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Chapter 26 - More Of My Obstinacy

ARIEL was downstairs in the shadowy hall, half asleep, half awake, waiting to see the visitors clear of the house. Without speaking to us, without looking at us, she led the way down the dark garden walk, and locked the gate behind us. "Good-night, Ariel," I called out to her over the paling. Nothing answered me but the tramp of her heavy footsteps returning to the house, and the dull thump, a moment afterward, of the closing door.

The footman had thoughtfully lighted the carriage lamps. Carrying one of them to serve as a lantern, he lighted us over the wilds of the brick desert, and landed us safely on the path by the high-road.

"Well!" said my mother-in-law, when we were comfortably seated in the carriage again. "You have seen Miserrimus Dexter, and I hope you are satisfied. I will do him the justice to declare that I never, in all my experience, saw him more completely crazy than he was to-night. What do _you_ say?"

"I don't presume to dispute your opinion," I answered. "But, speaking for myself, I'm not quite sure that he is mad."

"Not mad!" cried Mrs. Macallan, "after those frantic performances in his chair? Not mad, after the exhibition he made of his unfortunate cousin? Not mad, after the song that he sang in your honor, and the falling asleep by way of conclusion? Oh, Valeria! Valeria! Well said the wisdom of our ancestors--there are none so blind as those who won't see."

"Pardon me, dear Mrs. Macallan, I saw everything that you mention, and I never felt more surprised or more confounded in my life. But now I have recovered from my amazement, and can think it over quietly, I must still venture to doubt whether this strange man is really mad in the true meaning of the word. It seems to me that he only expresses--I admit in a very reckless and boisterous way--thoughts and feelings which most of us are ashamed of as weaknesses, and which we keep to ourselves accordingly. I confess I have often fancied myself transformed into some other person, and have felt a certain pleasure in seeing myself in my new character. One of our first amusements as children (if we have any imagination at all) is to get out of our own characters, and to try the characters of other personages as a change--to fairies, to be queens, to be anything, in short, but what we really are. Mr. Dexter lets out the secret just as the children do, and if that is madness, he is certainly mad. But I noticed that when his imagination cooled down he became Miserrimus Dexter again--he no more believed himself than we believed him to be Napoleon or Shakespeare. Besides, some allowance is surely to be made for the solitary, sedentary life that he leads. I am not learned enough to trace the influence of that life in making him what he is; but I think I can see the result in an over-excited imagination, and I fancy I can trace his exhibiting his power over the poor cousin and his singing of that wonderful song to no more formidable cause than inordinate self-conceit. I hope the confession will not lower me seriously in your good opinion; but I must say I have enjoyed my visit, and, worse still, Miserrimus Dexter really interests me."

"Does this learned discourse on Dexter mean that you are going to see him again?" asked Mrs. Macallan.

"I don't know how I may feel about it tomorrow morning," I said; "but my impulse at this moment is decidedly to see him again. I had a little talk with him while you were away at the other end of the room, and I believe he really can be of use to me--"

"Of use to you in what?" interposed my mother-in-law.

"In the one object which I have in view--the object, dear Mrs. Macallan, which I regret to say you do not approve."

"And you are going to take him into your confidence? to open your whole mind to such a man as the man we have just left?"

"Yes, if I think of it to-morrow as I think of it to-night. I dare say it is a risk; but I must run risks. I know I am not prudent; but prudence won't help a woman in my position, with my end to gain."

Mrs. Macallan made no further remonstrance in words. She opened a capacious pocket in front of the carriage, and took from it a box of matches and a railway reading-lamp.

"You provoke me," said the old lady, "into showing you what your husband thinks of this new whim of yours. I have got his letter with me--his last letter from Spain. You shall judge for yourself, you poor deluded young creature, whether my son is worthy of the sacrifice--the useless and hopeless sacrifice--which you are bent on making of yourself for his sake. Strike a light!"

I willingly obeyed her. Ever since she had informed me of Eustace's departure to Spain I had been eager for more news of him, for something to sustain my spirits, after so much that had disappointed and depressed me. Thus far I did not even know whether my husband thought of me sometimes in his self-imposed exile. As to this regretting already the rash act which had separated us, it was still too soon to begin hoping for that.

The lamp having been lighted, and fixed in its place between the two front windows of the carriage, Mrs. Macallan produced her son's letter. There is no folly like the folly of love. It cost me a hard struggle to restrain myself from kissing the paper on which the dear hand had rested.

"There!" said my mother-in-law. "Begin on the second page, the page devoted to you. Read straight down to the last line at the bottom, and, in God's name, come back to your senses, child, before it is too late!"

