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Chapter 48 - What Else Could I Do?

As soon as I could dry my eyes and compose my spirits after reading the wife's pitiable and dreadful farewell, my first thought was of Eustace--my first anxiety was to prevent him from ever reading what I had read.

Yes! to this end it had come. I had devoted my life to the attainment of one object; and that object I had gained. There, on the table before me, lay the triumphant vindication of my husband's innocence; and, in mercy to him, in mercy to the memory of his dead wife, my one hope was that he might never see it! my one desire was to hide it from the public view!

I looked back at the strange circumstances under which the letter had been discovered.

It was all my doing--as the lawyer had said. And yet, what I had done, I had, so to speak, done blindfold. The merest accident might have altered the whole course of later events. I had over and over again interfered to check Ariel when she entreated the Master to "tell her a story." If she had not succeeded, in spite of my opposition, Miserrimus Dexter's last effort of memory might never have been directed to the tragedy at Gleninch. And, again, if I had only remembered to move my chair, and so to give Benjamin the signal to leave off, he would never have written down the apparently senseless words which have led us to the discovery of the truth.

Looking back at events in this frame of mind, the very sight of the letter sickened and horrified me. I cursed the day which had disinterred the fragments of it from their foul tomb. Just at the time when Eustace had found his weary way back to health and strength; just at the time when we were united again and happy again--when a month or two more might make us father and mother, as well as husband and wife--that frightful record of suffering and sin had risen against us like an avenging spirit. There it faced me on the table, threatening my husband's tranquil life; nay, for all I knew (if he read it at the present critical stage of his recovery) even threatening his life!

The hour struck from the clock on the mantelpiece. It was Eustace's time for paying me his morning visit in my own little room. He might come in at any moment; he might see the letter; he might snatch the letter out of my hand. In a frenzy of terror and loathing, I caught up the vile sheets of paper and threw them into the fire.

It was a fortunate thing that a copy only had been sent to me. If the original letter had been in its place, I believe I should have burned the original at that moment.

The last morsel of paper had been barely consumed by the flames when the door opened, and Eustace came in.

He glanced at the fire. The black cinders of the burned paper were still floating at the back of the grate. He had seen the letter brought to me at the breakfast-table. Did he suspect what I had done? He said nothing--he stood gravely looking into the fire. Then he advanced and fixed his eyes on me. I suppose I was very pale. The first words he spoke were words which asked me if I felt ill.

I was determined not to deceive him, even in the merest trifle.

"I am feeling a little nervous, Eustace," I answered; "that is all."

He looked at me again, as if he expected me to say something more. I remained silent. He took a letter out of the breast-pocket of his coat and laid it on the table before me--just where the Confession had lain before I destroyed it!

"I have had a letter too this morning," he said. "And I, Valeria, have no secrets from you."

I understood the reproach which my husband's last words conveyed; but I made no attempt to answer him.

"Do you wish me to read it?" was all I said pointing to the envelope which he had laid on the table.

"I have already said that I have no secrets from you," he repeated. "The envelope is open. See for yourself what is inclosed in it."

I took out--not a letter, but a printed paragraph, cut from a Scotch newspaper.

"Read it," said Eustace.

I read as follows:

"STRANGE DOINGS AT GLENINCH--A romance in real life seems to be in course of progress at Mr. Macallan's country-house. Private excavations are taking place--if our readers will pardon us the unsavory allusion--at the dust-heap, of all places in the world! Something has assuredly been discovered; but nobody knows what. This alone is certain: For weeks past two strangers from London (superintended by our respected fellow-citizen, Mr. Playmore) have been at work night and day in the library at Gleninch, with the door locked. Will the secret ever be revealed? And will it throw any light on a mysterious and shocking event which our readers have learned to associate with the past history of Gleninch? Perhaps when Mr. Macallan returns, he may be able to answer these questions. In the meantime we can only await events."

I laid the newspaper slip on the table, in no very Christian frame of mind toward the persons concerned in producing it. Some reporter in search of news had evidently been prying about the grounds at Gleninch, and some busy-body in the neighborhood had in all probability sent the published paragraph to Eustace. Entirely at a loss what to do, I waited for my husband to speak. He did not keep me in suspense--he questioned me instantly.

"Do you understand what it means, Valeria?"

I answered honestly--I owned that I understood what it meant.

He waited again, as if he expected me to say more. I still kept the only refuge left to me--the refuge of silence.

"Am I to know no more than I know now?" he proceeded, after an interval. "Are you not bound to tell me what is going on in my own house?"

It is a common remark that people, if they can think at all, think quickly in emergencies. There was but one way out of the embarrassing position in which my husband's last words had placed me. My instincts showed me the way, I suppose. At any rate, I took it.

"You have promised to trust me," I began.

He admitted that he had promised.

"I must ask you, for your own sake, Eustace, to trust me for a little while longer. I will satisfy you, if you will only give me time."

His face darkened. "How much longer must I wait?" he asked.

I saw that the time had come for trying some stronger form of persuasion than words.

"Kiss me," I said, "before I tell you!"

He hesitated (so like a husband!). And I persisted (so like a wife!). There was no choice for him but to yield. Having given me my kiss (not over-graciously), he insisted once more on knowing how much longer I wanted him to wait.

"I want you to wait," I answered, "until our child is born."

He started. My condition took him by surprise. I gently pressed his hand, and gave him a look. He returned the look (warmly enough, this time, to satisfy me). "Say you consent," I whispered.

He consented.

So I put off the day of reckoning once more. So I gained time to consult again with Benjamin and Mr. Playmore.

While Eustace remained with me in the room, I was composed, and capable of talking to him. But when he left me, after a time, to think over what had passed between us, and to remember how kindly he had given way to me, my heart turned pityingly to those other wives (better women, some of them, than I am), whose husbands, under similar circumstances, would have spoken hard words to them--would perhaps even have acted more cruelly still. The contrast thus suggested between their fate and mine quite overcame me. What had I done to deserve my happiness? What had _they_ done, poor souls, to deserve their misery? My nerves were overwrought, I dare say after reading the dreadful confession of Eustace's first wife. I burst out crying--and I was all the better for it afterward!