

"Why?"

He pronounced that one word in a tone so utterly unlike his natural tone that his voice sounded quite strange to me.

"You won't be angry, Eustache, if I tell you?" I said. "My uncle, as I understood him, had several motives for writing to the Major. One of them was to inquire if he knew your mother's address."

Eustache suddenly stood still.

I paused at the same moment, feeling that I could venture no farther without the risk of offending him.

To speak the truth, his conduct, when he first mentioned our engagement to my uncle, had been (so far as appearances went) a little flimsy and strange. The Vicar had naturally questioned him about his family. He had answered that his father was dead; and he had consented, though not very readily, to announce his contemplated marriage to his mother. Informing us that she too lived in the country, he had gone to see her—without more particularly mentioning her address. In two days he had returned to the Vicarage with a very startling message. His mother intended no disrespect to me or my relatives; but she disapproved so absolutely of her son's marriage that she (and the members of her family, who all agreed with her) would refuse to be present at the ceremony, if Mr. Woodville persisted in keeping his engagement with Doctor Starkweather's niece. Being asked to explain this extraordinary communication, Eustache had told us that his mother and his sisters were bent on his marrying another lady, and that they were bitterly mortified and disappointed by his choosing a stranger to the family. The explanation was enough for me; it implied, so far as I was concerned, a compliment to my superior influence over Eustache, which a woman always receives with pleasure. But it failed to satisfy my uncle and my aunt. The Vicar expressed to Mr. Woodville a wish to visit his mother, or to see her, on the subject of her strange message. Eustache obstinately declined to mention his mother's address, on the ground that the Vicar's interference would be utterly useless. My uncle at once drew the conclusion that the mystery about the address indicated something wrong. He refused to favour Mr. Woodville's renewed proposal for my hand; and he wrote the same day to make inquiries of Mr. Woodville's reference, and of his own friend—Major Fitz-David.

Under such circumstances as these, to speak of my uncle's motives was to venture on very delicate ground. Eustache relieved me from further embarrassment by asking a question to which I could easily reply.

"Has your uncle received any answer from Major Fitz-David?" he inquired.

"Yes."

"Were you allowed to read it?" His voice sank as he said those words; his face betrayed a sudden anxiety which it pained me to see.

"I have got the answer with me to show you," I said.

He almost snatched the letter out of my hand; he turned his back on me to read it by the light of the moon. The letter was short enough to be soon read. I could have repeated it at the time. I can repeat it now.

"DEAR VICAR,—

"Mr. Eustache Woodville is quite correct in stating to you that he is a gentleman by birth and position, and that he inherits (under his deceased father's will) an independent fortune of two thousand a year,

"Always yours,

"LAWRENCE FITZ-DAVID."

"Can anybody wish for a plainer answer than that?" Eustache asked, handing the letter back to me.

"If I had written for information about you," I answered, "it would have been plain enough for me."

"Is it not plain enough for your uncle?"

"No."

"What does he say?"

"Why need you care to know, my darling?"

"I want to know, Valeria. There must be no secret between us in this matter. Did your uncle say anything when he showed you the Major's letter?"

"Yes."

"What was it?"

"My uncle told me that his letter of inquiry filled three pages, and he bade me observe that the Major's answer contained one sentence only. He said, 'I volunteered to go to Major Fitz-David and talk the matter over. You see, he takes no notice of my proposal. I asked him for the address of Mr. Woodville's mother. He passes over my request, as he has passed over my proposal—he studiously confines himself to the shortest possible statement of bare facts. Use your own common sense, Valeria. Isn't this rudeness rather remarkable on the part of a man who is a gentleman by birth and breeding, and who is also a friend of mine?'"

Eustache stopped me there.

"Did you answer your uncle's question?" he asked.

"No," I replied. "I only said that I did not understand the Major's conduct."

"And what did your uncle say next? If you love me, Valeria, tell me the truth."

"He used very strong language, Eustache. He is an old man; you must not be offended with him."

"I am not offended. What did he say?"

"He said, 'Mark my words! There is something under the surface in connection with Mr. Woodville, or with his family, to which Major Fitz-David is not at liberty to allude. Properly interpreted, Valeria, that letter is a warning. Show it to Mr. Woodville, and tell him (if you like) what I have just told you—'"

Eustache stopped me again.

"You are sure your uncle said those words?" he asked, scanning my face attentively in the moonlight.

"Quite sure. But I don't say what my uncle says. Pray don't think that!"

He suddenly pressed me to his bosom, and fixed his eyes on mine. His look frightened me.