I followed my instructions, and read these words:

"Can I trust myself to write of Valeria? I _must_ write of her. Tell me how she is, how she looks, what she is doing. I am always thinking of her. Not a day passes but I mourn the loss of her. Oh, if she had only been contented to let matters rest as they were! Oh, if she had never discovered the miserable truth!

"She spoke of reading the Trial when I saw her last. Has she persisted in doing so? I believe--I say this seriously, mother--I believe the shame and the horror of it would have

been the death of me if I had met her face to face when she first knew of the ignominy that I have suffered, of the infamous suspicion of which I have been publicly made the subject. Think of those pure eyes looking at a man who has been accused (and never wholly absolved) of the foulest and the vilest of all murders, and then think of what that man must feel if he have any heart and any sense of shame left in him. I sicken as I write of it.

"Does she still meditate that hopeless project--the offspring, poor angel, of her artless, unthinking generosity? Does she still fancy that it is in _her_ power to assert my innocence before the world? Oh, mother (if she do), use your utmost influence to make her give up the idea! Spare her the humiliation, the disappointment, the insult, perhaps, to which she may innocently expose herself. For her sake, for my sake, leave no means untried to attain this righteous, this merciful end.

"I send her no message--I dare not do it. Say nothing, when you see her, which can recall me to her memory. On the contrary, help her to forget me as soon as possible. The kindest thing I can do--the one atonement I can make to her--is to drop out of her life."

With those wretched words it ended. I handed his letter back to his mother in silence. She said but little on her side.

"If _this_ doesn't discourage you," she remarked, slowly folding up the letter, "nothing will. Let us leave it there, and say no more."

I made no answer--I was crying behind my veil. My domestic prospect looked so dreary! my unfortunate husband was so hopelessly misguided, so pitifully wrong! The one chance for both of us, and the one consolation for poor Me, was to hold to my desperate resolution more firmly than ever. If I had wanted anything to confirm me in this view, and to arm me against the remonstrances of every one of my friends, Eustace's letter would have proved more than sufficient to answer the purpose. At least he had not forgotten me; he thought of me, and he mourned the loss of me every day of his life. That was encouragement enough--for the present. "If Ariel calls for me in the pony-chaise to-morrow," I thought to myself, "with Ariel I go."

Mrs. Macallan set me down at Benjamin's door.

I mentioned to her at parting--I stood sufficiently in awe of her to put it off till the last moment--that Miserrimus Dexter had arranged to send his cousin and his pony-chaise to her residence on the next day; and I inquired thereupon whether my mother-in-law would permit me to call at her house to wait for the appearance of the cousin, or whether she would prefer sending the chaise on to Benjamin's cottage. I fully expected an explosion of anger to follow this bold avowal of my plans for the next day. The old lady agreeably surprised me. She proved that she had really taken a liking to me: she kept her temper.

"If you persist in going back to Dexter, you certainly shall not go to him from my door," she said. "But I hope you will _not_ persist. I hope you will awake a wiser woman to-morrow morning."

The morning came. A little before noon the arrival of the pony-chaise was announced at the door, and a letter was brought in to me from Mrs. Macallan.

"I have no right to control your movements," my mother-in-law wrote. "I send the chaise to Mr. Benjamin's house; and I sincerely trust that you will not take your place in it. I wish I could persuade you, Valeria, how truly I am your friend. I have been thinking about you anxiously in the wakeful hours of the night. _How_ anxiously, you will understand when I tell you that I now reproach myself for not having done more than I did to prevent your unhappy marriage. And yet, what more I could have done I don't really know. My son admitted to me that he was courting you under an assumed name, but he never told me what the name was. Or who you were, or where your friends lived. Perhaps I ought to have taken measures to find this out. Perhaps, if I had succeeded, I ought to have interfered and enlightened you, even at the sad sacrifice of making an enemy of my own son. I honestly thought I did my duty in expressing my disapproval, and in refusing to be present at the marriage. Was I too easily satisfied? It is too late to ask. Why do I trouble you with an old woman's vain misgivings and regrets? My child, if you come to any harm, I shall feel (indirectly) responsible for it. It is this uneasy state of mind which sets me writing, with nothing to say that can interest you. Don't go to Dexter! The fear has been pursuing me all night that your going to Dexter will end badly. Write him an excuse. Valeria! I firmly believe you will repent it if you return to that house."

Was ever a woman more plainly warned, more carefully advised, than I? And yet warning and advice were both thrown away on me.

Let me say for myself that I was really touched by the kindness of my mother-in-law's letter, though I was not shaken by it in the smallest degree. As long as I lived, moved, and thought, my one purpose now was to make Miserrimus Dexter confide to me his ideas on the subject of Mrs. Eustace Macallan's death. To those ideas I looked as my guiding stars along the dark way on which I was going. I wrote back to Mrs. Macallan, as I really felt gratefully and penitently. And then I went out to the chaise.