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Chapter 7 - On The Way To The Major

"YES, said Benjamin. "It _is_ a coincidence certainly. Still--"

He stopped and looked at me. He seemed a little doubtful how I might receive what he had it in his mind to say to me next.

"Go on," I said.

"Still, my dear, I see nothing suspicious in what has happened," he resumed. "To my mind it is quite natural that your husband, being in London, should pay a visit to one of his friends. And it's equally natural that we should pass through Vivian Place on our way back here. This seems to be the reasonable view. What do _you_ say?"

"I have told you already that my mind is in a bad way about Eustace," I answered. "_L_ say there is some motive at the bottom of his visit to Major Fitz-David. It is not an ordinary call. I am firmly convinced it is not an ordinary call!"

"Suppose we get on with our dinner?" said Benjamin, resignedly. "Here is a loin of mutton, my dear--an ordinary loin of mutton. Is there anything suspicious in _that?_ Very well, then. Show me you have confidence in the mutton; please eat. There's the wine, again. No mystery, Valeria, in that claret--I'll take my oath it's nothing but innocent juice of the grape. If we can't believe in anything else, let's believe in juice of the grape. Your good health, my dear."

I adapted myself to the old man's genial humor as readily as I could. We ate and we drank, and we talked of by-gone days. For a little while I was almost happy in the company of my fatherly old friend. Why was I not old too? Why had I not done with love, with its certain miseries, its transient delights, its cruel losses, its bitterly doubtful gains? The last autumn flowers in the window basked brightly in the last of the autumn sunlight. Benjamin's little dog digested his dinner in perfect comfort on the hearth. The parrot in the next house screeched his vocal accomplishments cheerfully. I don't doubt that it is a great privilege to be a human being. But may it not be the happier destiny to be an animal or a plant?

The brief respite was soon over; all my anxieties came back. I was once more a doubting, discontented, depressed creature when I rose to say good-by.

"Promise, my dear, you will do nothing rash," said Benjamin, as he opened the door for me.

"Is it rash to go to Major Fitz-David?" I asked.

"Yes--if you go by yourself. You don't know what sort of man he is; you don't know how he may receive you. Let me try first, and pave the way, as the saying is. Trust my experience, my dear. In matters of this sort there is nothing like paving the way."

I considered a moment. It was due to my good friend to consider before I said No.

Reflection decided me on taking the responsibility, whatever it might be, upon my own shoulders. Good or bad, compassionate or cruel, the Major was a man. A woman's influence was the safest influence to trust with him, where the end to be gained was such an end as I had in view. It was not easy to say this to Benjamin without the danger of mortifying him. I made an appointment with the old man to call on me the next morning at the hotel, and talk the matter over again. Is it very disgraceful to me to add that I privately determined (if the thing could be accomplished) to see Major Fitz-David in the interval?

"Do nothing rash, my dear. In your own interests, do nothing rash!"

Those were Benjamin's last words when we parted for the day.

I found Eustace waiting for me in our sitting-room at the hotel. His spirits seemed to have revived since I had seen him last. He advanced to meet me cheerfully, with an open sheet of paper in his hand.

"My business is settled, Valeria, sooner than I had expected," he began, gayly. "Are your purchases all completed, fair lady? Are _you_ free too?"

I had learned already (God help me!) to distrust his fits of gayety. I asked, cautiously,

"Do you mean free for to-day?"

"Free for to-day, and to-morrow, and next week, and next month--and next year too, for all I know to the contrary," he answered, putting his arm boisterously round my waist. "Look here!"

He lifted the open sheet of paper which I had noticed in his hand, and held it for me to read. It was a telegram to the sailing-master of the yacht, informing him that we had arranged to return to Ramsgate that evening, and that we should be ready to sail for the Mediterranean with the next tide.

"I only waited for your return," said Eustace, "to send the telegram to the office."

He crossed the room as he spoke to ring the bell. I stopped him.

"I am afraid I can't go to Ramsgate to-day," I said.

"Why not?" he asked, suddenly changing his tone, and speaking sharply.

I dare say it will seem ridiculous to some people, but it is really true that he shook my resolution to go to Major Fitz-David when he put his arm round me. Even a mere passing caress from _him_ stole away my heart, and softly tempted me to yield. But the ominous alteration in his tone made another woman of me. I felt once more, and felt more strongly than ever, that in my critical position it was useless to stand still, and worse than useless to draw back.

