tones, "if I venture on a painful subject? I hardly dare acknowledge--" In spite of her resolution to speak out plainly, the memory of past love and past kindness prevailed with her; the next words died away on her lips. She could only hold up the letter.

Lady Janet declined to see the letter. Lady Janet suddenly became absorbed in the arrangement of her bracelets.

"I know what you daren't acknowledge, you foolish child!" she exclaimed. "You daren't acknowledge that you are tired of this dull house. My dear! I am entirely of your opinion--I am weary of my own magnificence; I long to be living in one snug little room, with one servant to wait on me. I'll tell you what we will do. We will go to Paris, in the first place. My excellent Migliore, prince of couriers, shall be the only person in attendance. He shall take a lodging for us in one of the unfashionable quarters of Paris. We will rough it, Grace (to use the slang phrase), merely for a change. We will lead what they call a 'Bohemian life.' I know plenty of writers and painters and actors in Paris--the liveliest society in the world, my dear, until one gets tired of them. We will dine at the restaurant, and go to the play, and drive about in shabby little hired carriages. And when it begins to get monotonous (which it is only too sure to do!) we will spread our wings and fly to Italy, and cheat the winter in that way. There is a plan for you! Migliore is in town. I will send to him this evening, and we will start to-morrow."

Mercy made another effort.

"I entreat your ladyship to pardon me," she resumed. "I have something serious to say. I am afraid--"

"I understand. You are afraid of crossing the Channel, and you don't like to acknowledge it. Pooh! The passage barely lasts two hours; we will shut ourselves up in a private cabin. I will send at once--the courier may be engaged. Ring the bell."

"Lady Janet, I must submit to my hard lot. I cannot hope to associate myself again with any future plans of yours--"

"What! you are afraid of our 'Bohemian life' in Paris? Observe this, Grace! If there is one thing I hate more than another, it is 'an old head on young shoulders.' I say no more. Ring the bell."

"This cannot go on, Lady Janet! No words can say how unworthy I feel of your kindness, how ashamed I am--"

"Upon my honor, my dear, I agree with you. You ought to be ashamed, at your age, of making me get up to ring the bell."

Her obstinacy was immovable; she attempted to rise from the couch. But one choice was left to Mercy. She anticipated Lady Janet, and rang the bell.

The man-servant came in. He had his little letter-tray in his hand, with a card on it, and a sheet of paper beside the card, which looked like an open letter.

"You know where my courier lives when he is in London?" asked Lady Janet.

"Yes, my lady."

"Send one of the grooms to him on horseback; I am in a hurry. The courier is to come here without fail to-morrow morning--in time for the tidal train to Paris. You understand?"

"Yes, my lady."

"What have you got there? Anything for me?"

"For Miss Roseberry, my lady."

As he answered, the man handed the card and the open letter to Mercy.

"The lady is waiting in the morning-room, miss. She wished me to say she has time to spare, and she will wait for you if you are not ready yet."

Having delivered his message in those terms, he withdrew.

Mercy read the name on the card. The matron had arrived! She looked at the letter next. It appeared to be a printed circular, with some lines in pencil added on the empty page. Printed lines and written lines swam before her eyes. She felt, rather than saw, Lady Janet's attention steadily and suspiciously fixed on her. With the matron's arrival the foredoomed end of the flimsy false pretenses and the cruel delays had come.

"A friend of yours, my dear?"

"Yes, Lady Janet."

"Am I acquainted with her?"

"I think not, Lady Janet."

"You appear to be agitated. Does your visitor bring bad news? Is there anything that I can do for you?"

"You can add--immeasurably add, madam-- to all your past kindness, if you will only bear with me and forgive me."

"Bear with you and forgive you? I don't understand."

"I will try to explain. Whatever else you may think of me, Lady Janet, for God's sake don't think me ungrateful!"

Lady Janet held up her hand for silence.

"I dislike explanations," she said, sharply. "Nobody ought to know that better than you. Perhaps the lady's letter will explain for you. Why have you not looked at it yet?"

"I am in great trouble, madam, as you noticed just now--"

"Have you any objection to my knowing who your visitor is?"

"No, Lady Janet."

"Let me look at her card, then."

Mercy gave the matron's card to Lady Janet, as she had given the matron's telegram to Horace.

Lady Janet read the name on the card--considered--decided that it was a name quite unknown to her--and looked next at the address: "Western District Refuge, Milburn Road."

"A lady connected with a Refuge?" she said, speaking to herself; "and calling here by appointment--if I remember the servant's message? A strange time to choose, if she has come for a subscription!"

She paused. Her brow contracted; her face hardened. A word from her would now have brought the interview to its inevitable end, and she refused to speak the word. To the last moment she persisted in ignoring the truth! Placing the card on the couch at her side, she pointed with her long yellow-white forefinger to the printed letter lying side by side with her own letter on Mercy's lap.

