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Chapter 6 - My Own Discovery

FORTUNATELY for me, the landlord did not open the door when I rang. A stupid maid-of-all-work, who never thought of asking me for my name, let me in. Mrs. Macallan was at home, and had no visitors with her. Giving me this information, the maid led the way upstairs, and showed me into the drawing-room without a word of announcement.

My mother-in-law was sitting alone, near a work-table, knitting. The moment I appeared in the doorway she laid aside her work, and, rising, signed to me with a commanding gesture of her hand to let her speak first.

"I know what you have come here for," she said. "You have come here to ask questions. Spare yourself, and spare me. I warn you beforehand that I will not answer any questions relating to my son."

It was firmly, but not harshly said. I spoke firmly in my turn.

"I have not come here, madam, to ask questions about your son," I answered. "I have come, if you will excuse me, to ask you a question about yourself."

She started, and looked at me keenly over her spectacles. I had evidently taken her by surprise.

"What is the question?" she inquired.

"I now know for the first time, madam, that your name is Macallan," I said. "Your son has married me under the name of Woodville. The only honorable explanation of this circumstance, so far as I know, is that my husband is your son by a first marriage. The happiness of my life is at stake. Will you kindly consider my position? Will you let me ask you if you have been twice married, and if the name of your first husband was Woodville?"

She considered a little before she replied.

"The question is a perfectly natural one in your position," she said. "But I think I had better not answer it."

"May I ask why?"

"Certainly. If I answered you, I should only lead to other questions, and I should be obliged to decline replying to them. I am sorry to disappoint you. I repeat what I said on the beach--I have no other feeling than a feeling of sympathy toward _you._ If you had consulted me before your marriage, I should willingly have admitted you to my fullest confidence. It is now too late. You are married. I recommend you to make the best of your position, and to rest satisfied with things as they are."

"Pardon me, madam," I remonstrated. "As things are, I don't know that I _am_ married. All I know, unless you enlighten me, is that your son has married me under a name that is not his own. How can I be sure whether I am or am not his lawful wife?"

"I believe there can be no doubt that you are lawfully my son's wife," Mrs. Macallan answered. "At any rate it is easy to take a legal opinion on the subject. If the opinion is that you are _not_ lawfully married, my son (whatever his faults and failings may be) is a gentleman. He is incapable of willfully deceiving a woman who loves and trusts him. He will do you justice. On my side, I will do you justice, too. If the legal opinion is adverse to your rightful claims, I will promise to answer any questions which you may choose to put to me. As it is, I believe you to be lawfully my son's wife; and I say again, make the best of your position. Be satisfied with your husband's affectionate devotion to you. If you value your peace of mind and the happiness of your life to come, abstain from attempting to know more than you know now."

She sat down again with the air of a woman who had said her last word.

Further remonstrance would be useless; I could see it in her face; I could hear it in her voice. I turned round to open the drawing-room door.

"You are hard on me, madam," I said at parting. "I am at your mercy, and I must submit."

She suddenly looked up, and answered me with a flush on her kind and handsome old face.

"As God is my witness, child, I pity you from the bottom of my heart!"

After that extraordinary outburst of feeling, she took up her work with one hand, and signed to me with the other to leave her.

I bowed to her in silence, and went out.

I had entered the house far from feeling sure of the course I ought to take in the future. I left the house positively resolved, come what might of it, to discover the secret which the mother and son were hiding from me. As to the question of the name, I saw it now in the light in which I ought to have seen it from the first. If Mrs. Macallan _had_ been twice married (as I had rashly chosen to suppose), she would certainly have shown some signs of recognition when she heard me addressed by her first husband's name. Where all else was mystery, there was no mystery here. Whatever his reasons might be, Eustace had assuredly married me under an assumed name.

Approaching the door of our lodgings, I saw my husband walking backward and forward before it, evidently waiting for my return. If he asked me the question, I decided to tell him frankly where I had been, and what had passed between his mother and myself.

He hurried to meet me with signs of disturbance in his face and manner.

"I have a favor to ask of you, Valeria," he said. "Do you mind returning with me to London by the next train?"

I looked at him. In the popular phrase, I could hardly believe my own ears.

"It's a matter of business," he went on, "of no interest to any one but myself, and it requires my presence in London. You don't wish to sail just yet, as I understand? I can't leave you here by yourself. Have you any objection to going to London for a day or two?"

I made no objection. I too was eager to go back.

In London I could obtain the legal opinion which would tell me whether I were lawfully married to Eustace or not. In London I should be within reach of the help and advice of my father's faithful old clerk. I could confide in Benjamin as I could confide in no one else. Dearly as I loved my uncle Starkweather, I shrank from communicating with him in my present need. His wife had told me that I made a bad beginning when I signed the wrong name in the marriage register. Shall I own it? My pride shrank from acknowledging, before the honeymoon was over, that his wife was right.

In two hours more we were on the railway again. Ah, what a contrast that second journey presented to the first! On our way to Ramsgate everybody could see that we were a newly wedded couple. On our way to London nobody noticed us; nobody would have doubted that we had been married for years.

We went to a private hotel in the neighborhood of Portland Place.

After breakfast the next morning Eustace announced that he must leave me to attend to his business. I had previously mentioned to him that I had some purchases to make in London. He was quite willing to let me go out alone, on the condition that I should take a carriage provided by the hotel.

My heart was heavy that morning: I felt the unacknowledged estrangement that had grown up between us very keenly. My husband opened the door to go out, and came back to kiss me before he left me by myself. That little after-thought of tenderness touched me. Acting on the impulse of the moment, I put my arm round his neck, and held him to me gently.