"I am sorry to disappoint you," I answered. It is impossible for me (as I told you at Ramsgate) to be ready to sail at a moment's notice. I want time."

"What for?"

Not only his tone, but his look, when he put that second question, jarred on every nerve in me. He roused in my mind--I can't tell how or why--an angry sense of the indignity that he had put upon his wife in marrying her under a false name. Fearing that I should answer rashly, that I should say something which my better sense might regret, if I spoke at that moment, I said nothing. Women alone can estimate what it cost me to be silent. And men alone can understand how irritating my silence must have been to my husband.

"You want time?" he repeated. "I ask you again--what for?"

My self-control, pushed to its extremest limits, failed me. The rash reply flew out of my lips, like a bird set free from a cage.

"I want time," I said, "to accustom myself to my right name."

He suddenly stepped up to me with a dark look.

"What do you mean by your 'right name?'"

"Surely you know," I answered. "I once thought I was Mrs. Woodville. I have now discovered that I am Mrs. Macallan."

He started back at the sound of his own name as if I had struck him--he started back, and turned so deadly pale that I feared he was going to drop at my feet in a swoon. Oh, my tongue! my tongue! Why had I not controlled my miserable, mischievous woman's tongue!

"I didn't mean to alarm you, Eustace," I said. "I spoke at random. Pray forgive me."

He waved his hand impatiently, as if my penitent words were tangible things--ruffling, worrying things, like flies in summer--which he was putting away from him.

"What else have you discovered?" he asked, in low, stern tones.

"Nothing, Eustace."

"Nothing?" He paused as he repeated the word, and passed his hand over his forehead in a weary way. "Nothing, of course," he resumed, speaking to himself, "or she would not be here." He paused once more, and looked at me searchingly. "Don't say again what you said just now," he went on. "For your own sake, Valeria, as well as for mine." He dropped into the nearest chair, and said no more.

I certainly heard the warning; but the only words which really produced an impression on my mind were the words preceding it, which he had spoken to himself. He had said: "Nothing, of course, _or she could not be here._" If I had found out some other truth besides the truth about the name, would it have prevented me from ever returning to my husband? Was that what he meant? Did the sort of discovery that he contemplated mean something so dreadful that it would have parted us at once and forever? I stood by his chair in silence, and tried to find the answer to those terrible questions in his face. It used to speak to me so eloquently when it spoke of his love. It told me nothing now.

He sat for some time without looking at me, lost in his own thoughts. Then he rose on a sudden and took his hat.

"The friend who lent me the yacht is in town," he said. "I suppose I had better see him, and say our plans are changed." He tore up the telegram with an air of sullen resignation as he spoke. "You are evidently determined not to go to sea with me," he resumed. "We had better give it up. I don't see what else is to be done. Do you?"

His tone was almost a tone of contempt. I was too depressed about myself, too alarmed about _him_, to resent it.

"Decide as you think best, Eustace," I said, sadly. "Every way, the prospect seems a hopeless one. As long as I am shut out from your confidence, it matters little whether we live on land or at sea--we cannot live happily."

"If you could control your curiosity," he answered, sternly, "we might live happily enough. I thought I had married a woman who was superior to the vulgar failings of her sex. A good wife should know better than to pry into affairs of her husband's with which she had no concern."

Surely it was hard to bear this? However, I bore it.

"Is it no concern of mine?" I asked, gently, "when I find that my husband has not married me under his family name? Is it no concern of mine when I hear your mother say, in so many words, that she pities your wife? It is hard, Eustace, to accuse me of curiosity because I cannot accept the unendurable position in which you have placed me. Your cruel silence is a blight on my happiness and a threat to my future. Your cruel silence is estranging us from each other at the beginning of our married life. And you blame me for feeling this? You tell me I am prying into affairs which are yours only? They are _not_ yours only: I have my interest in them too. Oh, my darling, why do you trifle with our love and our confidence in each other? Why do you keep me in the dark?"

He answered with a stern and pitiless brevity,

"For your own good."

I turned away from him in silence. He was treating me like a child.

He followed me. Putting one hand heavily on my shoulder, he forced me to face him once more.

