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Chapter 43 - At Last!

MY letter from Mr. Playmore, inclosing the agent's extraordinary telegram, was not inspired by the sanguine view of our prospects which he had expressed to me when we met at Benjamin's house.

"If the telegram mean anything," he wrote, "it means that the fragments of the torn letter have been cast into the housemaid's bucket (along with the dust, the ashes, and the rest of the litter in the room), and have been emptied on the dust-heap at Gleninch. Since this was done, the accumulated refuse collected from the periodical cleansings of the house, during a term of nearly three years--including, of course, the ashes from the fires kept burning, for the greater part of the year, in the library and the picture-gallery--have been poured upon the heap, and have buried the precious morsels of paper deeper and deeper, day by day. Even if we have a fair chance of finding these fragments, what hope can we feel, at this distance of time, of recovering them with the writing in a state of preservation? I shall be glad to hear, by return of post if possible, how the matter strikes you. If you could make it convenient to consult with me personally in Edinburgh, we should save time, when time may be of serious importance to us. While you are at Doctor Starkweather's you are within easy reach of this place. Please think of it."

I thought of it seriously enough. The foremost question which I had to consider was the question of my husband.

The departure of the mother and son from Spain had been so long delayed, by the surgeon's orders, that the travelers had only advanced on their homeward journey as far as Bordeaux, when I had last heard from Mrs. Macallan three or four days since. Allowing for an interval of repose at Bordeaux, and for the slow rate at which they would be compelled to move afterward, I might still expect them to arrive in England some time before a letter from the agent in America could reach Mr. Playmore. How, in this position of affairs, I could contrive to join the lawyer in Edinburgh, after meeting my husband in London, it was not easy to see. The wise and the right way, as I thought, was to tell Mr. Playmore frankly that I was not mistress of my Own movements, and that he had better address his next letter to me at Benjamin's house.

Writing to my legal adviser in this sense, I had a word of my own to add on the subject of the torn letter.

In the last years of my father's life I had traveled with him in Italy, and I had seen in the Museum at Naples the wonderful relics of a bygone time discovered among the ruins of Pompeii. By way of encouraging Mr. Playmore, I now reminded him that the eruption which had overwhelmed the town had preserved, for more than sixteen hundred years, such perishable things as the straw in which pottery had been packed; the paintings on house walls; the dresses worn by the inhabitants; and (most noticeable of all, in our case) a piece of ancient paper, still attached to the volcanic ashes which had fallen over it. If these discoveries had been made after a lapse of sixteen centuries, under a layer of dust and ashes on a large scale, surely we might hope to meet with similar cases of preservation, after a lapse of three or four years only, under a layer of dust and ashes on a small scale. Taking for granted (what was perhaps doubtful enough) that the fragments of the letter could be recovered, my own conviction was that the writing on them, though it might be faded, would certainly still be legible. The very accumulations which Mr. Playmore deplored would be the means of preserving them from the rain and the damp. With these modest hints I closed my letter; and thus for once, thanks to my Continental experience, I was able to instruct my lawyer!

Another day passed; and I heard nothing of the travelers.

I began to feel anxious. I made my preparations for my journey southward overnight; and I resolved to start for London the next day--unless I heard of some change in Mrs. Macallan's traveling arrangements in the interval.

The post of the next morning decided my course of action. It brought me a letter from my mother-in-law, which added one more to the memorable dates in my domestic calendar.

Eustace and his mother had advanced as far as Paris on their homeward journey, when a cruel disaster had befallen them. The fatigues of traveling, and the excitement of his anticipated meeting with me, had proved together to be too much for my husband. He had held out as far as Paris with the greatest difficulty; and he was now confined to his bed again, struck down by a relapse. The doctors, this time, had no fear for his life, provided that his patience would support him through a lengthened period of the most absolute repose.

"It now rests with you, Valeria," Mrs. Macallan wrote, "to fortify and comfort Eustace under this new calamity. Do not suppose that he has ever blamed or thought of blaming you for leaving him with me in Spain, as soon as he was declared to be out of danger. 'It was _I_ who left _her_,' he said to me, when we first talked about it; 'and it is my wife's right to expect that I should go back to her.' Those were his words, my dear; and he has done all he can to abide by them. Helpless in his bed, he now asks you to take the will for the deed, and to join him in Paris. I think I know you well enough, my child, to be sure that you will do this; and I need only add one word of caution, before I close my letter. Avoid all reference, not only to the Trial (you will do that of your own accord), but even to our house at Gleninch. You will understand how he feels, in his present state of nervous depression, when I tell you that I should never have ventured on asking you to join him here, if your letter had not informed me that your visits to Dexter were at an end. Would you believe it?--his horror of anything which recalls our past troubles is still so vivid that he has actually asked me to give my consent to selling Gleninch!"

So Eustace's mother wrote of him. But she had not trusted entirely to her own powers of persuasion. A slip of paper was inclosed in her letter, containing these two lines, traced in pencil--oh, so feebly and so wearily!--by my poor darling himself:

"I am too weak to travel any further, Valeria. Will you come to me and forgive me?" A few pencil-marks followed; but they were illegible. The writing of those two short sentences had exhausted him.

It is not saying much for myself, I know--but, having confessed it when I was wrong, let me, at least, record it when I did what was right--I decided instantly on giving up all further connection with the recovery of the torn letter. If Eustace asked me the question, I was resolved to be able to answer truly: "I have made the sacrifice that assures your tranquillity. When resignation was hardest, I have humbled my obstinate spirit, and I have given way for my husband's sake."

There was half an hour to spare before I left the vicarage for the railway station. In that interval I wrote again to Mr. Playmore, telling him plainly what my position was, and withdrawing, at once and forever, from all share in investigating the mystery which lay hidden under the dust-heap at Gleninch.

