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Chapter 37 - At The Bedside

BEFORE she had uttered a word, I saw in my mother-in-law's face that she brought bad news.

"Eustace?" I said.

She answered me by a look.

"Let me hear it at once!" I cried. "I can bear anything but suspense."

Mrs. Macallan lifted her hand, and showed me a telegraphic dispatch which she had hitherto kept concealed in the folds of her dress.

"I can trust your courage," she said. "There is no need, my child, to prevaricate with you. Read that."

I read the telegram. It was sent by the chief surgeon of a field-hospital; and it was dated from a village in the north of Spain.

"Mr. Eustace severely wounded in a skirmish by a stray shot. Not in danger, so far. Every care taken of him. Wait for another telegram."

I turned away my face, and bore as best I might the pang that wrung me when I read those words. I thought I knew how dearly I loved him: I had never known it till that moment.

My mother-in-law put her arm round me, and held me to her tenderly. She knew me well enough not to speak to me at that moment.

I rallied my courage, and pointed to the last sentence in the telegram.

"Do you mean to wait?" I asked.

"Not a day!" she answered. "I am going to the Foreign Office about my passport--I have some interest there: they can give me letters; they can advise and assist me. I leave to-night by the mail train to Calais."

"_You_ leave?" I said. "Do you suppose I will let you go without me? Get my passport when you get yours. At seven this evening I will be at your house."

She attempted to remonstrate; she spoke of the perils of the journey. At the first words I stopped her. "Don't you know yet, mother, how obstinate I am? They may keep you waiting at the Foreign Office. Why do you waste the precious hours here?"

She yielded with a gentleness that was not in her everyday character. "Will my poor Eustace ever know what a wife he has got?" That was all she said. She kissed me, and went away in her carriage.

My remembrances of our journey are strangely vague and imperfect.

As I try to recall them, the memory of those more recent and more interesting events which occurred after my return to England gets between me and my adventures in Spain, and seems to force these last into a shadowy background, until they look like adventures that happened many years since. I confusedly recollect delays and alarms that tried our patience and our courage. I remember our finding friends (thanks to our letters of recommendation) in a Secretary to the Embassy and in a Queen's Messenger, who assisted and protected us at a critical point in the journey. I recall to mind a long succession of men in our employment as travelers, all equally remarkable for their dirty cloaks and their clean linen, for their highly civilized courtesy to women and their utterly barbarous cruelty to horses. Last, and most important of all, I see again, more clearly than I can see anything else, the one wretched bedroom of a squalid village inn in which we found our poor darling, prostrate between life and death, insensible to everything that passed in the narrow little world that lay around his bedside.

There was nothing romantic or interesting in the accident which had put my husband's life in peril.

He had ventured too near the scene of the conflict (a miserable affair) to rescue a poor lad who lay wounded on the field--mortally wounded, as the event proved. A rifle-bullet had struck him in the body. His brethren of the field-hospital had carried him back to their quarters at the risk of their lives. He was a great favorite with all of them; patient and gentle and brave; only wanting a little more judgment to be the most valuable recruit who had joined the brotherhood.

In telling me this, the surgeon kindly and delicately added a word of warning as well.

The fever caused by the wound had brought with it delirium, as usual. My poor husband's mind, in so far as his wandering words might interpret it, was filled by the one image of his wife. The medical attendant had heard enough in the course of his ministrations at the bedside, to satisfy him that any sudden recognition of me by Eustace (if he recovered) might be attended by the most lamentable results. As things were at that sad time, I might take my turn at nursing him, without the slightest chance of his discovering me, perhaps for weeks and weeks to come. But on the day when he was declared out of danger--if that happy day ever arrived--I must resign my place at his bedside, and must wait to show myself until the surgeon gave me leave.

My mother-in-law and I relieved each other regularly, day and night, in the sick-room.