"Do you mean to read it, or not?" she asked.

Mercy lifted her eyes, fast filling with tears, to Lady Janet's face.

"May I beg that your ladyship will read it for me?" she said--and placed the matron's letter in Lady Janet's hand.

It was a printed circular announcing a new development in the charitable work of the Refuge. Subscribers were informed that it had been decided to extend the shelter and the training of the institution (thus far devoted to fallen women alone) so as to include destitute and helpless children found wandering in the streets. The question of the number of children to be thus rescued and protected was left dependent, as a matter of course, on the bounty of the friends of the Refuge, the cost of the maintenance of each child being stated at the lowest possible rate. A list of influential persons who had increased their subscriptions so as to cover the cost, and a brief statement of the progress already made with the new work, completed the appeal, and brought the circular to its end.

The lines traced in pencil (in the matron's handwriting) followed on the blank page.

"Your letter tells me, my dear, that you would like--remembering your own childhood--to be employed when you return among us in saving other poor children left helpless on the world. Our circular will inform you that I am able to meet your wishes. My first errand this evening in your neighborhood was to take charge of a poor child--a little girl--who stands sadly in need of our care. I have ventured to bring her with me, thinking she might help to reconcile you to the coming change in your life. You will find us both waiting to go back with you to the old home. I write this instead of saying it, hearing from the servant that you are not alone, and being unwilling to intrude myself, as a stranger, on the lady of the house."

Lady Janet read the penciled lines, as she had read the printed sentences, aloud. Without a word of comment she laid the letter where she had laid the card; and, rising from her seat, stood for a moment in stern silence, looking at Mercy. The sudden change in her which the letter had produced--quietly as it had taken place--was terrible to see. On the frowning brow, in the flashing eyes, on the hardened lips, outraged love and outraged pride looked down on the lost woman, and said, as if in words, You have roused us at last.

"If that letter means anything," she said, "it means you are about to leave my house. There can be but one reason for your taking such a step as that."

"It is the only atonement I can make, madam"

"I see another letter on your lap. Is it my letter?"

"Yes."

"Have you read it?"

"I have read it."

"Have you seen Horace Holmcroft?"

"Yes."

"Have you told Horace Holmcroft--"

"Oh, Lady Janet--"

"Don't interrupt me. Have you told Horace Holmcroft what my letter positively forbade you to communicate, either to him or to any living creature? I want no protestations and excuses. Answer me instantly, and answer in one word--Yes, or No."

Not even that haughty language, not even those pitiless tones, could extinguish in Mercy's heart the sacred memories of past kindness and past love. She fell on her knees--her outstretched hands touched Lady Janet's dress. Lady Janet sharply drew her dress away, and sternly repeated her last words.

"Yes? or No?"

"Yes."

She had owned it at last! To this end Lady Janet had submitted to Grace Roseberry; had offended Horace Holmcroft; had stooped, for the first time in her life, to concealments and compromises that degraded her. After all that she had sacrificed and suffered, there Mercy knelt at her feet, self-convicted of violating her commands, trampling on her feelings, deserting her house! And who was the woman who had done this? The same woman who had perpetrated the fraud, and who had persisted in the fraud until her benefactress had descended to become her accomplice. Then, and then only, she had suddenly discovered that it was her sacred duty to tell the truth!

In proud silence the great lady met the blow that had fallen on her. In proud silence she turned her back on her adopted daughter and walked to the door.

Mercy made her last appeal to the kind friend whom she had offended--to the second mother whom she had loved.

"Lady Janet! Lady Janet! Don't leave me without a word. Oh, madam, try to feel for me a little! I am returning to a life of humiliation--the shadow of my old disgrace is falling on me once more. We shall never meet again. Even though I have not deserved it, let my repentance plead with you! Say you forgive me!"

Lady Janet turned round on the threshold of the door.

"I never forgive ingratitude," she said. "Go back to the Refuge."

The door opened and closed on her. Mercy was alone again in the room.

Unforgiven by Horace, unforgiven by Lady Janet! She put her hands to her burning head and tried to think. Oh, for the cool air of the night! Oh, for the friendly shelter of the Refuge! She could feel those sad longings in her: it was impossible to think.

She rang the bell--and shrank back the instant she had done it. Had she any right to take that liberty? She ought to have thought of it before she rang. Habit--all habit. How many hundreds of times she had rung the bell at Mablethorpe House!

The servant came in. She amazed the man-- she spoke to him so timidly; she even apologized for troubling him!

"I am sorry to disturb you. Will you be so kind as to say to the lady that I am ready for her?"

"Wait to give that message," said a voice behind them, "until you hear the bell rung again."

Mercy looked round in amazement. Julian had returned to the library by the dining-room door.