"Good bye, Valeria!" he said. "Try and think kindly of me, my darling, when you are married to some happier man."

He attempted to leave me. I clung to him in an agony of terror that shook me from head to foot.

"What do you mean?" I asked, as soon as I could speak. "I am yours and yours only. What have I said, what have I done, to deserve those dreadful words?"

"We must part, my angel," he answered, sadly. "The fault is none of yours; the misfortune is all mine. My Valeria! how can you marry a man who is an object of suspicion to your nearest and dearest friends? I have led a dreary life. I have never found in any other woman the sympathy with me, the sweet comfort and companionship, that I find in you. Oh, it is hard to lose you! It is hard to go back again to my unfriended life! I must make the sacrifice, love, for your sake. I know no more why that letter is what it is than you do. Will your uncle believe me? Will your friends believe me? One last kiss, Valeria! Forgive me for having loved you—passionately, devotedly loved you. Forgive me, and let me go!"

I held him desperately, recklessly. His eyes put me beside myself; his words filled me with a frenzy of despair.

"Go where you may," I said, "I go with you! Friends—reputation—I care nothing who I lose, or what I lose. Oh, Eustache, I am only a woman—don't madden me! I can't live without you. I must, and will be your wife!" Those wild words were all I could say before the misery and madness in me forced their way outward in a burst of sobs and tears.

He yielded. He soothed me with his charming voice; he brought me back to myself with his tender caresses. He called the bright heaven above us to witness that he devoted his whole life to me. He vowed—oh, in such solemn, such eloquent words! that his one thought, night and day, should be to prove himself worthy of such love as mine. And had he not nobly redeemed the pledge? Had not the betrothal of that memorable night been followed by the betrothal at the altar, by the vows before God? Ah, what a life was before me! What more than mortal happiness was mine!

Again, I lifted my head from his bosom to taste the dear delight of seeing him by my side—my life, my love, my husband, my own!

Hardly awakened yet from the absorbing memories of the past to the sweet realities of the present, I let my cheek touch his cheek, I whispered to him softly, "Oh, how I love you! how I love you!"

The next instant I started back from him. My heart stood still. I put my hand up to my face. What did I feel on my cheek? (I had not been weeping—I was too happy.) What did I feel on my cheek? A tear!

His face was still averted from me. I turned it towards me, with my own hands, by main force.

I looked at him—and saw my husband, on our wedding-day, with his eyes full of tears.

CHAPTER III.

RAMSGATE SANDS.

Eustache succeeded in quieting my alarm. But I can hardly say that he succeeded in satisfying my mind as well.

He had been thinking, he told me, of the contrast between his past and his present life. Bitter remembrances of the years that had gone had risen in his memory, and had filled him with melancholy misgivings of his capacity to make my life with him a happy one. He had asked himself if he had not met me too late—if he was not already a man soured and broken by the disappointments and disenchantments of the past? Doubts such as these, weighing more and more heavily on his mind, had filled his eyes with the tears which I had discovered—tears which he now entreated me, by my love for him, to dismiss from my memory for ever.

I forgave him, comforted him, revived him—but there were moments when the remembrance of what I had seen troubled me in secret, and when I asked myself if I really possessed my husband's full confidence as he possessed mine.

We left the train at Ramsgate.

The favourite watering-place was empty; the season was just over. Our arrangements for the wedding-tour included a cruise to the Mediterranean in a yacht lent to Eustache by a friend. We were both fond of the sea, and we were equally desirous, considering the circumstances under which we had married, of escaping the notice of friends and acquaintances. With this object in view, having celebrated our marriage privately in London, we had decided on instructing the sailing-master of the yacht to join us at Ramsgate. At this port (when the season for visitors was at an end) we could embark far more privately than at the popular yachting stations situated in the Isle of Wight.

Three days passed—days of delicious solitude, of exquisite happiness, never to be forgotten, never to be lived over again, to the end of our lives!

Early on the morning of the fourth day, just before sunrise, a trifling incident happened, which was noticeable, nevertheless, as being strange to me in my experience of myself.

I awoke, suddenly and unaccountably, from a deep and dreamless sleep, with an all-pervading sensation of nervous uneasiness, which I had never felt before. In the old days at the vicarage, my capacity as a sound sleeper had been the subject of many a little harmless joke. From the moment when my head was on the

pillow I had never known what it was to wake until the maid knocked at my door. At all seasons and times the long and uninterrupted repose of a child was the repose that I enjoyed.

