

"Why not?" he asked, suddenly changing his tone and speaking sharply.

I dare say it will seem ridiculous to some people—but it is really true that he shook my resolution to go to Major Fitz-David when he put his arm round me. Even a mere passing caress, from him, stole away my heart, and softly tempted me to yield. But the ominous alteration in his tone made another woman of me. I felt once more, and felt more strongly than ever, that, in my critical position, it was useless to stand still, and worse than useless to draw back.

"I am sorry to disappoint you," I answered. "It is impossible for me, as I told you at Ramsgate, to be ready to sail at a moment's notice. I want time."

"What for?"

Not only his tone, but his look, when he put that second question, jarred on every nerve in me. He roused in my mind—I can't tell how or why—an angry sense of the indignity that he had put upon his wife in marrying her under a false name. Fearing that I should answer rashly, that I should say something which my better sense might regret, if I spoke at that moment, I said nothing. Women alone can estimate what it cost me to be silent. And men alone can understand how irritating my silence must have been to my husband.

"You want time?" he repeated. "I ask you again—what for?"

My self-control, pushed to its extreme limits, failed me. The rash reply flew out of my lips, like a bird set free from a cage.

"I want time," I said, "to accustom myself to my right name."

He suddenly stepped up to me with a dark look.

"What do you mean by your 'right name'?"

"Surely you know," I answered. "I once thought I was Mrs. Woodville. I have now discovered that I am Mrs. Macallan."

He started back at the sound of his own name as if I had struck him; he started back and turned so deadly pale that I feared he was going to drop at my feet in a swoon. Oh, my tongue! my tongue! Why had I not controlled my miserable mischievous woman's tongue?

"I didn't mean to alarm you, Eustace," I said. "I spoke at random. Pray forgive me."

He waved his hand impatiently, as if my penitent words were tangible things—ruffling, worrying things, like flies in summer—which he was putting away from him.

"What else have you discovered?" he asked, in low stern tones.

"Nothing, Eustace."

"Nothing?" He paused as he repeated the word, and passed his hand over his forehead in a weary way. "Nothing, of course," he resumed, speaking to himself, "or she would not be here." He paused once more, and looked at me searchingly. "Don't say again what you said just now," he went on. "For your own sake, Valeria, as well as for mine." He dropped into the nearest chair, and said no more.

I certainly heard the warning; but the only words which really produced an impression on my mind were the words preceding it, which he had spoken to himself. He had said:—"Nothing of course, or she would not be here." If I had found out some other truth besides the truth about the name, would it have prevented me from ever returning to my husband? Was that what he meant? Did the sort of discovery that he contemplated, mean something so dreadful that it would have parted us at once and for ever? I stood by his chair in silence; and tried to find the answer to those terrible questions in his face. It used to speak to me so eloquently when it spoke of his love. It told me nothing now.

He sat for some time without looking at me, lost in his own thoughts. Then he rose on a sudden, and took his hat.

"The friend who lent me the yacht is in town," he said. "I suppose I had better see him, and say our plans are changed." He tore up the telegram with an air of sullen resignation as he spoke. "You are evidently determined not to go to sea with me," he resumed. "We have better give it up. I don't see what else is to be done. Do you?"

His tone was almost a tone of contempt. I was too depressed about myself, too alarmed about him, to resent it.

"Decide as you think best, Eustace," I said sadly. "Every way, the prospect seems a hopeless one. As long as I am shut out from your confidence, it matters little whether we live on land or at sea—we cannot live happily."

"If you could control your curiosity," he answered sternly, "we might live happily enough. I thought I had married a woman who was superior to the vulgar failings of her sex. A good wife should know better than to pry into affairs of her husband's with which she has no concern."

Surely it was hard to bear this! However, I bore it.

"Is it no concern of mine?" I asked gently, "when I find that my husband has not married me under his family name? Is it no concern of mine when I hear your mother say, in so many words, that she pitied your wife? It is hard, Eustace, to accuse me of curiosity, because I cannot accept the unendurable position in which you have placed me. Your cruel silence is a blight on my happiness, and a threat to my future. Your cruel silence is estranging us from each other, at the beginning of our married life. And you blame me for feeling this? You tell me I am prying into affairs which are your's only? They are not your's only: I have my interest in them too. Oh, my darling, why do you trifle with our love and confidence in each other? Why do you keep me in the dark?"

He answered with a stern and pitiless brevity.

"For your own good."

I turned away from him in silence. He was treating me like a child.

He followed me. Putting one hand heavily on my shoulder, he forced me to face him at once.

