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Chapter 12 - The Scotch Verdict

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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 further end of it, near the fire-place. 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 passively 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 fire-place. 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 those words with a hopeless, heart-broken humility 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--a s 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 further 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 fervor of that love."

"Never! never!"

He drew back from me a little further still.

"Look at the world around 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 in _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. Imbittered 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 say 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 to you, 'If you stir a step further 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 cankers 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?" I asked. "What did you tell me my friends would say 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 favor 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 first 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 blessed 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 were 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 defense 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 cruel words, and said no more.

In utter despair of moving him--feeling keenly, bitterly (if I must own it), his merciless superiority to all that I had said to him in the honest fervor 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 a 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.

