SUMMER AND WINTER.

"Ah, glorious summer days, swift gliding by,
Will ye not linger?" thus my earnest cry.

In vain, in vain! Too soon those golden hours
Are past away, and sullen winter lowers.

"No matter," said I—"Summer will return
Each moment then to some sweet use I'll turn;

"All day I'll wander under spreading trees,
And draw new life from every perfumed breeze."

Alas, when all the air was rich with hay,
Weary, yet restless, on my couch I lay.

"Give me but patience, Father!" this my cry,
"While these long summer days drag slowly by."

And the dear Father, listening from above,
Sent peace and calm, and winged the hours with love.

COMFORT IN AFFLICTION.

When his partners declared that the firm must suspend,
Since their money and credit were both at an end,
Poor Jinks was depressed for an hour and a half,
And then brightened up, with a singular laugh.

"There's a good here" quoth he, "that I never foresaw:
Many years I've supported my mother-in-law;
But now!—you'll excuse my hilarious shout—
At last the old lady will have to turn out!"

—[O. C. K.—Graphic.

The New Magdalen.

BY WILKIE COLLINS.

[The New Magdalen was commenced in The Mail of October 4th. Any or all the back numbers can be had on application at the office, or will be sent postage paid on receipt of five cents each copy.]

CHAPTER XV.

A WOMAN'S REMORSE.

Having warmed his feet to his own entire satisfaction, Horace turned round from the fire place, and discovered that he and Lady Janet were alone.

'Can I see Grace?' he asked.

The easy tone in which he put the question—a tone, as it were, of proprietorship in 'Grace'—jarred on Lady Janet at the moment. For the first time in her life she found herself comparing Horace with Julian—to Horace's disadvantage. He was rich; he was a gentleman of ancient lineage; he bore an unblemished character. But who had the strong brain? who had the great heart? Which was the man of the two?

'Nobody can see her,' answered Lady Janet. 'Not even you!'

The tone of the reply was sharp, with a dash of irony in it. But where is the modern young man, possessed of health and an independent income, who is capable of understanding that irony can be presumptuous enough to address itself to *him?* Horace (with perfect politeness) declined to consider himself answered.

'Does your ladyship mean that Miss Roseberry is in bed?' he asked.

'I mean that Miss Roseberry is in her room. I mean that I have twice tried to persuade Miss Roseberry to dress and come down stairs, and tried in vain. I mean that what Miss Roseberry refuses to do for Me, she is not likely to do for You—'

How many more meanings of her own Lady Janet might have gone on enumerating, it is not easy to calculate. At her third sentence a sound in the library caught her ear through the incompletely closed door, and suspended the next words on her lips. Horace heard it also. It was the rustling sound (traveling nearer and nearer over the library carpet) of a silken dress.

(In the interval while a coming event remains in a state of uncertainty, what is it the inevitable tendency of every Englishman under thirty to do? His inevitable tendency is to ask somebody to bet on the event. He can no more resist it than he can resist lifting his stick or his umbrella, in the absence of a gun, and pretending to shoot if a bird flies by him while he is out for a walk.)

'What will your ladyship bet that this is not Grace?' cried Horace.

Her ladyship took no notice of the proposal; her attention remained fixed on the library door. The rustling sound stopped for a moment. The door was softly pushed open. The false Grace Roseberry entered the room.

Horace advanced to meet her, opened his lips to speak, and stopped—struck dumb by the change in his affianced wife since he had seen her last. Some terrible oppression seemed to have crushed her. It was as if she had actually shrunk in height as well as in substance. She walked more slowly than usual; she spoke more rarely than usual, and in a lower tone. To those who had seen her before the fatal visit of the stranger from Mannheim, it was the wreck of the woman that now appeared, instead of the woman herself. And yet there was the old charm still surviving through it all; the grandeur of the head and eyes, the delicate symmetry of the features, the unsought grace of every movement—in a word, the unconquerable beauty which suffering can not destroy which time itself is powerless to wear out.

Lady Janet advanced, and took her with hearty kindness by both hands.