And now I had awakened, without any assignable cause, hours before my usual time. I tried to compose myself to sleep again. The effort was useless. Such a restlessness possessed me that I was not even able to lie still in the bed. My husband was sleeping soundly by my side. In the fear of disturbing him I rose, and put on my dressing-gown and slippers.

I went to the window. The sun was just rising over the calm grey sea. For a while the majestic spectacle before me exercised a tranquillising influence on the irritable condition of my nerves. But ere long the old restlessness returned upon me. I walked slowly to and fro in the room, until I was weary of the monotony of the exercise. I took up a book and laid it aside again. My attention wandered; the author was powerless to recall it. I got on my feet once more, and looked at Eustache, and admired him and loved him in his tranquil sleep. I went back to the window, and wearied of the beautiful morning. I sat down before the glass, and looked at myself. How haggard and worn I was already, through waking before my usual time. I rose again, not knowing what to do next. The confinement to the four walls of the room began to be intolerable to me. I opened the door that led into my husband's dressing-room, and entered it, to try if the change would relieve me.

The first object that I noticed was his dressing-case, open on the toilette table.

I took out the bottles and pots and brushes and combs, the knives and scissors in one department, the writing materials in another. I smelt the perfumes and pomatums; I busily cleaned and dusted the bottles with my handkerchief as I took them out. Little by little I completely emptied the dressing-case. It was lined with blue velvet. In one corner I noticed a tiny slip of loose blue silk. Taking it between my finger and thumb, and drawing it upward, I discovered that there was a false bottom to the case, forming a secret compartment for letters and papers. In my strange condition—capricious, idle, inquisitive—it was an amusement to me to take out the papers, just as I had taken out everything else.

I found some receipted bills, which failed to interest me; some letters, which it is needless to say I laid aside, after looking at the addresses; and under all a photograph, face downwards, with writing on the back of it. I looked at the writing, and saw these words:—

"To my dear son Eustache."

His mother—the woman who had so obstinately and so mercilessly opposed herself to our marriage!

I eagerly turned the photograph, expecting to see a woman with a stern ill-tempered, forbidding countenance. To my surprise the face showed the remains of great beauty; the expression, though remarkably firm, was yet winning, tender, and kind. The grey hair was arranged in rows of little quaint old-fashioned curls on either side of the head, under a plain lace cap. At one corner of the mouth there was a mark, apparently a mole, which added to the characteristic peculiarity of the face. I looked and looked, fixing the portrait thoroughly in my mind. This woman, who had almost insulted me and my relatives, was beyond all doubt or dispute, so far as appearance went, a person possessing unusual attractions—a person whom it would be a pleasure and a privilege to know.

I fell into deep thought. The discovery of the photograph quieted me as nothing had quieted me yet.

The striking of a clock downstairs in the hall warned me of the flight of time. I carefully put back all the objects in the dressing-case (beginning with the photograph) exactly as I had found them, and returned to the bed-room. As I looked at my husband still sleeping peacefully, the question forced itself into my mind. What had made that genial, gentle mother of his so sternly bent on parting us; so harshly and pitilessly resolute in asserting her disapproval of our marriage?

Could I put my question openly to Eustache when he woke? No; I was afraid to venture that length. It had been tacitly understood between us that we were not to speak of his mother—and besides, he might be angry if he knew that I had opened the private compartment of his dressing-case.

After breakfast we had news at last of the yacht. The vessel had safely moored in the inner harbour, and the sailing-master was waiting to receive my husband's orders on board.

Eustache hesitated at asking me to accompany him to the yacht. It would be necessary for him to examine the inventory of the vessel, and to decide questions not very interesting to a woman, relating to charts and barometers, provisions and water. He asked me if I would wait for his return. The day was enticingly beautiful, and the tide was on the ebb. I pleaded for a walk on the sands, and the landlady of our lodgings, who happened to be in the room at the time, volunteered to accompany me and take care of me. It was agreed that we should walk as far as we felt inclined in the direction of Broadstairs, and that Eustache should follow and meet us on the sands, after having completed his arrangements on board the yacht.

In half an hour more the landlady and I were out on the beach.

The scene on the fine autumn morning was nothing less than enchanting. The brisk breeze, the brilliant sky, the flashing blue sea, the sun-bright cliffs and the tawny sands at their feet, the gliding procession of ships on the great marine highway of the English Channel—it was all so exhilarating, it was all so delightful, that I really believe if I had been by myself I could have danced for joy like a child. The one drawback to my happiness was the landlady's untiring tongue. She was a forward, good-natured,

empty-headed woman, who persisted in talking, whether I listened or not, and who had a habit of perpetually addressing me as "Mrs. Woodville," which I thought a little over-familiar from a person in her position to a person in mine.

