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Chapter 44 - Our New Honeymoon

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It is not to be disguised or denied that my spirits were depressed on my journey to London.

To resign the one cherished purpose of my life, when I had suffered so much in pursuing it, and when I had (to all appearance) so nearly reached the realization of my hopes, was putting to a hard trial a woman's fortitude and a woman's sense of duty. Still, even if the opportunity had been offered to me, I would not have recalled my letter to Mr. Playmore. "It is done, and well done," I said to myself; "and I have only to wait a day to be reconciled to it--when I give my husband my first kiss."

I had planned and hoped to reach London in time to start for Paris by the night-mail. But the train was twice delayed on the long journey from the North; and there was no help for it but to sleep at Benjamin's villa, and to defer my departure until the morning.

It was, of course, impossible for me to warn my old friend of the change in my plans. My arrival took him by surprise. I found him alone in his library, with a wonderful illumination of lamps and candles, absorbed over some morsels of torn paper scattered on the table before him.

"What in the world are you about?" I asked.

Benjamin blushed--I was going to say, like a young girl; but young girls have given up blushing in these latter days of the age we live in.

"Oh, nothing, nothing!" he said, confusedly. "Don't notice it."

He stretched out his hand to brush the morsels of paper off the table. Those morsels raised a sudden suspicion in my mind. I stopped him.

"You have heard from Mr. Playmore!" I said. "Tell me the truth, Benjamin. Yes or no?"

Benjamin blushed a shade deeper, and answered, "Yes."

"Where is the letter?"

"I mustn't show it to you, Valeria."

This (need I say it?) made me determined to see the letter. My best way of persuading Benjamin to show it to me was to tell him of the sacrifice that I had made to my husband's wishes. "I have no further voice in the matter," I added, when I had done. "It now rests entirely with Mr. Playmore to go on or to give up; and this is my last opportunity of discovering what he really thinks about it. Don't I deserve some little indulgence? Have I no claim to look at the letter?"

Benjamin was too much surprised, and too much pleased with me, when he heard what had happened, to be able to resist my entreaties. He gave me the letter.

Mr. Playmore wrote to appeal confidentially to Benjamin as a commercial man. In the long course of his occupation in business, it was just possible that he might have heard of cases in which documents have been put together again after having been torn up by design or by accident. Even if his experience failed in this particular, he might be able to refer to some authority in London who would be capable of giving an opinion on the subject. By way of explaining his strange request, Mr. Playmore reverted to the notes which Benjamin had taken at Miserrimus Dexter's house, and informed him of the serious importance of "the gibberish" which he had reported under protest. The letter closed by recommending that any correspondence which ensued should be kept a secret from me--on the ground that it might excite false hopes in my mind if I were informed of it.

I now understood the tone which my worthy adviser had adopted in writing to me. His interest in the recovery of the letter was evidently so overpowering that common prudence compelled him to conceal it from me, in case of ultimate failure. This did not look as if Mr. Playmore was likely to give up the investigation on my withdrawal from it. I glanced again at the fragments of paper on Benjamin's table, with an interest in them which I had not felt yet.

"Has anything been found at Gleninch?" I asked.

"No," said Benjamin. "I have only been trying experiments with a letter of my own, before I wrote to Mr. Playmore."

"Oh, you have torn up the letter yourself, then?"

"Yes. And, to make it all the more difficult to put them together again, I shook up the pieces in a basket. It's a childish thing to do, my dear, at my age--"

He stopped, looking very much ashamed of himself.

"Well," I went on; "and have you succeeded in putting your letter together again?"

"It's not very easy, Valeria. But I have made a beginning. It's the same principle as the principle in the 'Puzzles' which we used to put together when I was a boy. Only get one central bit of it right, and the rest of the Puzzle falls into its place in a longer or a shorter time. Please don't tell anybody, my dear. People might say I was in my dotage. To think of that gibberish in my note-book having a meaning in it, after all! I only got Mr. Playmore's letter this morning; and--I am really almost ashamed to mention it--I have been trying experiments on torn letters, off and on, ever since. You won't tell upon me, will you?"

I answered the dear old man by a hearty embrace. Now that he had lost his steady moral balance, and had caught the infection of my enthusiasm, I loved him better than ever.

But I was not quite happy, though I tried to appear so. Struggle against it as I might, I felt a little mortified when I remembered that I had resigned all further connection with the search for the letter at such a time as this. My one comfort was to think of Eustace. My one encouragement was to keep my mind fixed as constantly as possible on the bright change for the better that now appeared in the domestic prospect. Here, at least, there was no disaster to fear; here I could honestly feel that I had triumphed. My husband had come back to me of his own free will; he had not given way, under the hard weight of evidence--he had yielded to the nobler influences of his gratitude and his love. And I had taken him to my heart again--not because I had made discoveries which left him no other alternative than to live with me, but because I believed in the better mind that had come to him, and loved and trusted him without reserve. Was it not worth some sacrifice to have arrived at this result! True--most true! And yet I was a little out of spirits. Ah, well! well! the remedy was within a day's journey. The sooner I was with Eustace the better.