'My dear child, welcome among us again! You have come down stairs to please me?'

She bent her head in silent acknowledgement that it was so. Lady Janet pointed to Horace: 'Here is somebody who has been longing to see you, Grace.'

She never looked up; she stood submissive, her eyes fixed on a little basket of colored wools which hung on her arm. 'Thank you, Lady Janet,' she said, faintly. 'Thank you, Horace.'

Horace placed her arm in his, and led her to the sofa. She shivered as she took her seat, and looked round. It was the first time she had seen the dining-room since the day when she had found herself face to face with the dead-alive.

'Why do you come here, my love?' asked Lady Janet. 'The drawing-room would have been warmer and a pleasanter place for you.'

'I saw a carriage at the front-door. I was afraid of meeting with visitors in the drawing-room.'

As she made that reply, the servant came in, and announced the visitors' names. Lady Janet sighed wearily. 'I must go and get rid of them,' she said, resigning herself to circumstances. 'What will *you* do, Grace?'

'I will stay here, if you please.'

'I will keep her company,' added Horace.

Lady Janet hesitated. She had promised to see her nephew in the dining-room on his return to the house—and to see him alone. Would there be time enough to get rid of the visitors and to establish her adopted daughter in the empty drawing-room before Julian appeared? It was ten minutes' walk to the lodge, and he had to make the gate-keeper understand his instructions. Lady Janet decided that she had time enough at her disposal. She nodded kindly to Mercy, and left her alone with her lover.

Horace seated himself in the vacant place on the sofa. So far as it was in his nature to devote himself to any one he was devoted to Mercy. 'I am grieved to see how you have suffered,' he said, with honest distress in his face as he looked at her. 'Try to forget what has happened.'

'I am trying to forget. Do *you* think of it much?'

'My darling, it is too contemptible to be thought of.'

She placed her work basket on her lap. Her wasted fingers began absently sorting the wools inside.

'Have you seen Mr. Julian Gray?' she asked, suddenly.

'Yes.'

'What does *he* say about it?' She looked at Horace for the first time, steadily scrutinizing his face. Horace took refuge in prevarication.

'I really haven't asked for Julian's opinion,' he said.

She looked down again, with a sigh, at the basket on her lap—considered a little—and tried him once more.

'Why has Mr. Julian Gray not been here for a whole week?' she went on. 'The servants say he has been abroad. Is that true?'

It was useless to deny it. Horace admitted that the servants were right.

Her fingers suddenly stopped at their restless work among the wools; her breath quickened perceptibly. What had Julian Gray been doing abroad? Had he been making inquiries? Did he alone, of all the people who saw that terrible meeting, suspect her? Yes! His was the finer intelligence; his was a clergyman's (a London clergyman's) experience of frauds and deceptions, and of the women who were guilty of them. Not a doubt of it now! Julian suspected her.

'When does he come back?' she asked, in tones so low that Horace could barely hear her.

'He has come back already. He returned last night.'

A faint shade of color stole slowly over the pallor of her face. She suddenly put her basket away, and clasped her hands together to quiet the trembling of them, before she asked her next question.

'Where is—' She paused to steady her voice. 'Where is the person,' she resumed, 'who came here and frightened me?'

Horace hastened to reassure her. 'The person will not come again,' he said. 'Don't talk of her! Don't think of her!'

She shook her head. 'There is something I want to know,' she persisted. 'How did Mr. Julian Gray become acquainted with her?'

This was easily answered. Horace mentioned the consul at Mannheim, and the letter of introduction. She listened eagerly, and said her next words in a louder, firmer tone.

'She was quite a stranger, then, to Mr. Julian Gray—before that?'

'Quite a stranger,' Horace replied. 'No more questions—not another word about her, Grace! I forbid the subject. Come, my own love!' he said, taking her hand and bending over her tenderly, 'rally your spirits! We are young—we love each other—now is our time to be happy!'

Her hand turned suddenly cold, and trembled in his. Her head sank with a helpless weariness on her breast. Horace rose in alarm.

