

anybody, to believe in his innocence," the Major replied.

"Help me to the door," I said. "Where is he? I must, and will see him!"

I dropped back exhausted on the sofa as I said the words. Major Fitz-David poured out a glass of wine from the bottle on the table, and insisted on my drinking it.

"You shall see him," said the Major. "I promise you that. The doctor has forbidden him to leave the house until you have seen him. Only wait a little! My poor dear lady, wait, if it is only for a few minutes, until you are stronger!"

I had no choice but to obey him. Oh, those miserable helpless minutes on the sofa! I cannot write of them without shuddering at the recollection, even at this distance of time.

"Bring him here!" I said. "Pray, pray bring him here!"

"Who is to persuade him to come back?" asked the Major sadly. "How can I, how can anybody, prevail with a man—a madman I had almost said—who could leave you at the moment when you first opened your eyes on him? I saw Eustace alone in the next room, while the doctor was in attendance on you. I tried to shake his obstinate distrust of your belief in his innocence, and of my belief in his innocence, by every argument and every appeal that an old friend could address to him. He had but one answer to give me. Reason as I might, and plead as I might, he still persisted in referring me to the Scotch Verdict."

"The Scotch Verdict?" I repeated. "What is that?"

The Major looked surprised at the question.

"Have you really never heard of the Trial?" he said.

"Never."

"I thought it strange," he went on, "when you told me you had found out your husband's true name, that the discovery appeared to have suggested no painful association to your mind. It is not more than three years since all England was talking of your husband. One can hardly wonder at his taking refuge, poor fellow, in an assumed name! Where could you have been at the time?"

"Did you say it was three years ago?" I asked.

"Yes."

"I think I can explain my strange ignorance of what was so well known to everyone else. Three years since my father was alive. I was living with him, in a country house in Italy, up in the mountains, near Siena. We never saw an English newspaper, or met with an English traveller, for weeks and weeks together. It is just possible that there might have been some reference made to the Trial in my father's letters from England. If there was, he never told me of it. Or, if he did mention the case, I felt no interest in it, and forgot it again directly. Tell me—what has the Verdict to do with my husband's horrible doubt of us? Eustace is a free man. The verdict was not guilty, of course?"

Major Fitz-David shook his head sadly.

"Eustace was tried in Scotland," he said. "There is a verdict allowed by the Scotch law, which, so far as I know, is not permitted by the laws of any other civilized country on the face of the earth. When the jury are in doubt whether to condemn or acquit the prisoner brought before them, they are permitted, in Scotland, to express that doubt by a form of compromise. If there is not evidence enough, on the one hand, to justify them in finding a prisoner guilty, and not evidence enough, on the other hand, to thoroughly convince them that a prisoner is innocent, they extricate themselves from the difficulty by finding a verdict of Not Proven."

"Was that the verdict when Eustace was tried?" I asked.

"Yes."

"The jury were not quite satisfied that my husband was guilty? and not quite satisfied that my husband was innocent? Is that what the Scotch Verdict means?"

"That is what the Scotch Verdict means. For three years that doubt about him in the minds of the jury who tried him has stood on public record."

Oh, my poor darling! my innocent martyr! I understood it at last. The false name in which he had married me; the terrible words he had spoken, when he had warned me to respect his secret; the still more terrible doubt that he felt of me at that moment—it was all intelligible to my sympathies; it was all clear to my understanding now. I got up again from the sofa, strong in a daring resolution which the Scotch Verdict had suddenly kindled in me—a resolution at once too sacred and too desperate to be confided, in the first instance, to any other than my husband's ear.

"Take me to Eustace," I said. "I am strong enough to bear anything now."

After one searching look at me, the Major silently offered me his arm and led me out of the room.

CHAPTER XII.

THE SCOTCH VERDICT.

We walked to the far end of the hall. Major Fitz-David opened the door of a long narrow room, built out at the back of the house as a smoking-room, and extending along one side of the courtyard as far as the stable wall.

My husband was alone in the room, seated at the farther end of it, near the fireplace. He started to his feet and faced me in silence as I entered. The Major softly closed the door on us and retired. Eustace never stirred a step to meet me. I ran to him, and threw my arms round his neck and kissed him. The embrace was not returned; the kiss was not returned. He passionately submitted—nothing more.

"Eustace!" I said, "I never loved you more dearly than I love you at this moment! I never felt for you as I feel for you now!"

He released himself deliberately from my arms. He signed to me with the mechanical courtesy of a stranger to take a chair.

