



"I will join you in a few minutes. Au revoir, my charming pupil—Au revoir"—(See page 319, col. 1.)

his means would allow, was a great collector of books—and there I told my old friend, frankly and truly, all that I have told here.

He was too distressed to say much. He fervently pressed my hand, he fervently thanked God that my father had not lived to hear what he had heard. Then, after a pause, he repeated my mother-in-law's name to himself, in a doubting, questioning tone.

"Macallan?" he said. "Macallan? Where have I heard that name? Why does it sound as if it wasn't strange to me?"

He gave up pursuing the lost recollection, and asked, very earnestly, what he could do for me. I answered that he could help me in the first place to put an end to the doubt—an unendurable doubt to me—whether I was lawfully married or not. His energy of the old days when he had conducted my father's business showed itself again, the moment I said these words.

"Your carriage is at the door, my dear," he answered. "Come with me to my lawyer, without wasting another moment."

We drove to Lincoln's Inn Fields.

At my request, Benjamin put my case to the lawyer, as the case of a friend in whom I was interested. The answer was given without hesitation. I had married, honestly believing my husband's name to be the name under which I had known him. The witnesses to my marriage, my uncle, my aunt, and Benjamin, had acted, as I had acted, in perfect good faith. Under those circumstances, there was no doubt about the law. I was legally married. Macallan or Woodville, I was his wife.

This decisive answer relieved me of a heavy anxiety. I accepted my old friend's invitation to return with him to St. John's Wood, and to make my luncheon at his early dinner.

On our way back I reverted to the one other subject which was now uppermost in my mind.

I reiterated my resolution to discover why Eustace had not married me under the name that was really his own.

My companion shook his head, and entreated me to consider well beforehand what I proposed doing. His advice to me—so strange do extremes meet!—was my mother-in-law's advice, repeated almost word for word. "Leave things as they are, my dear. In the interest of your own peace of mind, be satisfied with your husband's affection. You know that you are his wife, and you know that he loves you. Surely that is enough?"

I had but one answer to this. Life, on such conditions as my good friend had just stated, would be simply unendurable to me. Nothing could alter my resolution, for this plain reason, that nothing could reconcile me to living with my husband on the terms on which we were living now. It only rested with Benjamin to say whether he would give a helping hand to his master's daughter or not.

The old man's answer was thoroughly characteristic of him.

"Mention what you want of me, my dear," was all he said.

We were then passing a street in the neighbourhood of Portman Square. I was on the point of speaking again when the words were suspended on my lips. I saw my husband.

He was just descending the steps of a house, as if leaving it after a visit. His eyes were on the ground; he did not look up when the carriage passed. As the servant closed the door behind him, I noticed that the number of the house was sixteen. At the next corner I saw the name of the street. It was Vivian Place.

"Do you happen to know who lives at number sixteen, Vivian Place?" I inquired of my companion.

Benjamin started. My question was certainly a strange one, after what he had just said to me.

"No," he replied. "Why do you ask?"

"I have just seen Eustace leaving that house."

"Well, my dear, and what of that?"

"My mind is in a bad way, Benjamin. Everything my husband does that I don't understand rouses my suspicion now."

Benjamin lifted his withered old hands, and let them drop on his knees again in mute lamentation over me.

"I tell you again," I went on, "my life is unendurable to me. I won't answer for what I may do if I am left much longer to live in doubt of the one man on earth whom I love. You have had experience of the world. Suppose you were shut out from Eustace's confidence as I am? Suppose you were as fond of him as I am, and felt your position as bitterly as I feel it, what would you do?"

The question was plain. Benjamin met it with a plain answer.

"I think I should find my way, my dear, to some intimate friend of your husband's," he said, "and make a few discreet inquiries in that quarter first."

Some intimate friend of my husband's? I considered with myself. There was but one friend of his whom I knew of: my uncle's correspondent, Major Fitz-David. My heart beat fast as the name recurred to my memory. Suppose I followed Benjamin's advice? Suppose I applied to Major Fitz-David? Even if he too refused to answer my questions, my position would not be more helpless than it was now. I determined to make the attempt. The only difficulty in the way, so far, was to discover the Major's address. I had given back his letter to Doctor Starkweather, at my uncle's own request. I remembered that the address from

which the Major wrote was somewhere in London, and I remembered no more.

"Thank you, old friend; you have given me an idea already," I said to Benjamin. "Have you got a directory in your house?"