'You are cold—you are faint,' he said. 'Let me get you a glass of wine!—let me mend the fire!'

The decanters were still on the luncheon-table. Horace insisted on her drinking some port-wine. She barely took half the contents of the wine glass. Even that little told on her sensitive organization; it roused her sinking energies of body and mind. After watching her anxiously, without attracting her notice, Horace left her again to attend to the fire at the other end of the room. Her eyes followed him slowly with a hard and tearless despair. 'Rally your spirits,' she repeated to herself in a whisper. 'My spirits! O God!' She looked round her at the luxury and beauty of the room, as those look who take their leave of familiar scenes. The moment after, her eyes sank, and rested on the rich dress that she wore—a gift from Lady Janet. She thought of the past; she thought of the future. Was the time near when she would be back again in the Refuge, or back again in the streets?—she who had been Lady Janet's adopted daughter, and Horace Holmcroft's betrothed wife! A sudden frenzy of recklessness seized on her as she thought of the coming end. Horace was right; Why not rally her spirits? Why not make the most of her time? The last hours of her life in that house were at hand. Why not enjoy her stolen position while she could? 'Adventuress!' whispered the mocking spirit within her, 'be true to your character. Away with your remorse! Remorse is the luxury of an honest woman.' She caught up her basket of wools, inspired by a new idea. 'Ring the bell!' she cried out to Horace at the fire place.

He looked round in wonder. The sound of her voice was so completely altered that he almost fancied there must have been another woman in the room.

'Ring the bell!' she repeated. 'I have left my work up stairs. If you want me to be in good spirits, I must have my work.'

Still looking at her, Horace put his hand mechanically to the bell and rang. One of the men servants came in.

'Go up stairs and ask my maid for my work,' she said, sharply. Even the man was taken by surprise: it was her habit to speak to the servants with a gentleness and consideration which had long since won all their hearts. 'Do you hear me?' she asked, impatiently. The servant bowed, and went out on his errand. She turned to Horace with flashing eyes and fevered cheeks.

'What a comfort it is,' she said, 'to belong to the upper class! A poor woman has no maid to dress her, and no footman to send up stairs. Is life worth having, Horace, on less than five thousand a year?'

The servant returned with a strip of embroidery. She took it with an insolent grace, and told him to bring her a footstool. The man obeyed. She tossed the embroidery away from her on the sofa. 'On second thoughts, I don't care about my work,' she said. 'Take it up stairs again.' The perfectly trained servant, marveling privately, obeyed once more. Horace, in silent astonishment, advanced to the sofa to observe her more nearly. 'How grave you look!' she exclaimed, with an air of flippant unconcern. 'You don't approve of my sitting idle, perhaps? Anything to please you! I haven't got to go up and down stairs. Ring the bell again.'

'My dear Grace,' Horace remonstrated, gravely, 'you are quite mistaken. I never even thought of your work.'

'Never mind; it's inconsistent to send for my work, and then send it away again. Ring the bell.'

Horace looked at her without moving. 'Grace!' he said, 'what has come to you?'

'How should I know?' she retorted, carelessly. 'Didn't you tell me to rally your spirits? Will you ring the bell, or must I?'

Horace submitted. He frowned as he walked back to the bell. He was one of the many people who instinctively resent any thing that is new to them. This strange outbreak was quite new to him. For the first time in his life he felt sympathy for a servant, when the much-enduring man appeared once more.

'Bring my work back: I have changed my mind.' With that brief explanation she reclined luxuriously on the soft sofa-cushions, swinging one of her balls of wool to and fro above her head, and looking at it lazily as she lay back. 'I have a remark to make, Horace,' she went on, when the door had closed on her messenger. 'It is only people in our rank of life who get good servants. Did you notice? Nothing upsets that man's temper. A servant in a poor family would have been impudent, a maid-of-all-work would have wondered when I was going to know my own mind.' The man returned with the embroidery. This time she received him graciously; she dismissed him with her thanks. 'Have you seen your mother lately, Horace?' she asked, suddenly sitting up and busying herself with her work.

'I saw her yesterday,' Horace answered.

