

I knelt down to examine it, eager to clear my mind, if I could, of the degrading jealousy that had got possession of me.

Unfortunately, the lower shelf contained nothing but relics of the Major's military life; comprising his sword and pistols, his epaulettes, his sash, and other minor accoutrements. None of these objects excited the slightest interest in me. My eyes wandered back to the upper shelf; and, like the fool I was (there is no milder word that can fully describe me at that moment), I took the photograph out again, and enraged myself uselessly by another look at it. This time I observed, what I had not noticed before, that there were some lines of writing (in a woman's hand) at the back of the portraits. The lines ran thus:

"To Major Fitz-David, with two vases. From his friends, S. and E. M."

Was one of those two vases the vase that had been broken? And was the change that I had noticed in Major Fitz-David's face produced by some past association in connection with it, which in some way affected me? It might or might not be so. I was little disposed to indulge in speculation on this topic, while the far more serious question of the initials confronted me on the back of the photograph.

"S. and E. M.?" Those last two letters might stand for the initials of my husband's name—his true name—Eustace Macallan. In this case, the first letter ("S."), in all probability, indicated her name. What right had she to associate herself with him in that manner? I considered a little, my memory exerted itself, I suddenly called to mind that Eustace had sisters. He had spoken of them more than once, in the time before our marriage. Had I been mad enough to torture myself with jealousy of my husband's sister? It might well be so; "S." might stand for his sister's Christian name. I felt heartily ashamed of myself as this new view of the matter dawned on me. What a wrong I had done to them both in my thoughts! I turned the photograph sadly and penitently, to examine the portraits again with a kinder and truer appreciation of them.

I naturally looked now for a family likeness between the two faces. There was no family likeness; on the contrary, they were as unlike each other in form and expression as faces could be. Was she his sister after all? I looked at her hands, as represented in the portrait. Her right hand was clasped by Eustace; her left hand lay on her lap. On the third finger, distinctly visible, there was a wedding-ring. Were any of my husband's sisters married? I had myself asked him the question when he mentioned them to me; and I perfectly remembered that he had replied in the negative.

Was it possible that my first jealous instinct had led me to the right conclusion after all? If it had, what did the association of the three initial letters mean? What did the wedding-ring mean? Good Heavens! was I looking at the portrait of a rival in my husband's affections, and was that rival his wife?

I threw the photograph from me with a cry of horror. For one terrible moment I felt as if my reason was giving way. I don't know what would have happened, or what I should have done next, if my love for Eustace had not taken the uppermost place among the contending emotions that tortured me. That faithful love steadied my brain. That faithful love roused the reviving influence of my better and nobler sense. Was the man whom I had enshrined in my heart of hearts capable of such base wickedness as the bare idea of his marriage to another woman implied? No! Mine was the baseness, mine the wickedness, in having even for a moment thought of it.

I picked up the detestable photograph from the floor, and put it back in the book. I hastily closed the cupboard door, fetched the library ladder, and set it against the bookcase. My one idea, now, was the idea of taking refuge in employment of any sort from my own thoughts. I felt the hateful suspicion that had degraded me coming back again in spite of my efforts to repel it. The books! the books! my only hope was to absorb myself, body and soul, in the books.

I had one foot on the ladder when I heard the door of the room open, the door which communicated with the hall.

I looked round, expecting to see the Major. I saw instead the Major's future prima donna standing just inside the door, with her round eyes steadily fixed on me.

"I can stand a good deal," the girl began coolly; "but I can't stand *this* any longer."

"What is it that you can't stand any longer?" asked.

"If you have been here a minute, you have been here two good hours," she went on. "All by yourself in the Major's study. I am of a jealous disposition, I am. And I want to know what it means." She advanced a few steps nearer to me, with a heightening colour and a threatening look. "Is he going to bring you out on the stage?" she asked sharply.

"Certainly not."

"He ain't in love with you, is he?" Under other circumstances, I might have told her to leave the room. In my position, at that critical moment, the mere presence of a human creature was a positive relief to me. Even this girl, with her coarse questions and her uncultivated manners, was a welcome intruder on my solitude; she offered me a refuge from myself.

"Your question is not very civilly put," I said. "However, I excuse you. You are probably not aware that I am a married woman."

"What has that got to do with it?" she retorted. "Married or single, it's all one to the Major. That brazen-faced hussy who calls herself Lady Clarinda is married, and she sends him nose-gays three times a week! Not that I care, mind you, about the old fool. But I've lost my situation at the railway, and I've got my own interests to look after, and I don't know what may happen if I let other women come

between him and me. That's where the shoe pinches—don't you see? I'm not easy in my mind when I see him leaving you mistress here to do just what you like. No offence! I speak out, I do. I want to know what you are about, all by yourself, in this room? How did you pick up with the Major? I never heard him speak of you before to-day."

Under all the surface selfishness and coarseness of this strange girl there was a certain frankness and freedom which pleaded in her favour, to my mind at any rate. I answered frankly and freely on my side.

