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Chapter 46 - The Crisis Deferred

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"TAKE care, Valeria!" said Mrs. Macallan. "I ask you no questions; I only caution you for your own sake. Eustace has noticed what I have noticed--Eustace has seen a change in you. Take care!"

So my mother-in-law spoke to me later in the day, when we happened to be alone. I had done my best to conceal all traces of the effect produced on me by the strange and terrible news from Gleninch. But who could read what I had read, who could feel what I now felt, and still maintain an undisturbed serenity of look and manner? If I had been the vilest hypocrite living, I doubt even then if my face could have kept my secret while my mind was full of Benjamin's letter.

Having spoken her word of caution, Mrs. Macallan made no further advance to me. I dare say she was right. Still, it seemed hard to be left, without a word of advice or of sympathy, to decide for myself what it was my duty to my husband to do next.

To show him Benjamin's narrative, in his state of health, and in the face of the warning addressed to me, was simply out of the question. At the same time, it was equally impossible, after I had already betrayed myself, to keep him entirely in the dark. I thought over it anxiously in the night. When the morning came, I decided to appeal to my husband's confidence in me.

I went straight to the point in these terms:

"Eustace, your mother said yesterday that you noticed a change in me when I came back from my drive. Is she right?"

"Quite right, Valeria," he answered--speaking in lower tones than usual, and not looking at me.

"We have no concealments from each other now," I answered. "I ought to tell you, and do tell you, that I found a letter from England waiting at the banker's which has caused me some agitation and alarm. Will you leave it to me to choose my own time for speaking more plainly? And will you believe, love, that I am really doing my duty toward you, as a good wife, in making this request?"

I paused. He made no answer: I could see that he was secretly struggling with himself. Had I ventured too far? Had I overestimated the strength of my influence? My heart beat fast, my voice faltered--but I summoned courage enough to take his hand, and to make a last appeal to him. "Eustace," I said; "don't you know me yet well enough to trust me?"

He turned toward me for the first time. I saw a last vanishing trace of doubt in his eyes as they looked into mine.

"You promise, sooner or later, to tell me the whole truth?" he said

"I promise with all my heart!"

"I trust you, Valeria!"

His brightening eyes told me that he really meant what he said. We sealed our compact with a kiss. Pardon me for mentioning these trifles--I am still writing (if you will kindly remember it) of our new honeymoon.

By that day's post I answered Benjamin's letter, telling him what I had done, and entreating him, if he and Mr. Playmore approved of my conduct, to keep me informed of any future discoveries which they might make at Gleninch.

After an interval---an endless interval, as it seemed to me--of ten days more, I received a second letter from my old friend, with another postscript added by Mr. Playmore.

"We are advancing steadily and successfully with the putting together of the letter," Benjamin wrote. "The one new discovery which we have made is of serious importance to your husband. We have reconstructed certain sentences declaring, in the plainest words, that the arsenic which Eustace procured was purchased at the request of his wife, and was in her possession at Gleninch. This, remember, is in the handwriting of the wife, and is signed by the wife--as we have also found out. Unfortunately, I am obliged to add that the objection to taking your husband into our confidence, mentioned when I last wrote, still remains in force--in greater force, I may say, than ever. The more we make out of the letter, the more inclined we are (if we only studied our own feelings) to throw it back into the dust-heap, in mercy to the memory of the unhappy writer. I shall keep this open for a day or two. If there is more news to tell you by that time you will hear of it from Mr. Playmore."

Mr. Playmore's postscript followed, dated three days later.

"The concluding part of the late Mrs. Macallan's letter to her husband," the lawyer wrote, "has proved accidentally to be the first part which we have succeeded in piecing together. With the exception of a few gaps still left, here and there, the writing of the closing paragraphs has been perfectly reconstructed. I have neither the time nor the inclination to write to you on this sad subject in any detail. In a fortnight more, at the longest, we shall, I hope, send you a copy of the letter, complete from the first line to the last. Meanwhile, it is my duty to tell you that there is one bright side to this otherwise deplorable and shocking document. Legally speaking, as well as morally speaking, it absolutely vindicates your husband's innocence. And it may be lawfully used for this purpose--if he can reconcile it to his conscience, and to the mercy due to the memory of the dead, to permit the public exposure of the letter in Court. Understand me, he cannot be tried again on what we call the criminal charge--for certain technical reasons with which I need not trouble you. But, if the facts which were involved at the criminal trial can also be shown to be involved in a civil action (and in this case they can), the entire matter may be made the subject of a new legal inquiry; and the verdict of a second jury, completely vindicating your husband, may thus be obtained. Keep this information to yourself for the present. Preserve the position which you have so sensibly adopted toward Eustace until you have read the restored letter. When you have done this, my own idea is that you will shrink, in pity to _him,_ from letting him see it. How he is to be kept in ignorance of what we have discovered is another question, the discussion of which must be deferred until we can consult together. Until that time comes, I can only repeat my advice--wait till the next news reaches you from Gleninch."

I waited. What I suffered, what Eustace thought of me, does not matter. Nothing matters now but the facts.

In less than a fortnight more the task of restoring the letter was completed. Excepting certain instances, in which the morsels of the torn paper had been irretrievably lost--and in which it had been necessary to complete the sense in harmony with the writer's intention--the whole letter had been put together; and the promised copy of it was forwarded to me in Paris.

Before you, too, read that dreadful letter, do me one favor. Let me briefly remind you of the circumstances under which Eustace Macallan married his first wife.

Remember that the poor creature fell in love with him without awakening any corresponding affection on his side. Remember that he separated himself from her, and did all he could to avoid her, when he found this out. Remember that she presented herself at his residence in London without a word of warning; that he did his best to save her reputation; that he failed, through no fault of his own; and that he ended, rashly ended in a moment of despair, by marrying her, to silence the scandal that must otherwise have blighted her life as a woman for the rest of her days. Bear all this in mind (it is the sworn testimony of respectable witnesses); and pray do not forget--however foolishly and blamably he may have written about her in the secret pages of his Diary--that he was proved to have done his best to conceal from his wife the aversion which the poor soul inspired in him; and that he was (in the opinion of those who could best judge him) at least a courteous and a considerate husband, if he could be no more.

And now take the letter. It asks but one favor of you: it asks to be read by the light of Christ's teaching--"Judge not, that ye be not judged."