'She understands, I hope, that I am not well enough to call on her? She is not offended with me?'

Horace recovered his serenity. The deference to his mother implied in Mercy's questions gently flattered his self-esteem. He resumed his place on the sofa.

'Offended with you!' he answered, smiling. 'My dear Grace, she sends you her love. And more than that, she has a wedding present for you.'

Mercy became absorbed in her work; she stooped close over the embroidery—so close that Horace could not see her face. 'Do you know what the present is?' she asked, in lowered tones, speaking absently.

'No. I only know it is waiting for you. Shall I go and get it to-day?'

She neither accepted nor refused the proposal—she went on with her work more industriously than ever.

'There is plenty of time,' Horace persisted. 'I can go to dinner.'

Still she took no notice: still she never looked up. 'Your mother is very kind to me,' she said, abruptly. 'I was afraid, at one time, that she would think me hardly good enough to be your wife.'

Horace laughed indulgently; his self-esteem was more gently flattered than ever.

'Absurd!' he exclaimed. 'My darling, you are connected with Lady Janet Roy. Your family is almost as good as ours.'

'Almost?' she repeated. 'Only almost?'

The momentary levity of expression vanished from Horace's face. The family question was far too serious a question to be lightly treated. A becoming shadow of solemnity stole over his manner. He looked as if it was Sunday, and he was just stepping into church.

'In OUR family,' he said, 'we trace back—by my father, to the Saxons; by my mother, to the Normans. Lady Janet's family is an old family—on her side only.'

Mercy dropped her embroidery, and looked Horace full in the face. She, too, attached no common importance to what she had next to say.

'If I had not been connected with Lady Janet,' she began, 'would you ever have thought of marrying me?'

'My love! what is the use of asking? You *are* connected with Lady Janet.'

She refused to let him escape answering her in that way.

'Suppose I had not been connected with Lady Janet,' she persisted. 'Suppose I had only been a good girl, with nothing but my own merits to speak for me. What would your mother have said then?'

Horace still parried the question—only to have the point of it pressed home on him once more.

'Why do you ask?' he said.

'I ask to be answered,' she rejoined. 'Would your mother have liked you to marry a poor girl, of no family—with nothing but her own virtues to speak for her?'

Horace was fairly pressed back to the wall.

'If you must know,' he replied, 'my mother would have refused to sanction such a marriage as that.'

'No matter how good the girl might have been?'

There was something defiant—almost threatening—in her tone. Horace was annoyed—and he showed it when he spoke.

'My mother would have respected the girl, without ceasing to respect herself,' he said. 'My mother would have remembered what was due to the family name.'

'And she would have said, No?'

'She would have said, No.'

'Ah!'

There was an undertone of angry contempt in the exclamation, which made Horace start. 'What is the matter?' he asked.

'Nothing,' she answered, and took up her embroidery again. There he sat at her side, anxiously looking at her—his hope in the future centered in his marriage! In a week more, if she chose, she might enter that ancient family, of which he had spoken so proudly, as his wife. 'Oh!' she thought, 'if I didn't love him! if I had only his merciless mother to think of!'

Uneasily conscious of some estrangement between them, Horace spoke again. 'Surely I have not offended you?' he said.

She turned toward him once more. The work dropped unheeded on her lap. Her grand eyes softened into tenderness. A smile trembled sadly on her delicate lips. She laid one hand caressingly on his shoulder. All the beauty of her voice lent its charm to the next words she spoke to him. The woman's heart hungered in its misery for the comfort that could only come from his lips.

'*You* would have loved me, Horace—without stopping to think of the family name?'

The family name again! How strangely she persisted in coming back to that! Horace looked at her without answering, trying vainly to fathom what was passing in her mind.

She took his hand, and wrung it hard—as if she would wring the answer out of him in that way.

'You would have loved me?' she repeated.

The double spell of her voice and her touch was on him. He answered, warmly, 'Under any circumstances! under any name!'

She put one arm around his neck, and fixed her eyes on his. 'Is that true?'

'True as the heaven above us!'