"Listen to this," he said. "What I am now going to say to you I say for the first and last time. Valeria! if you ever discover what I am now keeping from your knowledge--from that moment you live a life of torture; your tranquillity is gone. Your days will be days of terror; your nights will be full of horrid dreams--through no fault of mine, mind! through no fault of mine! Every day of your life you will feel some new distrust, some growing fear of me, and you will be doing me the vilest injustice all the time. On my

faith as a Christian, on my honor as a man, if you stir a step further in this matter, there is an end to your happiness for the rest of your life! Think seriously of what I have said to you; you will have time to reflect. I am going to tell my friend that our plans for the Mediterranean are given up. I shall not be back before the evening." He sighed, and looked at me with unutterable sadness. "I love you, Valeria," he said. "In spite of all that has passed, as God is my witness, I love you more dearly than ever."

So he spoke. So he left me.

I must write the truth about myself, however strange it may appear. I don't pretend to be able to analyze my own motives; I don't pretend even to guess how other women might have acted in my place. It is true of me, that my husband's terrible warning--all the more terrible in its mystery and its vagueness--produced no deterrent effect on my mind: it only stimulated my resolution to discover what he was hiding from me. He had not been gone two minutes before I rang the bell and ordered the carriage, to take me to Major Fitz-David's house in Vivian Place.

Walking to and fro while I was waiting--I was in such a fever of excitement that it was impossible for me to sit still--I accidentally caught sight of myself in the glass.

My own face startled me, it looked so haggard and so wild. Could I present myself to a stranger, could I hope to produce the necessary impression in my favor, looking as I looked at that moment? For all I knew to the contrary, my whole future might depend upon the effect which I produced on Major Fitz-David at first sight. I rang the bell again, and sent a message to one of the chambermaids to follow me to my room.

I had no maid of my own with me: the stewardess of the yacht would have acted as my attendant if we had held to our first arrangement. It mattered little, so long as I had a woman to help me. The chambermaid appeared. I can give no better idea of the disordered and desperate condition of my mind at that time than by owning that I actually consulted this perfect stranger on the question of my personal appearance. She was a middle-aged woman, with a large experience of the world and its wickedness written legibly on her manner and on her face. I put money into the woman's hand, enough of it to surprise her. She thanked me with a cynical smile, evidently placing her own evil interpretation on my motive for bribing her.

"What can I do for you, ma'am?" she asked, in a confidential whisper. "Don't speak loud! there is somebody in the next room."

"I want to look my best," I said, "and I have sent for you to help me."

"I understand, ma'am."

"What do you understand?"

She nodded her head significantly, and whispered to me again. "Lord bless you, I'm used to this!" she said. "There is a gentleman in the case. Don't mind me, ma'am. It's a way I have. I mean no harm." She stopped, and looked at me critically. "I wouldn't change my dress if I were you," she went on. "The color becomes you."

It was too late to resent the woman's impertinence. There was no help for it but to make use of her. Besides, she was right about the dress. It was of a delicate maize-color, prettily trimmed with lace. I could wear nothing which suited me better. My hair, however, stood in need of some skilled attention. The chambermaid rearranged it with a ready hand which showed that she was no beginner in the art of dressing hair. She laid down the combs and brushes, and looked at me; then looked at the toilet-table, searching for something which she apparently failed to find.

"Where do you keep it?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Look at your complexion, ma'am. You will frighten him if he sees you like that. A touch of color you must have. Where do you keep it? What! you haven't got it? you never use it? Dear, dear, dear me!"

For a moment surprise fairly deprived her of her self-possession. Recovering herself, she begged permission to leave me for a minute. I let her go, knowing what her errand was. She came back with a box of paint and powders; and I said nothing to check her. I saw, in the glass, my skin take a false fairness, my cheeks a false color, my eyes a false brightness--and I never shrank from it. No! I let the odious conceit go on; I even admired the extraordinary delicacy and dexterity with which it was all done. "Anything" (I thought to myself, in the madness of that miserable time) "so long as it helps me to win the Major's confidence! Anything, so long as I discover what those last words of my husband's really mean!"

The transformation of my face was accomplished. The chambermaid pointed with her wicked forefinger in the direction of the glass.

"Bear in mind, ma'am, what you looked like when you sent for me," she said. "And just see for yourself how you look now. You're the prettiest woman (of your style) in London. Ah what a thing pearl-powder is, when one knows how to use it!"