"Listen to this," he said. "What I am now going to say to you, I say for the first, and last time. Valeria! If you ever discover what I am now keeping from your knowledge, from that moment you live a life of torture; your tranquillity is gone. Your days will be days of terror; your nights will be full of horrid dreams through no fault of mine, mind! through no fault of mine! Every day of your life, you will feel some new distrust, some growing fear of me, and you will be doing me the vilest injustice all the time. On my faith as a Christian, on my honour as a man, if you stir a step farther in this matter, there is an end of your happiness for the rest of your life! Think seriously of what I have said to you; you will have time to reflect. I am going to tell my friend that our plans for the Mediterranean are given up. I shall not be back before the evening." He sighed, and looked at me with unutterable sadness. "I love you, Valeria," he said. "In spite of all that has passed, as God is my witness, I love you more dearly than ever."

So he spoke. So he left me.

I must write the truth about myself, however strange it may appear. I don't pretend to be able to analyse my own motives; I don't pretend even to guess how other women might have acted in my place. It is true of me, that my husband's terrible warning—all the more terrible in its mystery and its vagueness—produced no deterrent effect on my mind: it only stimulated my resolution to discover what he was hiding from me. He had not been gone two minutes before I rang the bell, and ordered the carriage to take me to Major Fitz-David's house in Vivian Place.

Walking to an iron grille I was waiting—I was in such a fever of excitement that it was impossible for me to sit still—I accidentally caught sight of myself in the glass.

My own face startled me: it looked so haggard and so wild. Could I present myself to a stranger, could I hope to produce the necessary impression in my favour, looking as I looked at that moment? For all I knew to the contrary, my whole future might depend upon the effect which I produced on Major Fitz-David at first sight. I rang the bell again, and sent a message to one of the chambermaids to follow me to my room.

I had no maid of my own with me: the stewardess of the yacht would have acted as my attendant, if we had held to our first arrangement. It mattered little, so long as I had a woman to help me. The chambermaid appeared. I can give no better idea of the disordered and desperate condition of my mind at that time, than by owning that I actually consulted this perfect stranger on the question of my personal appearance. She was a middle-aged woman, with a large experience of the world and its wickedness written legibly on her manner and on her face. I put mine into the woman's hand, enough of it to surprise her. She thanked me with a cynical smile, evidently placing her own evil interpretation on my motive for bribing her.

"What can I do for you, ma'am?" she asked in a confidential whisper. "Don't speak loud! There is somebody in the next room."

"I want to look my best," I said; "and I have sent for you to help me."

"I understand, ma'am."

She nodded her head significantly, and whispered to me again.

"Lord bless you, I'm used to this!" she said. "There is a gentleman in the case. Don't mind me, ma'am. It's a way I have. I mean no harm." She stopped and looked at me critically. "I wouldn't change my dress, if I were you," she went on. "The colour becomes you."

It was too late to resent the woman's impertinence. There was no help for it but to make use of her. Besides, she was right about the dress. It was of a delicate maize colour, prettily trimmed with lace. I could wear nothing which suited me better. My hair, however, stood in need of some skilled attention. The chambermaid re-arranged it, with a ready hand which showed that she was no beginner in the art of dressing hair. She laid down the combs and brushes, and looked at me—then looked at the toilette table, searching for something which she apparently failed to find.

"Where do you keep it?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Look at your complexion, ma'am. You will frighten him if he sees you like that. A touch of colour you must have. Where do you keep it? What! you haven't got it? you never use it? Dear, dear, dear me!"

For a moment, surprise fairly deprived her of her self-possession! Recovering herself, she begged permission to leave me for a minute. I let her go, knowing what her errand was. She came back with a box of paints and powders; and I said nothing to check her. I saw, in the glass, my skin take a false fairness, my cheeks a false colour, my eyes a false brightness—and I never shrank from it. No! I let the odious deceit go on; I even admired the extraordinary delicacy and dexterity with which it was all done. "Anything" (I thought to myself, in the madness of that miserable time), "so long as it helps me to win the Major's confidence! Anything so long as I discover what those last words of my husband's really mean!"

The transformation of my face was accomplished. The chambermaid pointed with her wicked forefinger in the direction of the glass.

"Bear in mind, ma'am, what you looked like when you sent for me," she said. "And just see for yourself how you look now. You're the prettiest woman (of your style) in London. Ah, what a thing pearl powder is, when one knows how to use it!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE FRIEND OF THE WOMEN.