She drank in those few commonplace words with a greedy delight. She forced him to repeat them in a new form.

'No matter who I might have been? For myself alone?'

'For yourself alone.'

She threw both arms around him, and laid her head passionately on his breast. 'I love you! I love you!! I love you!!!' Her voice rose with hysterical vehemence at each repetition of the words—then suddenly sank to a low, hoarse cry of rage and despair. The sense of her true position toward him revealed itself in all its horror as the confession of her love escaped her lips. Her arms dropped from him; she flung herself back on the sofa-cushions, hiding her face in her hands. 'Oh, leave me!' she moaned, faintly. 'Go! go!'

Horace tried to wind his arm around her, and raise her. She started to her feet, and waved him back from her with a wild action of her hands, as if she was afraid of him. 'The wedding present!' she cried, seizing the first pretext that occurred to her. 'You offered to bring me your mother's present. I am dying to see what it is. Go and get it!'

Horace tried to compose her. He might as well have tried to compose the winds and the sea.

'Go!' she repeated, pressing one clinched hand on her bosom. 'I am not well. Talking excites me—I am hysterical; I shall be better alone. Get me the present. Go!'

'Shall I send Lady Janet? Shall I ring for your maid?'

'Send for nobody! ring for nobody! If you love me—leave me here by myself! leave me instantly!'

'I shall see you when I come back?'

'Yes! yes!'

There was no alternative but to obey her. Unwillingly and forebodingly, Horace left the room.

She drew a deep breath of relief, and dropped into the nearest chair. If Horace had stayed a moment longer—she felt it, she knew it—her head would have given way; she would have burst out before him with the terrible truth. 'Oh!' she thought, pressing her cold hands on her burning eyes, 'if I could only cry, now there is nobody to see me!'

The room was empty; she had every reason for concluding she was alone. And yet at that very moment there were ears that listened—there were eyes waiting to see her.

Little by little the door behind her which faced the library and led into the billiard room was opened noiselessly from without, by an inch at a time. As the opening was enlarged a hand in a black glove, an arm in a black sleeve, appeared, guiding the movement of the door. An interval of a moment passed, and the worn white face of Grace Roseberry showed itself stealthily, looking into the dining-room.

Her eyes brightened with vindictive pleasure as they discovered Mercy sitting alone at the further end of the room. Inch by inch she opened the door more widely, took one step forward, and checked herself. A sound, just audible at the far end of the conservatory, had caught her ear.

She listened—satisfied herself that she was not mistaken—and drawing back with a frown of displeasure, softly closed the door again, so as to hide herself from view. The sound that had disturbed her was the distant murmur of men's voices (apparently two in number) talking together in lowered tones, at the garden entrance to the conservatory.

Who were the men? and what would they do next? They might do one of two things: they might enter the drawing-room, or they might withdraw again by way of the garden. Kneeling behind the door, with her ear at the key-hole, Grace Roseberry waited the event.

CHAPTER XVI.

THEY MEET AGAIN.

Absorbed in herself, Mercy failed to notice the opening door or to hear the murmur of voices in the conservatory.

The one terrible necessity which had been present to her mind at intervals for a week past was confronting her at that moment. She owed to Grace Roseberry the tardy justice of owning the truth. The longer her confession was delayed, the more cruelly she was injuring the woman whom she had robbed of her identity—the friendless woman who had neither witnesses nor papers to produce, who was powerless to right her own wrongs. Keenly as she felt this, Mercy failed, nevertheless, to conquer the horror that shook her when she thought of the impending avowal. Day followed day, and still she shrank from the unendurable ordeal of confession—as she was shrinking from it now.

Was it fear for herself that closed her lips?

She trembled—as any human being in her place must have trembled—at the bare idea of finding herself thrown back again on the world, which had no place in it and no hope in it for *her*. But she could have overcome that terror—she could have resigned herself to that doom.

No! it was not the fear of the confession itself, or the fear of the consequences which must follow it, that still held her silent. The horror that daunted her was the horror of owning to Horace and to Lady Janet that she had cheated them out of their love.