In the hours of his delirium--hours that recurred with a pitiless regularity--my name was always on my poor darling's fevered lips. The ruling idea in him was the fine dreadful idea which I had vainly combated at our last interview. In the face of the verdict pronounced at the Trial, it was impossible even for his wife to be really and truly

persuaded that he was an innocent man. All the wild pictures which his distempered imagination drew for that one obstinate conviction. He fancied himself to be still living with me under those dreaded conditions. Do what he might, I was always recalling to him the terrible ordeal through which he had passed. He acted his part, and he acted mine. He gave me a cup of tea; and I said to him, "We quarreled yesterday, Eustace. Is it poisoned?" He kissed me, in token of our reconciliation; and I laughed, and said, "It's morning now, my dear. Shall I die by nine o'clock to-night?" I was ill in bed, and he gave me my medicine. I looked at him with a doubting eye. I said to him, "You are in love with another woman. Is there anything in the medicine that the doctor doesn't know of?" Such was the horrible drama which now perpetually acted itself in his mind. Hundreds and hundreds of times I heard him repeat it, almost always in the same words. On other occasions his thoughts wandered away to my desperate project of proving him to be an innocent man. Sometimes he laughed at it. Sometimes he mourned over it. Sometimes he devised cunning schemes for placing unsuspected obstacles in my way. He was especially hard on me when he was inventing his preventive stratagems--he cheerfully instructed the visionary people who assisted him not to hesitate at offending or distressing me. "Never mind if you make her angry; never mind if you make her cry. It's all for her good; it's all to save the poor fool from dangers she doesn't dream of. You mustn't pity her when she says she does it for my sake. See! she is going to be insulted; she is going to be deceived; she is going to disgrace herself without knowing it. Stop her! stop her!" It was weak of me, I know; I ought to have kept the plain fact that he was out of his senses always present to my mind: still it is true that my hours passed at my husband's pillow were many of them hours of mortification and misery of which he, poor dear, was the innocent and only cause.

The weeks passed; and he still hovered between life and death.

I kept no record of the time, and I cannot now recall the exact date on which the first favorable change took place. I only remember that it was toward sunrise on a fine winter morning when we were relieved at last of our heavy burden of suspense. The surgeon happened to be by the bedside when his patient awoke. The first thing he did, after looking at Eustace, was to caution me by a sign to be silent and to keep out of sight. My mother-in-law and I both knew what this meant. With full hearts we thanked God together for giving us back the husband and the son.

The same evening, being alone, we ventured to speak of the future--for the first time since we had left home.

"The surgeon tells me," said Mrs. Macallan, "that Eustace is too weak to be capable of bearing anything in the nature of a surprise for some days to come. We have time to consider whether he is or is not to be told that he owes his life as much to your care as to mine. Can you find it in your heart to leave him, Valeria, now that God's mercy has restored him to you and to me?"

"If I only consulted my own heart," I answered, "I should never leave him again."

Mrs. Macallan looked at me in grave surprise.

"What else have you to consult?" she asked.

"If we both live," I replied, "I have to think of the happiness of his life and the happiness of mine in the years that are to come. I can bear a great deal, mother, but I cannot endure the misery of his leaving me for the second time."

"You wrong him, Valeria--I firmly believe you wrong him--in thinking it possible that he can leave you again."

"Dear Mrs. Macallan, have you forgotten already what we have both heard him say of me while we have been sitting by his bedside?"

"We have heard the ravings of a man in delirium. It is surely hard to hold Eustace responsible for what he said when he was out of his senses."

"It is harder still," I said, "to resist his mother when she is pleading for him. Dearest and best of friends! I don't hold Eustace responsible for what he said in the fever--but I do take warning by it. The wildest words that fell from him were, one and all, the faithful echo of what he said to me in the best days of his health and his strength. What hope have I that he will recover with an altered mind toward me? Absence has not changed it; suffering has not changed it. In the delirium of fever, and in the full possession of his reason, he has the same dreadful doubt of me. I see but one way of winning him back: I must destroy at its root his motive for leaving me. It is hopeless to persuade him that I believe in his innocence: I must show him that belief is no longer necessary; I must prove to him that his position toward me has become the position of an innocent man!"

"Valeria! Valeria! you are wasting time and words. You have tried the experiment; and you know as well as I do that the thing is not to be done."

I had no answer to that. I could say no more than I had said already.

"Suppose you go back to Dexter, out of sheer compassion for a mad and miserable wretch who has already insulted you," proceeded my mother-in-law. "You can only go back accompanied by me, or by some other trustworthy person. You can only stay long enough to humor the creature's wayward fancy, and to keep his crazy brain quiet for a time. That done, all is done--you leave him. Even supposing Dexter to be still capable of helping you, how can you make use of him but by admitting him to terms of confidence and familiarity--by treating him, in short, on the footing of an intimate friend? Answer me honestly: can you bring yourself to do that, after what happened at Mr. Benjamin's house?"