"Thank you, Valeria," he answered, in cold measured tones. "You could say no less to me after what has happened, and you could say no more. Thank you."

We were standing before the fireplace. He left me and walked away slowly with his head down, apparently intending to leave the room. I followed him, I got before him, I placed myself between him and the door.

"Why do you leave me?" I said. "Why do you speak to me in this cruel way? Are you angry, Eustace? My darling, if you are angry, I ask you to forgive me."

"It is I who ought to ask your pardon," he replied. "I beg you to forgive me, Valeria, for having made you my wife."

He pronounced these words with a hopeless heart-broken humanity dreadful to see. I laid my hand on his bosom. I said, "Eustace, look at me."

He slowly lifted his eyes to my face—eyes cold and clear and tearless, looking at me in steady resignation, in immovable despair. In the utter wretchedness of that moment, I was like him; I was as quiet and as cold as my husband. He chilled, he froze me.

"Is it possible," I said, "that you doubt my belief in your innocence?"

He left the question unanswered. He sighed bitterly to himself. "Poor woman!" he said, as a stranger might have said, pitying me. "Poor woman!"

My heart swelled in me as if it would burst. I lifted my hand from his bosom, and laid it on his shoulder to support myself.

"I don't ask you to pity me, Eustace; I ask you to do me justice. You are not doing me justice. If you had trusted me with the truth, in the days when we first knew that we loved each other—if you had told me all, and more than all that I know now—as God is my witness, I would still have married you! Now do you doubt that I believe you are an innocent man?"

"I don't doubt it," he said. "All your impulses are generous, Valeria. You are speaking generously, and feeling generously. Don't blame me, my poor child, if I look on farther than you do: if I see what is to come—too surely to come—in the cruel future."

"The cruel future!" I repeated. "What do you mean?"

"You believe in my innocence, Valeria. The jury who tried me doubted it, and have left that doubt on record. What reason have you for believing, in the face of the verdict, that I am an innocent man?"

"I want no reason! I believe, in spite of the jury, in spite of the verdict."

"Will your friends agree with you? When your uncle and aunt know what has happened—and sooner or later they must know it—what will they say? They will say, 'He began badly; he concealed from our niece that he had been wedded to a first wife; he married our niece under a false name. He may say he is innocent; but we have only his word for it. When he was put on his trial, the verdict was not proven. Not proven won't do for us. If the jury have done him an injustice—if he is innocent—let him prove it.' That is what the world thinks and says of me. That is what your friends will think and say of me. The time is coming, Valeria, when you—even you—will feel that your friends have reason to appeal to on their side, and that you have no reason on yours."

"That time will never come!" I answered warmly. "You wrong me, you insult me, in thinking it possible!"

He put down my hand from him, and drew back a step, with a bitter smile.

"We have only been married a few days, Valeria. Your love for me is new and young. Time, which wears away all things, will wear away the first fervour of that love."

"Never! never!"

He drew back from me a little further still.

"Look at the world round you," he said.

"The happiest husbands and wives have their occasional misunderstandings and disagreements; the brightest married life has its passing clouds. When those days come for us, the doubts and fears that you don't feel now, will find their way to you then. When the clouds rise on our married life—when I say my first harsh word, when you make your first hasty reply—then, in the solitude of your own room, in the stillness of the wakeful night, you will think of my first wife's miserable death. You will remember that I was held responsible for it, and that my innocence was never proved. You will say to yourself, 'Did it begin, in her time, with a harsh word from him, and with a hasty reply from her? Will it one day end with me as the jury half feared that it ended with her?' Hideous questions for a wife to ask herself! You will stifle them; you will recoil from them, like a good woman, with horror. But, when we meet the next morning, you will be on your guard, and I shall see it, and know in my heart of hearts what it means. Embittered by that knowledge, my next harsh word may be harsher still. Your next thoughts of me may remind you, more vividly and more boldly, that your husband was once tried as a poisoner, and that the question of his first wife's death was never properly cleared up. Do you see what materials for a domestic hell are mingling for us here? Was it for nothing that I warned you, solemnly warned you, to draw back, when I found you bent on discovering the truth? Can I ever be at your bedside now, when you are ill, and not remind you, in the most innocent things I do, of what happened at that other bedside, in the time of that other woman whom I married first? If I pour out your medicine I commit a suspicious action—they said I poisoned her in her medicine. If I bring you a cup of tea, I revive the remembrance of a horrid doubt—they said I put the

arsenic in her cup of tea. If I kiss you when I leave the room, I remind you that the prosecution accused me of kissing her, to save appearances and produce an effect on the nurse. Can we live together on such terms as these? No mortal creatures could support the misery of it. This very day I said it to you, 'If you stir a step farther in this matter, there is an end of your happiness for the rest of your life.' You have taken that step—and the end has come to your happiness and to mine. The blight that causers and kills is on you and on me for the rest of our lives!"