Every day Lady Janet was kinder and kinder. Every day Horace was fonder and fonder of her. How could she confess to Lady Janet? how could she own to Horace that she had imposed upon him? 'I can't do it. They are so good to me—I can't do it!' In that hopeless way it had ended during the seven days that had gone by. In that hopeless way it ended again now.

The murmur of the two voices at the further end of the conservatory ceased. The billiard-room door opened again slowly, by an inch at a time.

Mercy still kept her place, unconscious of the events that were passing around her. Sinking under the hard stress laid upon it, her mind had drifted little by little into a new train of thought. For the first time she found the courage to question the future in a new way. Supposing her confession to have been made, or supposing the woman whom she had personated to have discovered the means of exposing the fraud, what advantage, she now asked herself, would Miss Grace Roseberry derive from Mercy Merrick's disgrace?

Could Lady Janet transfer to the woman who was really her relative by marriage the affection which she had given to the woman who had pretended to be her relative? No! All the right in the world would not put the true Grace into the false Grace's vacant place. The qualities by which Mercy had won Lady Janet's love were the qualities which were Mercy's own. Lady Janet could do rigid justice—but hers was not the heart to give itself to a stranger (and to give itself unreservedly) a second time. Grace Roseberry would be formally acknowledged—and there it would end.

Was there hope in this new view?

Yes! There was the false hope of making the inevitable atonement by some other means than by the confession of the fraud.

What had Grace Roseberry actually lost by the wrong done to her? She had lost the salary of Lady Janet's "companion and reader." Say that she wanted money, Mercy had her savings from the generous allowance made to her by Lady Janet; Mercy could offer money. Or say that she wanted employment, Mercy's interest with Lady Janet could offer employment, could offer any thing Grace might ask, if she would only come to terms.

Invigorated by the new hope, Mercy rose excitedly, weary of inaction in the empty room. She, who but a few minutes since had shuddered at the thought of their meeting again, was now eager to devise a means of finding her way privately to an interview with Grace. It should be done without loss of time—on that very day, if possible; by the next day at the latest. She looked round her mechanically, pondering how to reach the end in view. Her eyes rested by chance on the door of the billiard room.

Was it fancy? or did she really see the door first open a little, then suddenly and softly close again?

Was it fancy? or did she really hear, at the same moment, a sound behind her as of persons speaking in the conservatory?

She paused; and looking back in that direction, listened intently. The sound—if she had really heard it—was no longer audible. She advanced toward the billiard-room, to set her first doubt at rest. She stretched out her hand to open the door, when the voices (recognizable now as the voices of two men) caught her ear once more.

This time she was able to distinguish the words that were spoken.

'Any further orders, Sir?' inquired one of the men.

'Nothing more,' replied the other.

Mercy started, and faintly flushed, as the second voice answered the first. She stood irresolute next to the billiard-room, hesitating what to do next.

After an interval the second voice made itself heard again, advancing nearer to the dining-room: 'Are you there, aunt?' it asked cautiously. There was a moment's pause, then the voice spoke for the third time, sounding louder and nearer 'Are you there?' it reiterated; 'I have something to tell you.' Mercy summoned her resolution, and answered, 'Lady Janet is not here.' She turned as she spoke toward the conservatory door, and confronted on the threshold Julian Gray.

They looked at one another without exchanging a word on either side. The situation—for widely different reasons—was equally embarrassing to both of them.

There—as Julian saw *her*—was the woman forbidden to him, the woman whom he loved.

There—as Mercy saw *him*—was the man whom she dreaded, the man whose actions (as she interpreted him) proved that he suspected her.

On the surface of it, the incidents which had marked their first meeting were now exactly repeated, with the one difference that the impulse to withdraw this time appeared to be on the man's side and not on the woman's. It was Mercy who spoke first.

'Did you expect to find Lady Janet here?' she asked, constrainedly.

He answered, on his part, more constrainedly still.

'It doesn't matter,' he said. 'Another time will do.'

He drew back as he made the reply. She advanced desperately, with the deliberate intention of detaining him by speaking to him.