I find it impossible to describe my sensations while the carriage was taking me to Major Fitz-David's house. I doubt, indeed, if I really felt or thought at all, in the true sense of those words.

From the moment when I had resigned myself into the hands of the chambermaid, I seemed in some strange way to have lost my ordinary identity, to have stepped out of my own character. At other times, my temperament was of the nervous and anxious sort, and my tendency was to exaggerate any difficulties that might place themselves in my way. At other times, having before me the prospect of a critical interview with a stranger, I should have considered with myself what it might be wise to pass over, and what it might be wise to say. Now, I never gave my coming interview with the Major a thought; I felt an unreasoning confidence in myself, and a blind faith in him. Now, neither the past nor the future troubled me; I lived unreflectingly in the present. I looked at the shops as we drove by them, and at the other carriages as they passed mine. I noticed—yes! and enjoyed—the glances of admiration which chance foot-passengers on the pavement cast on me. I said to myself, "This looks well for my prospect of making a friend of the Major!" When we drew up at the door in Vivian Place, it is no exaggeration to say that I had but one anxiety, anxiety to find the Major at home.

The door was opened by a servant out of livery, an old man who looked as if he might have been a soldier in his earlier days. He eyed me with a grave attention, which relaxed little by little into sly approval. I asked for Major Fitz-David. The answer was not altogether encouraging: the man was not sure whether his master was at home or not.

I gave him my card. My cards, being part of my wedding outfit, necessarily had the false name printed on them, *Mrs. Eustace Woodville*. The servant showed me into a front room on the ground floor, and disappeared with my card in his hand.

Looking about me, I noticed a door in the wall opposite the window, communicating with some inner room. The door was not of the ordinary kind. It fitted into the thickness of the partition wall, and worked in grooves. Looking a little nearer, I saw that it had not been pulled out so as completely to close the doorway. Only the merest chink was left; but it was enough to convey to my ears all that passed in the next room.

"What did you say, Oliver, when she asked for me?" inquired a man's voice, pitched cautiously in a low key.

"I said I was not sure you were at home, sir," answered the voice of the servant who had let me in.

There was a pause. The first speaker was evidently Major Fitz-David himself. I waited to hear more.

"I think I had better not see her, Oliver," the Major's voice resumed.

"Very good, sir."

"Say I have gone out, and you don't know when I shall be back again. Beg the lady to write, if she has any business with me."

"Yes, sir."

"Stop, Oliver."

Oliver stopped. There was another and longer pause. Then the master resumed the examination of the man.

"Is she young, Oliver?"

"Yes, sir."

"And—pretty?"

"Better than pretty, sir, to my thinking."

"Aye? aye? What you call a fine woman—eh, Oliver?"

"Certainly, sir."

"Tall?"

"Nearly as tall as I am, Major."

"Aye? aye? aye? A good figure?"

"As slim as a sapling, sir, and as upright as a dart."

"On second thoughts I am at home, Oliver. Show her in! show her in!"

So far, one thing at least seemed to be clear. I had done well in sending for the chambermaid. What would Oliver's report of me have been, if I had presented myself to him with colourless cheek and my ill-dressed hair?

The servant re-appeared; and conducted me to the inner room. Major Fitz-David advanced to welcome me. What was the Major like?

Well—he was like a well-preserved old gentleman of (say) sixty years old; little and lean, and chiefly remarkable by the extraordinary length of his nose. After this feature, I noticed, next, his beautiful brown wig; his sparkling little grey eyes; his rosy complexion; his short military whisker, dyed to match his wig; his white teeth and his winning smile; his smart blue frock-coat, with a camella in the button-hole; and his splendid ring—a ruby, flashing on his little finger as he courteously signed to me to take a chair.

"Dear Mrs. Woodville, how very kind of you this is! I have been longing to have the happiness of knowing you. Eustace is an old friend of mine. I congratulated him when I heard of his marriage. May I make a confession?—I envy him now I have seen his wife."

The future of my life was, perhaps, in the man's hands. I studied him attentively; I tried to read his character in his face.

The Major's sparkling little grey eyes softened as they looked at me; the Major's strong and sturdy voice dropped to its lowest and tenderest tones when he spoke to me; the Major's manner expressed, from the moment when I entered the room, a happy mixture of admiration and respect. He drew his chair close to mine, as if it was a privilege to be near me. He took my hand, and lifted my glove to his lips, as if that glove was the most delicious luxury the world could produce. "Dear Mrs.

Woodville," he said as he softly laid my hand back on my lap, "bear with an old fellow who worships your enchanting sex. You really brighten this dull house. It is such a pleasure to see you!"