I had told her of my last interview with Miserrimus Dexter, in the natural confidence that she inspired in me as relative and fellow-traveler; and this was the use to which she turned her information! I suppose I had no right to blame her; I suppose the motive sanctioned everything. At any rate, I had no choice but to give offense or to give an answer. I gave it. I acknowledged that I could never again permit Miserrimus Dexter to treat me on terms of familiarity as a trusted and intimate friend.

Mrs. Macallan pitilessly pressed the advantage that she had won.

"Very well," she said, "that resource being no longer open to you, what hope is left? Which way are you to turn next?"

There was no meeting those questions, in my present situation, by any adequate reply. I felt strangely unlike myself--I submitted in silence. Mrs. Macallan struck the last blow that completed her victory.

"My poor Eustace is weak and wayward," she said; "but he is not an ungrateful man. My child, you have returned him good for evil--you have proved how faithfully and how devotedly you love him, by suffering all hardships and risking all dangers for his sake. Trust me, and trust him! He cannot resist you. Let him see the dear face that he has been dreaming of looking at him again with all the old love in it, and he is yours once more, my daughter--yours for life." She rose and touched my forehead with her lips; her voice sank to tones of tenderness which I had never heard from her yet. "Say yes, Valeria," she whispered; "and be dearer to me and dearer to him than ever!"

My heart sided with her. My energies were worn out. No letter had arrived from Mr. Playmore to guide and to encourage me. I had resisted so long and so vainly; I had tried and suffered so much; I had met with such cruel disasters and such reiterated disappointments--and he was in the room beneath me, feebly finding his way back to consciousness and to life--how could I resist? It was all over. In saying Yes (if Eustace confirmed his mother's confidence in him), I was saying adieu to the one cherished ambition, the one dear and noble hope of my life. I knew it--and I said Yes.

And so good-by to the grand struggle! And so welcome to the new resignation which owned that I had failed.

My mother-in-law and I slept together under the only shelter that the inn could offer to us--a sort of loft at the top of the house. The night that followed our conversation was bitterly cold. We felt the chilly temperature, in spite of the protection of our dressing-gowns and our traveling-wrappers. My mother-in-law slept, but no rest came to me. I was too anxious and too wretched, thinking over my changed position, and doubting how my husband would receive me, to be able to sleep.

Some hours, as I suppose, must have passed, and I was still absorbed in my own melancholy thoughts, when I suddenly became conscious of a new and strange sensation which astonished and alarmed me. I started up in the bed, breathless and bewildered. The movement awakened Mrs. Macallan. "Are you ill?" she asked. "What is the matter with you?" I tried to tell her, as well as I could. She seemed to understand me before I had done; she took me tenderly in her arms, and pressed me to her bosom. "My poor innocent child," she said, "is it possible you don't know? Must I really tell you?" She whispered her next words. Shall I ever forget the tumult of feelings which the whisper aroused in me--the strange medley of joy and fear, and wonder and relief, and pride and humility, which filled my whole being, and made a new woman of me from that moment? Now, for the first time, I knew it! If God spared me for a few months more, the most enduring and the most sacred of all human joys might be mine--the joy of being a mother.

I don't know how the rest of the night passed. I only find my memory again when the morning came, and when I went out by myself to breathe the crisp wintry air on the open moor behind the inn.

I have said that I felt like a new woman. The morning found me with a new resolution and a new courage. When I thought of the future, I had not only my husband to consider now. His good name was no longer his own and mine--it might soon become the most precious inheritance that he could leave to his child. What had I done while I was in ignorance of this? I had resigned the hope of cleansing his name from the stain that rested on it--a stain still, no matter how little it might look in the eye of the law. Our child might live to hear malicious tongues say, "Your father was tried for the vilest of all murders, and was never absolutely acquitted of the charge." Could I face the glorious perils of childbirth with that possibility present to my mind? No! not until I had made one more effort to lay the conscience of Miserrimus Dexter bare to my view! not until I had once again renewed the struggle, and brought the truth that vindicated the husband and the father to the light of day!

I went back to the house, with my new courage to sustain me. I opened my heart to my friend and mother, and told her frankly of the change that had come over me since we had last spoken of Eustace.

She was more than disappointed--she was almost offended with me. The one thing needful had happened, she said. The happiness that might soon come to us would form a new tie between my husband and me. Every other consideration but this she treated as purely fanciful. If I left Eustace now, I did a heartless thing and a foolish thing. I should regret, to the end of my days, having thrown away the one golden opportunity of my married life.