The attempt which he had made to withdraw, the constraint in his manner when he had answered, had instantly confirmed her in the false conviction that he, and he alone, had guessed the truth! If she was right—if he had secretly made discoveries abroad which placed her entirely at his mercy—the attempt to induce Grace to consent to a compromise with her would be manifestly useless. Her first and foremost interest now was to find out how she really stood in the estimation of Julian Gray. In a terror of suspense, that turned her cold from head to foot, she stopped him on his way out, and spoke to him with the piteous counterfeit of a smile.

'Lady Janet is receiving some visitors,' she said. 'If you will wait here, she will be back directly.'

The effort of hiding her agitation from him had brought a passing color to her cheeks. Worn and wasted as she was, the spell of her beauty was strong enough to hold him against his own will. All he had to tell Lady Janet was that he had met one of the gardeners in the conservatory, and had cautioned him as well as the lodge-keeper. It would have been easy to write this, and to send the note to his aunt on quitting the house. For the sake of his own peace of mind, for the sake of his duty to Horace, he was doubly bound to make the first polite excuse that occurred to him, and to leave her as he had found her, alone in the room. He made the attempt, and hesitated. Despairing himself for doing it, he allowed himself to look at her. Their eyes met. Julian stepped into the dining-room.

'If I am not in the way,' he said, confusedly, 'I will wait, as you kindly propose.'

She noticed his embarrassment; she saw that he was strongly restraining himself from looking at her again. Her own eyes dropped to the ground as she made the discovery. Her speech failed her; her heart throbbed faster and faster.

'If I look at him again' (was the thought in *her* mind) 'I shall fall at his feet and tell him all that I have done!'

'If I look at her again' (was the thought in *his* mind) 'I shall fall at her feet and tell her that I am in love with her!'

With downcast eyes he placed a chair for her. With downcast eyes she bowed to him and took it. A dead silence followed. Never was human misunderstanding more intricately complete than the misunderstanding which had now established itself between those two.

Mercy's work-basket was near her. She took it, and gained time for composing herself by pretending to arrange the colored wools. He stood behind her chair, looking at the graceful turn of her head, looking at the rich masses of her hair. He reviled himself as the weakest of men, as the falsest of friends, for remaining near her—and yet he remained.

The silence continued. The billiard-room door opened again noiselessly. The face of the listening woman appeared stealthily behind it.

At the same moment Mercy roused herself and spoke: "Won't you sit down?' she said, softly, still not looking round at him, still busy with her basket of wools.

He turned to get a chair—turned so quickly that he saw the billiard-room door move, as Grace Roseberry closed it again.

'Is there any one in that room?' he asked, addressing Mercy.

'I don't know,' she answered. 'I thought I saw the door open and shut again a little while ago.'

He advanced at once to look into the room. As he did so Mercy dropped one of her balls of wool. He stopped to pick it up for her—then threw open the door and looked into the billiard-room. It was empty.

Had some person been listening, and had that person retreated in time to escape discovery? The open door of the smoking-room showed that room also to be empty. A third door was open—the door of the side-hall, leading into the grounds. Julian closed and locked it, and returned to the dining-room.

'I can only suppose,' he said to Mercy, 'that the billiard-room door was not properly shut, and that the draught of air from the hall must have moved it.'

She accepted the explanation in silence. He was, to all appearances, not quite satisfied with it himself. For a moment or so he looked about him uneasily. Then the old fascination fastened its hold on him again. Once more he looked at the graceful turn of her head, at the rich masses of her hair. The courage to put the critical question to him, now that she had lured him into remaining in the room, was still a courage that failed her. She remained as busy as ever with her work—too busy to look at him; too busy to speak to him. The silence became unendurable. He broke it by making a commonplace inquiry after her health.

'I am well enough to be ashamed of the anxiety I have caused and the trouble I have given,' she answered. 'To-day I have got down stairs for the first time. I am trying to do a little work.' She looked into the basket. The various specimens of wool in it were partly in balls and partly in loose skeins. The skeins were mixed and tangled. 'Here is sad confusion!' she exclaimed, timidly, with a faint smile. 'How am I to set it right again?'