There was no need for the old gentleman to make his little confession. Women, children, and dogs proverbially know by instinct who the people are who really like them. The women had a warm friend—perhaps, at one time, a dangerous warm friend—in Major Fitz-David. I knew as much of him as that, before I had settled myself in my chair and opened my lips to answer him.

"Thank you, Major, for your kind reception and your pretty compliment," I said; matching my host's easy tone as closely as the necessary restraints on my side would permit. "You have made your confession. May I make mine?"

Major Fitz-David lifted his hand again from my lap, and drew his chair as close as possible to mine. I looked at him gravely, and tried to release my hand. Major Fitz-David declined to let go of it, and proceeded to tell me why.

"I have just heard you speak for the first time," he said. "I am under the charm of your voice. Dear Mrs. Woodville, bear with an old fellow who is under the charm! Don't grudge me my innocent little pleasures. Lend me—I wish I could say give me—this pretty hand. I am such an admirer of pretty hands; I can listen so much better with a pretty hand in mine. The ladies indulge my weakness. Please indulge me too. Yes? And what were you going to say?"

"I was going to say, Major, that I felt particularly sensible of your kind welcome, because, as it happens, I have a favour to ask of you."

I was conscious, while I spoke, that I was approaching the object of my visit a little too abruptly. But Major Fitz-David's admiration rose from one climax to another with such alarming rapidity, that I felt the importance of administering a practical check to it. I trusted to those ominous words, "a favour to ask of you," to administer the check—and I did not trust in vain. My aged admirer gently dropped my hand, and (with all possible politeness) changed the subject.

"The favour is granted, of course! he said. "And now—tell me—how is our dear Eustace?"

"Anxious and out of spirits," I answered.

"Anxious and out of spirits!" repeated the Major. "The enviable man who is married to you, anxious and out of spirits! Monstrous! Eustace fairly disgusts me. I shall take him off the list of my friends."

"In that case, take me off the list with him, Major. I am in wretched spirits too. You are my husband's old friend. I may acknowledge to you that our married life, is, just now, not quite a happy one."

Major Fitz-David lifted his eyebrows (dyed to match his whiskers) in polite surprise.

"Already!" he exclaimed. "What can Eustace be made of? Has he no appreciation of beauty and grace? Is he the most insensible of living beings?"

"He is the best and dearest of men," I answered. "But there is some dreadful mystery in his past life—"

I could get no further: Major Fitz-David deliberately stopped me. He did it with the smoothest politeness, on the surface. But I saw a look in his bright little eyes, which said plainly, "If you will venture on delicate ground, madam, don't ask me to accompany you."

"My charming friend!" he exclaimed. "May I call you my charming friend? You have—among a thousand other delightful qualities which I can see already—a vivid imagination. Don't let it get the upper hand. Take an old fellow's advice; don't let it get the upper hand! What can I offer you, dear Mrs. Woodville? A cup of tea?"

"Call me by my right name, sir," I answered boldly. "I have made a discovery. I know as well as you do, that my name is Macallan."

The Major started, and looked at me very attentively. His manner became grave, his tone changed completely, when he spoke next.

"May I ask," he said, "if you have communicated to your husband the discovery which you have just mentioned to me?"

"Certainly!" I answered. "I consider that my husband owes me an explanation. I have asked him to tell me what his extraordinary conduct means—and he has refused, in language that frightens me. I have appealed to his mother—and she has refused to explain, in language that humiliates me. Dear Major Fitz-David, I have no friends to take my part; I have nobody to come to but you! Do me the greatest of all favours—tell me why your friend Eustace has married me under a false name!"

"Do me the greatest of all favours," answered the Major. "Don't ask me to say a word about it."

He looked, in spite of his unsatisfactory reply as if he really felt for me. I determined to try my utmost powers of persuasion; I resolved not to be beaten at the first repulse.

"I must ask you," I said. "Think of my position. How can I live, knowing what I know, and knowing to more? I would rather hear the most horrible thing you can tell me than be condemned [as I am now] to perpetual misgiving and perpetual suspense. I love my husband with all my heart; but I cannot live with him on these terms: the misery of it would drive me mad. I am only a woman, Major. I can only throw myself on your kindness. Don't—pray, pray don't keep me in the dark!"

I could say no more. In the reckless impulse of the moment, I snatched up his hand and raised it to my lips. The gallant old gentleman started as if I had given him an electric shock.

"My dear, dear lady!" he exclaimed, "I can't tell you how I feel for you! You charm me, you overwhelm me, you touch me to the