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## Chapter 13 - The Man's Decision

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MY first impulse was the reckless impulse to follow Eustace--openly through the streets.

The Major and Benjamin both opposed this hasty resolution on my part. They appealed to my own sense of self-respect, without (so far as I remember it) producing the slightest effect on my mind. They were more successful when they entreated me next to be patient for my husband's sake. In mercy to Eustace, they begged me to wait half an hour. If he failed to return in that time, they pledged themselves to accompany me in search of him to the hotel.

In mercy to Eustace I consented to wait. What I suffered under the forced necessity for remaining passive at that crisis in my life no words of mine can tell. It will be better if I go on with my narrative.

Benjamin was the first to ask me what had passed between my husband and myself.

"You may speak freely, my dear," he said. "I know what has happened since you have been in Major Fitz-David's house. No one has told me about it; I found it out for myself. If you remember, I was struck by the name of 'Macallan,' when you first mentioned it to me at my cottage. I couldn't guess why at the time. I know why now."

Hearing this, I told them both unreservedly what I had said to Eustace, and how he had received it. To my unspeakable disappointment, they both sided with my husband, treating my view of his position as a mere dream. They said it, as he had said it, "You have not read the Trial."

I was really enraged with them. "The facts are enough for \_me,\_" I said. "We know he is innocent. Why is his innocence not proved? It ought to be, it must be, it shall be! If the Trial tell me it can't be done, I refuse to believe the Trial. Where is the book, Major? Let me see for myself if his lawyers have left nothing for his wife to do. Did they love him as I love him? Give me the book!"

Major Fitz-David looked at Benjamin.

"It will only additionally shock and distress her if I give her the book," he said. "Don't you agree with me?"

I interposed before Benjamin could answer.

"If you refuse my request," I said, "you will oblige me, Major, to go to the nearest bookseller and tell him to buy the Trial for me. I am determined to read it."

This time Benjamin sided with me.

"Nothing can make matters worse than they are, sir," he said. "If I may be permitted to advise, let her have her own way."

The Major rose and took the book out of the Italian cabinet, to which he had consigned it for safe-keeping.

"My young friend tells me that she informed you of her regrettable outbreak of temper a few days since," he said as he handed me the volume. "I was not aware at the time what book she had in her hand when she so far forgot herself as to destroy the vase. When I left you in the study, I supposed the Report of the Trial to be in its customary place on the top shelf of the book-case, and I own I felt some curiosity to know whether you would think of examining that shelf. The broken vase--it is needless to conceal it from you now--was one of a pair presented to me by your husband and his first wife only a week before the poor woman's terrible death. I felt my first presentiment that you were on the brink of discovery when I found you looking at the fragments, and I fancy I betrayed to you that something of the sort was disturbing me. You looked as if you noticed it."

"I did notice it, Major. And I too had a vague idea that I was on the way to discovery. Will you look at your watch? Have we waited half an hour yet?"

My impatience had misled me. The ordeal of the half-hour was not yet at an end.

Slowly and more slowly the heavy minutes followed each other, and still there were no signs of my husband's return. We tried to continue our conversation, and failed. Nothing was audible; no sounds but the ordinary sounds of the street disturbed the dreadful silence. Try as I might to repel it, there was one foreboding thought that pressed closer and closer on my mind as the interval of waiting wore its weary way on. I shuddered as I asked myself if our married life had come to an end--if Eustace had really left me.

The Major saw what Benjamin's slower perception had not yet discovered--that my fortitude was beginning to sink under the unrelieved oppression of suspense.

"Come!" he said. "Let us go to the hotel."

It then wanted nearly five minutes to the half-hour. I \_looked\_ my gratitude to Major Fitz-David for sparing me those last minutes: I could not speak to him or to Benjamin. In silence we three got into a cab and drove to the hotel.

The landlady met us in the hall. Nothing had been seen or heard of Eustace. There was a letter waiting for me upstairs on the table in our sitting-room. It had been left at the hotel by a messenger only a few minutes since.

Trembling and breathless, I ran up the stairs, the two gentlemen following me. The address of the letter was in my husband's handwriting. My heart sank in me as I looked at the lines; there could be but one reason for his writing to me. That closed envelope held his farewell words. I sat with the letter on my lap, stupefied, incapable of opening it.

Kind-hearted Benjamin attempted to comfort and encourage me. The Major, with his larger experience of women, warned the old man to be silent.

"Wait!" I heard him whisper. "Speaking to her will do no good now. Give her time."

Acting on a sudden impulse, I held out the letter to him as he spoke. Even moments might be of importance, if Eustace had indeed left me. To give me time might be to lose the opportunity of recalling him.

"You are his old friend," I said. "Open his letter, Major, and read it for me."

Major Fitz-David opened the letter and read it through to himself. When he had done he threw it on the table with a gesture which was almost a gesture of contempt.

"There is but one excuse for him," he said. "The man is mad."

Those words told me all. I knew the worst; and, knowing it, I could read the letter. It ran thus:

"MY BELOVED VALERIA--When you read these lines you read my farewell words. I return to my solitary unfriended life--my life before I knew you.

"My darling, you have been cruelly treated. You have been entrapped into marrying a man who has been publicly accused of poisoning his first wife--and who has not been honorably and completely acquitted of the charge. And you know it!

"Can you live on terms of mutual confidence and mutual esteem with me when I have committed this fraud, and when I stand toward you in this position? It was possible for you to live with me happily while you were in ignorance of the truth. It is not possible, now you know all.

"No! the one atonement I can make is--to leave you. Your one chance of future happiness is to be disassociated, at once and forever, from my dishonored life. I love you, Valeria--truly, devotedly, passionately. But the specter of the poisoned woman rises between us. It makes no difference that I am innocent even of the thought of harming my first wife. My innocence has not been proved. In this world my innocence can never be proved. You are young and loving, and generous and hopeful. Bless others, Valeria, with your rare attractions and your delightful gifts. They are of no avail with me. The poisoned woman stands between us. If you live with me now, you will see her as I see her. That torture shall never be yours. I love you. I leave you.

"Do you think me hard and cruel? Wait a little, and time will change that way of thinking. As the years go on you will say to yourself, 'Basely as he deceived me, there was some generosity in him. He was man enough to release me of his own free will.'

"Yes, Valeria, I fully, freely release you. If it be possible to annul our marriage, let it be done. Recover your liberty by any means that you may be advised to employ; and be assured beforehand of my entire and implicit submission. My lawyers have the necessary instructions on this subject. Your uncle has only to communicate with them, and I think he will be satisfied of my resolution to do you justice. The one interest that I have now left in life is my interest in your welfare and your happiness in the time to come. Your welfare and your happiness are no longer to be found in your union with Me.

"I can write no more. This letter will wait for you at the hotel. It will be useless to attempt to trace me. I know my own weakness. My heart is all yours: I might yield to you if I let you see me again.

"Show these lines to your uncle, and to any friends whose opinions you may value. I have only to sign my dishonored name, and every one will understand and applaud my motive for writing as I do. The name justifies--amply justifies--the letter. Forgive and forget me. Farewell.

"EUSTACE MACALLAN."

In those words he took his leave of me. We had then been married--six days.