'Let me help you,' said Julian.

'You?'

'Why not?' he asked, with momentary return of the quaint humor which she remembered so well. 'You forget that I am a curate. Curates are privileged to make themselves useful to young ladies. Let me try.'

He took a stool at her feet, and set himself to unravel one of the tangled skeins. In a minute the wool was stretched on his hands, and the loose end was ready for Mercy to wind. There was something in the trivial action, and in the homely attention it implied, which in some degree quieted her fear of him. She began to roll the wool off his hands into a ball. Thus occupied, she said the daring words which were to lead him little by little into betraying his suspicions, if he did indeed suspect the truth.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE GUARDIAN ANGEL.

'You were here when I fainted, were you not?' Mercy began. 'You must think me a sad coward, even for a woman.'

He shook his head. 'I am far from thinking that,' he replied. 'No courage could have sustained the shock which fell on you. I don't wonder that you fainted. I don't wonder that you have been ill.'

She paused in rolling up the ball of wool. What did those words of unexpected sympathy mean? Was he laying a trap for her? Urged by that serious doubt, she questioned him more boldly.

'Horace tells me you have been abroad,' she said. 'Did you enjoy your holiday?'

'It was no holiday. I went abroad because I thought it right to make certain inquiries—' He stopped there, unwilling to return to a subject that was painful to her.

Her voice sank, her fingers trembled round the ball of wool; but she managed to go on.

'Did you arrive at any results?' she asked.

'At no results worth mentioning.'

The caution of that reply renewed her worst suspicion of him. In sheer despair, she spoke out plainly.

'I want to know your opinion—' she began.

'Gently!' said Julian. 'You are entangling the wool again.'

'I want to know your opinion of the person who so terribly frightened me. Do you think her—'

'Do I think her—what?'

'Do you think her an adventuress?'

(As she said those words the branches of a shrub in the conservatory were noiselessly parted by a hand in a black glove. The face of Grace Roseberry appeared dimly behind the leaves. Undiscovered, she had escaped from the billiard-room, and had stolen her way into the conservatory as the safer hiding place of the two. Behind the shrub she could see as well as listen. Behind the shrub she waited as patiently as ever.)

'I take a more merciful view,' Julian answered. 'I believe she is acting under a delusion. I don't blame her; I pity her.'

'You pity her?' As Mercy repeated the words, she tore off Julian's hands the last few lengths of wool left, and threw the imperfectly wound skein back into the basket. 'Does that mean,' she resumed, abruptly, 'that you believe her?'

Julian rose from his seat, and looked at Mercy in astonishment.

'Good heavens, Miss Roseberry! what put such an idea as that into your head?'

'I am little better than a stranger to you,' she rejoined, with an effort to assume a jesting tone. 'You met that person before you met with me. It is not so very far from pitying her to believing her. How could I feel sure that you might not suspect me?'

'Suspect *you!*' he exclaimed. 'You don't know how you distress, how you shock me. Suspect *you!* The bare idea of it never entered my mind. The man doesn't live who trusts you more implicitly, who believes in you more devotedly than I do.'

His eyes, his voice, his manner, all told her that those words came from the heart. She contrasted his generous confidence in her (the confidence of which she was unworthy) with her ungracious distrust of him. Not only had she wronged Grace Roseberry—she had wronged Julian Gray. Could she deceive *him* as she had deceived the others? Could she meanly accept that implicit trust, that devoted belief? Never had she felt the base submissions which her own imposture condemned her to undergo with a loathing of them so overwhelming as the loathing that she felt now. In horror of herself, she turned her head aside, in silence, and shrank from meeting his eye. He noticed the movement, placing his own interpretation on it. Advancing closer he asked anxiously if he had offended her.

'You don't know how your confidence touches me,' she said, without looking up. 'You little think how keenly I feel your kindness.'

She checked herself abruptly. Her fine tact warned her that she was speaking too warmly—that the expression of her gratitude might strike him as be-