"My darling," I said, "give me all your confidence. I know that you love me. Show that you can trust me too."

He sighed bitterly, and drew back from me--in sorrow, not in anger.

"I thought we had agreed, Valeria, not to return to that subject again," he said. "You only distress yourself and distress me."

He left the room abruptly, as if he dare not trust himself to say more. It is better not to dwell on what I felt after this last repulse. I ordered the carriage at once. I was eager to find a refuge from my own thoughts in movement and change.

I drove to the shops first, and made the purchases which I had mentioned to Eustace by way of giving a reason for going out. Then I devoted myself to the object which I really had at heart. I went to old Benjamin's little villa, in the by-ways of St. John's Wood.

As soon as he had got over the first surprise of seeing me, he noticed that I looked pale and care-worn. I confessed at once that I was in trouble. We sat down together by the bright fireside in his little library (Benjamin, as far as his means would allow, was a great collector of books), and there I told my old friend, frankly and truly, all that I have told here.

He was too distressed to say much. He fervently pressed my hand; he fervently thanked God that my father had not lived to hear what he had heard. Then, after a pause, he repeated my mother-in-law's name to himself in a doubting, questioning tone. "Macallan?" he said. "Macallan? Where have I heard that name? Why does it sound as if it wasn't strange to me?"

He gave up pursuing the lost recollection, and asked, very earnestly, what he could do for me. I answered that he could help me, in the first place, to put an end to the doubt--an unendurable doubt to _me_--whether I were lawfully married or not. His energy of the old days when he had conducted my father's business showed itself again the moment I said those words.

"Your carriage is at the door, my dear," he answered. "Come with me to my own lawyer, without wasting another moment."

We drove to Lincoln's Inn Fields.

At my request Benjamin put my case to the lawyer as the case of a friend in whom I was interested. The answer was given without hesitation. I had married, honestly believing my husband's name to be the name under which I had known him. The witnesses to my marriage--my uncle, my aunt, and Benjamin--had acted, as I had acted, in perfect good faith. Under those circumstances, there was no doubt about the law. I was legally married. Macallan or Woodville, I was his wife.

This decisive answer relieved me of a heavy anxiety. I accepted my old friend's invitation to return with him to St. John's Wood, and to make my luncheon at his early dinner.

On our way back I reverted to the one other subject which was now uppermost in my mind. I reiterated my resolution to discover why Eustace had not married me under the name that was really his own.

My companion shook his head, and entreated me to consider well beforehand what I proposed doing. His advice to me--so strangely do extremes meet!--was my mother-in-law's advice, repeated almost word for word. "Leave things as they are, my dear. In the interest of your own peace of mind be satisfied with your husband's affection. You know that you are his wife, and you know that he loves you. Surely that is enough?"

I had but one answer to this. Life, on such conditions as my good friend had just stated, would be simply unendurable to me. Nothing could alter my resolution--for this plain reason, that nothing could reconcile me to living with my husband on the terms on which we were living now. It only rested with Benjamin to say whether he would give a helping hand to his master's daughter or not.

The old man's answer was thoroughly characteristic of him.

"Mention what you want of me, my dear," was all he said.

We were then passing a street in the neighborhood of Portman Square. I was on the point of speaking again, when the words were suspended on my lips. I saw my husband.

He was just descending the steps of a house--as if leaving it after a visit. His eyes were on the ground: he did not look up when the carriage passed. As the servant closed the door behind him, I noticed that the number of the house was Sixteen. At the next corner I saw the name of the street. It was Vivian Place.

"Do you happen to know who lives at Number Sixteen Vivian Place?" I inquired of my companion.

Benjamin started. My question was certainly a strange one, after what he had just said to me.

"No," he replied. "Why do you ask?"

"I have just seen Eustace leaving that house."

"Well, my dear, and what of that?"

"My mind is in a bad way, Benjamin. Everything my husband does that I don't understand rouses my suspicion now."

Benjamin lifted his withered old hands, and let them drop on his knees again in mute lamentation over me.

"I tell you again," I went on, "my life is unendurable to me. I won't answer for what I may do if I am left much longer to live in doubt of the one man on earth whom I love. You have had experience of the world. Suppose you were shut out from Eustace's confidence, as I am? Suppose you were as fond of him as I am, and felt your position as bitterly as I feel it--what would you do?"

The question was plain. Benjamin met it with a plain answer.

"I think I should find my way, my dear, to some intimate friend of your husband's," he said, "and make a few discreet inquiries in that quarter first."

Some intimate friend of my husband's? I considered with myself. There was but one friend of his whom I knew of--my uncle's correspondent, Major Fitz-David. My heart beat fast as the name recurred to my memory. Suppose I followed Benjamin's advice? Suppose I applied to Major Fitz-David? Even if he, too, refused to answer my questions, my position would not be more helpless than it was now. I determined to make the attempt. The only difficulty in the way, so far, was to discover the Major's address. I had given back his letter to Doctor Starkweather, at my uncle's own request. I remembered that the address from which the Major wrote was somewhere in London--and I remembered no more.

"Thank you, old friend; you have given me an idea already," I said to Benjamin. "Have you got a Directory in your house?"

"No, my dear," he rejoined, looking very much puzzled. "But I can easily send out and borrow one."

We returned to the villa. The servant was sent at once to the nearest stationer's to borrow a Directory. She returned with the book just as we sat down to dinner. Searching for the Major's name under the letter F, I was startled by a new discovery.

"Benjamin!" I said. "This is a strange coincidence. Look here!"

He looked where I pointed. Major Fitz-David's address was Number Sixteen Vivian Place--the very house which I had seen my husband leaving as we passed in the carriage!