"Major Fitz-David is an old friend of my husband's," I said; "and he is kind to me for my husband's sake. He has given me permission to look in this room."

I stopped, at a loss how to describe my employment in terms which should tell her nothing, and which should at the same time successfully set her distrust of me at rest.

"To look about in this room—for what?" she asked. Her eyes fell on the library ladder, beside which I was still standing. "For a book?" she resumed.

"Yes," I said, taking the hint. "For a book." "Haven't you found it yet?"

"No." She looked hard at me; undisguisedly considering with herself whether I was, or was not, speaking the truth.

"You seem to be a good sort," she said, making up her mind at last. "There's nothing stuck up about you. I'll help you if I can. I have rummaged among the books here over and over again, and I know more about them than you do. What book do you want?"

As she put that awkward question, she noticed for the first time Lady Clarinda's nose-gay lying on the side table where the Major had left it. Instantly forgetting where and my book, this curious girl pounced like a fury on the flowers, and actually trampled them under her feet!

"There!" she cried, "If I had Lady Clarinda here, I'd serve her in the same way."

"What will the Major say?" I asked.

"What do I care? Do you suppose I'm afraid of him? Only last week I broke one of his fine gimcracks up there, and all through Lady Clarinda and her flowers!"

She pointed to the top of the bookcase—to the empty space on it, close by the window. My heart gave a sudden bound, as my eyes took the direction indicated by her finger. She had broken the vase! Was the way to discovery about to reveal itself to me, through this girl? Not a word would pass my lips; I could only look at her.

"Yes!" she said. "The thing stood here. He knows how I late her flowers, and he put her nose-gay in the vase out of my way. There was a woman's face painted on the china; and he told me it was the living image of her face. It was no more like her than I am. I was in such a rage that I up with the book I was reading at the time, and shied it at the painted face. Over the vase went, bless your heart—crash to the floor. Stop a bit! I wonder whether *that's* the book you have been looking after? Are you like me? Do you like reading Trials?"

Trials? Had I heard her aright? Yes: she had said, Trials.

I answered by an affirmative motion of my head. I was still speechless. The girl sauntered in her cool way to the fireplace, and taking up the tongs, returned with them to the bookcase.

"Here's where the book fell," she said—"in the space between the bookcase and the wall. I'll have it out in no time."

I waited without moving a muscle, without uttering a word.

She approached me, with the tongs in one hand, and with a plainly-bound volume in the other.

"Is that the book?" she said. "Open it, and see."

I took the book from her.

"It's tremendously interesting," she went on. "I've read it twice over—I have. Mind you, I believe he did it after all."

Did it? Did what? What was she talking about? I tried to put the question to her. I struggled—quite vainly—to say only those words: "What are you talking about?"

She seemed to lose all patience with me. She snatched the book out of my hand, and opened it before me on the table by which we were standing side by side.

"I declare you're as help-eas-as-a-baby!" she said contemptuously. "There! Is that the book?"

I read the first lines on the title-page:—

A COMPLETE REPORT OF

THE TRIAL OF

EUSTACE MACALLAN.

I stopped, and looked up at her. She started back from me with a scream of terror. I looked down again at the title-page, and read the next lines:—

FOR THE ALLEGED POISONING

OF

HIS WIFE.

There, God's mercy remembered me. There, the black blank of a swoon swallowed me up.

CHAPTER XI.

THE RETURN TO LIFE.

My first remembrance, when I began to recover my senses, was the remembrance of Pain-agonising pain, as if every nerve in my body was being twisted and torn out of me. My whole being writhed and quivered under the dumb and recalcitrant protest of Nature against the effort to recall me to life. I would have given worlds to be able to cry out—to entreat the unseen creatures about me to give me back to death. How long that speechless agony held me, I never

knew. In a longer or a shorter time there stole over me slowly, a sleepy sense of relief. I heard my own laboured breathing, I felt my hands moving feebly and mechanically like the hands of a baby. I faintly opened my eyes, and looked round me—as if I had passed through the ordeal of death, and had awakened to new senses, in a new world.

The first person I saw, was a man—a stranger. He moved quietly out of my sight; beckoning, as he disappeared, to some other person in the room.

Slowly and unwillingly, the other person advanced to the sofa on which I lay. A faint cry of joy escaped me; I tried to hold out my feeble hands. The other person who was approaching me was my husband!

I looked at him eagerly. He never looked at me in return. With his eyes on the ground, with a strange appearance of confusion and distress in his face, he too moved away out of my sight. The unknown man whom I had first noticed, followed him out of the room. I called after him faintly, "Eustace!" He never answered; he never returned. With an effort I moved my head on the pillow, so as to look round on the other side of the sofa. Another familiar face appeared before me as if in a dream. My good old Benjamin was sitting watching me, with the tears in his eyes.

He rose and took my hand silently, in his simple kindly way.

"Where is Eustace?" I asked. "Why has he gone away and left me?"

(To be continued.)

Amusement.

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29th October.

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