So far I had forced myself to listen to him. At those last words, the picture of the future that he was placing before me became too hideous to be endured. I refused to hear more.

"You are talking horribly," I said. "At your age and at mine, have we done with love, and done with hope? It is blasphemy to love and hope to say it!"

"Wait till you have read the Trial," he answered. "You mean to read it, I suppose?"

"Every word of it! With a motive, Eustace, which you have yet to know."

"No motive of yours, Valeria, no love and hope of yours, can alter the inexorable facts. My first wife died poisoned; and the verdict of the jury has not absolutely acquitted me of the guilt of causing her death. As long as you were ignorant of that, the possibilities of happiness were always within our reach. Now you know it, I say again—our married life is at an end."

"No," I said. "Now I know it, our married life has begun—begun with a new object for your wife's devotion, with a new reason for your wife's love!"

"What do you mean?"

I went near to him again, and took his hand.

"What did you tell me the world has said of you? 'Not proven won't do for us. If the jury have done him an injustice—if he is innocent—let him prove it.' Those were the words you put into the mouths of my friends. I adopt them for mine! I say, not proven won't do for me. Prove your right, Eustace, to a verdict of not guilty. Why have you let three years pass without doing it? Shall I guess why? You have waited for your wife to help you. Here she is, my darling, ready to help you with all her heart and soul. Here she is, with one object in life—to show the world, and to show the Scotch jury, that her husband is an innocent man!"

I had roused myself; my pulses were throbbing, my voice rang through the room. Had I roused him? What was his answer?

"Read the Trial," that was his answer.

I seized him by the arm. In my indignation and my despair, I shook him with all my strength. God forgive me, I could almost have struck him, for the tone in which he had spoken, and the look that he had cast on me!

"I have told you that I mean to read the Trial," I said. "I mean to read it, line by line, with you. Some inexcusable mistake has been made. Evidence in your favour, that might have been found, has not been found. Suspicious circumstances have not been investigated. Crafty people have not been watched. Eustace! the conviction of some dreadful oversight, committed by you or by the persons who helped you, is firmly settled in my mind. The resolution to set that vile verdict right was the first resolution that came to me when I heard of it in the next room. We will set it right! We must set it right—for your sake, for my sake, for the sake of our children if we are blest with children. Oh, my own love, don't look at me with those cold eyes! Don't answer me in those hard tones! Don't treat me as if I was talking ignorantly and madly of something that can never be!"

Still, I never roused him. His next words were spoken compassionately rather than coldly—that was all.

"My defence was undertaken by the greatest lawyers in the land," he said. "After such men have done their utmost, and have failed, my poor Valeria, what can you, what can I, do? We can only submit."

"Never!" I cried. "The greatest lawyers are mortal men; the greatest lawyers have made mistakes before now. You can't deny that."

"Read the Trial." For the third time, he said those words, and said no more.

In utter despair of moving him—feeling keenly, bitterly (if I must own it) his mercurial superiority to all that I had said to him in the honest fervour of my devotion and my love—I thought of Major Fitz-David as a last resort. In the disordered state of my mind, at that moment, it made no difference to me that the Major had already tried to reason with him, and had failed. In the face of the facts, I had blind belief in the influence of his old friend, if his old friend could only be prevailed upon to support my view.

"Wait for me one moment," I said. "I want you to hear another opinion besides mine."

I left him, and returned to the study. Major Fitz-David was not there. I knocked at the door of communication with the front room. It was opened instantly by the Major himself. The doctor had gone away. Benjamin still remained in the room.

"Will you come and speak to Eustace?" I began. "If you will only say what I want you to say—"

Before I could add a word more, I heard the house door opened and closed. Major Fitz-David and Benjamin heard it too. They looked at each other in silence.

I ran back, before the Major could stop me, to the room in which I had seen Eustace. It was empty. My husband had left the house.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MAN'S DECISION.

My first impulse was the reckless impulse to follow Eustace—openly, through the streets.