We had been out, I should think, more than half an hour, when we overtook a lady walking before us on the beach.

Just as we were about to pass the stranger, she took her handkerchief from her pocket, and accidentally drew out with it a letter, which fell, unnoticed by her, on the sand. I was nearest to the letter, and I picked it up and offered it to the lady.

The instant she turned to thank me, I stood rooted to the spot. There was the original of the photographic portrait in the dressing-case; there was my husband's mother, standing face to face with me. I recognised the quaint little grey curls, the gentle, genial expression, the mole at the corner of the mouth. No mistake was possible. His mother herself!

The old lady naturally enough mistook my confusion for shyness. With perfect tact and kindness she entered into conversation with me. In another minute I was walking side by side with the woman who had sternly repudiated me as a member of her family; feeling, I own, terribly discomposed, and not knowing in the least whether I ought or ought not to assume the responsibility, in my husband's absence, of telling her who I was.

In another minute my familiar landlady, walking on the other side of my mother-in-law, decided the question for me. I happened to say that I supposed we must by that time be near the end of our walk, the little watering-place called Broadstairs. "Oh, no, Mrs. Woodville," cried the irrepressible woman, calling me by my name, as usual, "nothing like so near as you think!"

I looked with a beating heart at the old lady. To my unutterable amazement not the faintest gleam of recognition appeared in her face. Old Mrs. Woodville went on talking to young Mrs. Woodville just as composedly as if she had never heard her own name before in her life.

My face and manner must have betrayed something of the agitation that I was suffering. Happening to look at me at the end of her next sentence, the old lady started, and said in her kindly way:

"I am afraid you have over-exerted yourself. You are very pale—you are looking quite exhausted. Come and sit down here; let me lend you my smelling-bottle."

I followed her quite helplessly to the base of the cliff. Some fragments of chalk offered us a seat. I vaguely heard the voluble landlady's expressions of sympathy and regret; I mechanically took the smelling-bottle which my husband's mother offered to me, after hearing my name, as an act of kindness to a stranger.

If I had only had myself to care for, I believe I should have provoked an explanation on the spot. But I had Eustache to think of. I was entirely ignorant of the relations, hostile or friendly, which existed between his mother and himself. What could I do?

In the meantime the old lady was still speaking to me with the most considerate sympathy. She, too, was fatigued, she said. She had passed a weary night at the bedside of a near relative, staying at Ramsgate. Only the day before she had received a telegram announcing that one of her sisters was seriously ill. She was herself, thank God, still active and strong, and she had thought it her duty to start at once for Ramsgate. Towards the morning the state of the patient had improved. "The doctor assures me, ma'am, that there is no immediate danger; and I thought it might revive me, after my long night at the bedside, if I took a little walk on the beach."

I heard the words—I understood what they meant—but I was still too bewildered and too intimidated by my extraordinary position to be able to continue the conversation. The landlady had a sensible suggestion to make; the landlady was the next person who spoke.

"Here is a gentleman coming," she said to me, pointing in the direction of Ramsgate. "You can never walk back. Shall we ask him to send a chaise from Broadstairs to the gap in the cliff?"

The gentleman advanced a little nearer. The landlady and I recognised him at the same moment. It was Eustache coming to meet us, as we had arranged. The irrepressible landlady gave the freest expression to her feelings. "Oh, Mrs. Woodville, ain't it lucky? Here is Mr. Woodville himself."

Once more the name failed to produce the slightest effect on her. Her sight was not so keen as ours; she had not recognised the son yet. He had young eyes like us, and he recognised his mother. For a moment he stopped like a man thunderstruck. Then he came on, his ruddy face white with suppressed emotion, his eyes fixed on his mother.

"You here!" he said to her.

"How do you do, Eustache?" she quietly rejoined. "Have you heard of your aunt's illness, too? Did you know she was staying at Ramsgate?"

He made no answer. The landlady, drawing the inevitable inference from the words that she had just heard, looked from me to my mother-in-law in a state of amazement which paralysed her tongue. I waited, with my eyes on my husband, to see what he would do. If he had delayed acknowledging me another moment, the whole future course of my life might have been altered—I should have despised him.

He did not delay. He came to my side and took my hand.

"Do you know who this is?" he said to his mother.

She answered, looking at me with a courteous bend of the head.

"A lady I met on the beach, Eustache, who kindly restored to me a letter that I had drop-