"No, my dear," he rejoined, looking very much puzzled. "But I can easily send out and borrow one."

We returned to the Villa. The servant was sent at once to the nearest stationer's to borrow a directory. She returned with the book just as we sat down to dinner. Searching for the Major's name under the letter F, I was startled by a new discovery.

"Benjamin!" I said. "This is a strange coincidence. Look here!"

He looked where I pointed. Major Fitz-David's address was Number Sixteen, Vivian Place—the very house which I had seen my husband leaving as we passed in the carriage!

CHAPTER VII.

ON THE WAY TO THE MAJOR.

"Yes," said Benjamin. "It is a coincidence certainly. Still—"

He stopped and looked at me. He seemed a little doubtful how I might receive what he had in his mind to say to me next.

"Go on," I said.

"Still, my dear, I see nothing suspicious in what has happened," he resumed. "To my mind, it is quite natural that your husband, being in London, should pay a visit to one of his friends. And it's equally natural that we should pass through Vivian Place on our way back here. This seems to be the reasonable view. What do you say?"

"I have told you already that my mind is in a bad way about Eustace," I answered. "I say there is some motive at the bottom of his visit to Major Fitz-David. It is not an ordinary call. I am firmly convinced it is not an ordinary call!"

"Suppose we get on with our dinner?" said Benjamin resignedly. "Here is a loin of mutton, my dear, an ordinary loin of mutton. Is there anything suspicious in that? Very well, then. Show me you have confidence in the mutton; please eat. There's the wine, again. No mystery, Valeria, in that claret; I'll take my oath it's nothing but innocent juice of the grape. If we can't believe in anything else, let's believe in juice of the grape. Your good health, my dear."

I adapted myself to the old man's genial humour as readily as I could. We eat and we drank, and we talked of bygone days. For a little while I was almost happy in the company of my fatherly old friend. Why was I not old too? Why had I not done with love—with its certain miseries; its transient delights; its cruel losses; its bitterly doubtful gains? The last autumn flowers in the window basked brightly in the last of the autumn sunlight. Benjamin's little dog digested his dinner in perfect comfort on the hearth. The parrot in the next house screeched his vocal accomplishments cheerfully. I don't doubt that it is a great privilege to be a human being. But may it not be the happier destiny to be an animal or a plant?

The brief respite was soon over; all my anxieties came back. I was once more a doubting, discontented, depressed creature, when I rose to say good-bye.

"Promise, my dear, you will do nothing rash," said Benjamin, as he opened the door for me.

"Is it rash to go to Major Fitz-David?" I asked.

"Yes, if you go by yourself. You don't know what sort of man he is; you don't know how he may receive you. Let me try first, and pave the way, as the saying is. Trust my experience, my dear. In matters of this sort there is nothing like paving the way."

I considered a moment. It was due to my good friend to consider before I said No.

Reflection decided me on taking the responsibility, whatever it might be, upon my own shoulders. Good or bad, compassionate or cruel, the Major was a man. A woman's influence was the safest influence to trust with him, where the end to be gained was such an end as I had in view. It was not easy to say this to Benjamin without the danger of mortifying him. I made an appointment with the old man to call on me the next morning at the hotel, and talk the matter over again. Is it very disgraceful to me to add that I privately determined, if the thing could be accomplished, to see Major Fitz-David in the interval?

"Do nothing rash, my dear. In your own interests, do nothing rash!"

Those were Benjamin's last words when we parted for the day.

I found Eustace waiting for me in our sitting-room at the hotel. His spirits seemed to have revived since I had seen him last. He advanced to meet me cheerfully, with an open sheet of paper in his hand.

"My business is settled, Valeria, sooner than I expected," he began gaily. "Are your purchases all completed, fair lady? Are you free, too?"

I had learnt already, God help me! to distrust his fits of gaiety. I asked cautiously,

"Do you mean free for to-day?"

"Free for to-day, and to-morrow, and next week, and next month, and next year, too, for all I know to the contrary," he answered, putting his arm boisterously round my waist.

"Look here!"

He lifted the open sheet of paper which I had noticed in his hand, and held it for me to read. It was a telegram to the sailing master of the yacht, informing him that we had arranged to return to Ramsgate that evening, and that we should be ready to sail for the Mediterranean with the next tide.

"I only waited for your return," said Eustace, "to send the telegram to the office."

He crossed the room, as he spoke, to ring the bell. I stopped him.

"I am afraid I can't go to Ramsgate to-day," I said.