The Major and Benjamin both opposed this hasty resolution on my part. They appealed to my own sense of self-respect, without (so far as I remember it) producing the slightest effect on my mind. They were more successful when they entreated me next to be patient, for my husband's sake. In mercy to Eustace, they begged me to wait half an hour. If he failed to return in that time, they pledged themselves to accompany me in search of him to the hotel.

In mercy to Eustace, I consented to wait. What I suffered under the forced necessity for remaining passive at that crisis in my life, no words of mine can tell. It will be better if I go on with my narrative.

Benjamin was the first to ask me what had passed between my husband and myself.

"You may speak freely, my dear," he said. "I know what has happened since you have been in Major Fitz-David's house. No one has told me about it; I found it out for myself. If you remember, I was struck by the name of 'Macallan,' when you first mentioned it to me at my cottage. I couldn't guess why, at the time. I know why, now."

Hearing this, I told them both unreservedly what I had said to Eustace, and how he had received it. To my unspeakable disappointment, they both sided with my husband—treating my view of his position as a mere dream. They said it, as he had said it, "You have not read the Trial."

I was really enraged with them. "The facts are enough for me," I said. "We know he is innocent. Why is his innocence not proved? It ought to be, it must be, it shall be! If the Trial tells me it can't be done, I refuse to believe the Trial. Where is the book, Major? Let me see for myself, if his lawyers have left nothing for his wife to do. Did they love him as I love him? Give me the book!"

Major Fitz-David looked at Benjamin.

"It will only additionally shock and distress her, if I give her the book," he said. "Don't you agree with me?"

I interposed before Benjamin could answer.

"If you refuse my request," I said, "you will oblige me, Major, to go to the nearest bookseller and tell him to buy the Trial for me. I am determined to read it."

This time, Benjamin sided with me.

"Nothing can make matters worse than they are, sir," he said. "If I may be permitted to advise, let her have her own way."

The Major rose, and took the book out of the Italian cabinet—to which he had consigned it for safe keeping.

"My young friend tells me, that she informed you of her regrettable outbreak of temper a few days since," he said, as he handed me the volume. "I was not aware, at the time, what book she had in her hand when she so far forgot herself as to destroy the vase. When I left you in the study, I supposed the Report of the Trial to be in its customary place, on the top shelf of the book-case; and I own I felt some curiosity to know whether you would think of examining that shelf. The broken vase—it is needless to conceal it from you now—was one of a pair presented to me by your husband and his first wife only a week before the poor woman's terrible death. I felt my first resentment that you were on the brink of discovery, when I found you looking at the fragments—and I fancy I betrayed to you that something of the sort was disturbing me. You looked as if you noticed it."

"I did notice it, Major. And I too had a vague idea that I was on the way to discovery. Will you look at your watch? Have we waited half an hour yet?"

My impatience had misled me. The ordeal of the half hour was not yet at an end.

Slowly and more slowly, the heavy minutes followed each other—and still there were no signs of my husband's return. We tried to continue our conversation, and talked. Nothing was audible: no sounds but the ordinary sounds of the street disturbed the dreadful silence. Try as I might to forget it, there was one foreboding thought that pressed closer and closer on my mind, as the interval of waiting wore its weary way on. I shuddered as I asked myself, if our married life had come to an end—if Eustace had really left me?

The Major saw, what Benjamin's slower perception had not yet discovered—that my fortitude was beginning to sink under the unrelieved oppression of suspense.

"Come!" he said. "Let us go to the hotel."

It then wanted nearly five minutes to the half hour. I looked my gratitude to Major Fitz-David for sparing me those last minutes; I could not speak to him, or to Benjamin. In silence, we three got into a cab and drove to the hotel.

The landlady met us in the hall. Nothing had been seen or heard of Eustace. There was a letter waiting for me upstairs, on the table in our sitting-room. It had been left at the hotel by a messenger, only a few minutes since.

Trembling and breathless, I ran up the stairs; the two gentlemen following me. The writing on the address of the letter was in my husband's hand. My heart sank in me as I looked at the lines; there could be but one reason for his writing to me. That closed envelope held his farewell words. I sat with the letter on my lap, stupefied—incapable of opening it.

Kind-hearted Benjamin attempted to comfort and encourage me. The Major, with his larger experience of women, warned the old man to be silent.

"Wait," I heard him whisper. "Speaking to her will do no good, now. Give her time."

Acting on a sudden impulse, I held out the letter to him as he spoke. Even moments might be of importance, if Eustace had indeed left me. To give me time, might be to lose the opportunity of recalling him.

"You are his old friend," I said. "Open his letter, Major, and read it for me."