It cost me a hard struggle, it oppressed me with many a painful doubt; but I held firm this time. The honor of the father, the inheritance of the child--I kept these thoughts as constant ly as possible before my mind. Sometimes they failed me, and left me nothing better than a poor fool who had some fitful bursts of crying, and was always ashamed of herself afterward. But my native obstinacy (as Mrs. Macallan said) carried me through. Now and then I had a peep at Eustace, while he was asleep; and that helped me too. Though they made my heart ache and shook me sadly at the times those furtive visits to my husband fortified me afterward. I cannot explain how this happened (it seems so contradictory); I can only repeat it as one of my experiences at that troubled time.

I made one concession to Mrs. Macallan--I consented to wait for two days before I took any steps for returning to England, on the chance that my mind might change in the interval.

It was well for me that I yielded so far. On the second day the director of the field-hospital sent to the post-office at our nearest town for letters addressed to him or to his care. The messenger brought back a letter for me. I thought I recognized the handwriting, and I was right. Mr. Playmore's answer had reached me at last!

If I had been in any danger of changing my mind, the good lawyer would have saved me in the nick of time. The extract that follows contains the pith of his letter; and shows how he encouraged me when I stood in sore need of a few cheering and friendly words.

"Let me now tell you," he wrote, "what I have done toward verifying the conclusion to which your letter points.

"I have traced one of the servants who was appointed to keep watch in the corridor on the night when the first Mrs. Eustace died at Gleninch. The man perfectly remembers that Miserrimus Dexter suddenly appeared before him and his fellow-servant long after the house was quiet for the night. Dexter said to them, 'I suppose there is no harm in my going into the study to read? I can't sleep after what has happened; I must relieve my mind somehow.' The men had no orders to keep any one out of the study. They knew that the door of communication with the bedchamber was locked, and that the keys of the two other doors of communication were in the possession of Mr. Gale. They accordingly permitted Dexter to go into the study. He closed the door (the door that opened on the corridor), and remained absent for some time--in the study as the men supposed; in the bedchamber as we know from what he let out at his interview with you. Now he could enter that room, as you rightly imagine, in but one way--by being in possession of the missing key. How long he remained there I cannot discover. The point is of little consequence. The servant remembers that he came out of the study again 'as pale as death,' and that he passed on without a word on his way back to his own room.

"These are facts. The conclusion to which they lead is serious in the last degree. It justifies everything that I confided to you in my office at Edinburgh. You remember what passed between us. I say no more.

"As to yourself next. You have innocently aroused in Miserrimus Dexter a feeling toward you which I need not attempt to characterize. There is a certain something--I saw it myself--in your figure, and in some of your movements, which does recall the late Mrs. Eustace to those who knew her well, and which has evidently had its effect on Dexter's morbid mind. Without dwelling further on this subject, let me only remind you that he has shown himself (as a consequence of your influence over him) to be incapable, in his moments of agitation, of thinking before he speaks while he is in your presence. It is not merely possible, it is highly probable, that he may betray himself far more seriously than he has betrayed himself yet if you give him the opportunity. I owe it to you (knowing what your interests are) to express myself plainly on this point. I have no sort of doubt that you have advanced one step nearer to the end which you have in view in the brief interval since you left Edinburgh. I see in your letter (and in my discoveries) irresistible evidence that Dexter must have been in secret communication with the deceased lady (innocent communication, I am certain, so far as _she_ was concerned), not only at the time of her death, but perhaps for weeks before it. I cannot disguise from myself or from you, my own strong persuasion that if you succeed in discovering the nature of this communication, in all human likelihood you prove your husband's innocence by the discovery of the truth. As an honest man, I am bound not to conceal this. And, as an honest man also, I am equally bound to add that, not even with your reward in view, can I find it in my conscience to advise you to risk what you must risk if you see Miserrimus Dexter again. In this difficult and delicate matter I cannot and will not take the responsibility: the final decision must rest with yourself. One favor only I entreat you to grant--let me hear what you resolve to do as soon as you know it yourself."

The difficulties which my worthy correspondent felt were no difficulties to me. I did not possess Mr. Playmore's judicial mind. My resolution was settled before I had read his letter through.

The mail to France crossed the frontier the next day. There was a place for me, under the protection of the conductor, if I chose to take it. Without consulting a living creature--rash as usual, headlong as usual--I took it.