Early the next morning I left London for Paris by the tidal-train. Benjamin accompanied me to the Terminus.

"I shall write to Edinburgh by to-day's post," he said, in the interval before the train moved out of the station. "I think I can find the man Mr. Playmore wants to help him, if he decides to go on. Have you any message to send, Valeria?"

"No. I have done with it, Benjamin; I have nothing more to say."

"Shall I write and tell you how it ends, if Mr. Playmore does really try the experiment at Gleninch?"

I answered, as I felt, a little bitterly.

"Yes," I said "Write and tell me if the experiment fail."

My old friend smiled. He knew me better than I knew myself.

"All right!" he said, resignedly. "I have got the address of your banker's correspondent in Paris. You will have to go there for money, my dear; and you _may_ find a letter waiting for you in the office when you least expect it. Let me hear how your husband goes on. Good-by--and God bless you!"

That evening I was restored to Eustace.

He was too weak, poor fellow, even to raise his head from the pillow. I knelt down at the bedside and kissed him. His languid, weary eyes kindled with a new life as my lips touched his. "I must try to live now," he whispered, "for your sake."

My mother-in-law had delicately left us together. When he said those words the temptation to tell him of the new hope that had come to brighten our lives was more than I could resist.

"You must try to live now, Eustace," I said, "for some one else besides me."

His eyes looked wonderingly into mine.

"Do you mean my mother?" he asked.

I laid my head on his bosom, and whispered back--"I mean your child."

I had all my reward for all that I had given up. I forgot Mr. Playmore; I forgot Gleninch. Our new honeymoon dates, in my remembrance, from that day.

The quiet time passed, in the by-street in which we lived. The outer stir and tumult of Parisian life ran its daily course around us, unnoticed and unheard. Steadily, though slowly, Eustace gained strength. The doctors, with a word or two of caution, left him almost entirely to me. "You are his physician," they said; "the happier you make him, the sooner he will recover." The quiet, monotonous round of my new life was far from wearying me. I, too, wanted repose--I had no interests, no pleasures, out of my husband's room.

Once, and once only, the placid surface of our lives was just gently ruffled by an allusion to the past. Something that I accidentally said reminded Eustace of our last interview at Major Fitz-David's house. He referred, very delicately, to what I had then said of the Verdict pronounced on him at the Trial; and he left me to infer that a word from my lips, confirming what his mother had already told him, would quiet his mind at once and forever.

My answer involved no embarrassments or difficulties; I could and did honestly tell him that I had made his wishes my law. But it was hardly in womanhood, I am afraid, to be satisfied with merely replying, and to leave it there. I thought it due to me that Eustace too should concede something, in the way of an assurance which might quiet _my_ mind. As usual with me, the words followed the impulse to speak them. "Eustace," I asked, "are you quite cured of those cruel doubts which once made you leave me?"

His answer (as he afterward said) made me blush with pleasure. "Ah, Valeria, I should never have gone away if I had known you then as well as I know you now!"

So the last shadows of distrust melted away out of our lives.

The very remembrance of the turmoil and the trouble of my past days in London seemed now to fade from my memory. We were lovers again; we were absorbed again in each other; we could almost fancy that our marriage dated back once more to a day or two since. But one last victory over myself was wanting to make my happiness complete. I still felt secret longings, in those dangerous moments when I was left by myself, to know whether the search for the torn letter had or had not taken place. What wayward creatures we are! With everything that a woman could want to make her happy, I was ready to put that happiness in peril rather than remain ignorant of what was going on at Gleninch! I actually hailed the day when my empty purse gave me an excuse for going to my banker's correspondent on business, and so receiving any letters waiting for me which might be placed in my hands.

I applied for my money without knowing what I was about; wondering all the time whether Benjamin had written to me or not. My eyes wandered over the desks and tables in the office, looking for letters furtively. Nothing of the sort was visible. But a man appeared from an inner office: an ugly man, who was yet beautiful to my eyes, for this sufficient reason--he had a letter in his hand, and he said, "Is this for you, ma'am?"

A glance at the address showed me Benjamin's handwriting.

Had they tried the experiment of recovering the letter? and had they failed?

Somebody put my money in my bag, and politely led me out to the little hired carriage which was waiting for me at the door. I remember nothing distinctly until I opened the letter on my way home. The first words told me that the dust-heap had been examined, and that the fragments of the torn letter had been found.

