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Chapter 24 - Miserrimus Dexter--First View

WE had dawdled over our luncheon before Mrs. Macallan arrived at Benjamin's cottage. The ensuing conversation between the old lady and myself (of which I have only presented a brief abstract) lasted until quite late in the afternoon. The sun was setting in heavy clouds when we got into the carriage, and the autumn twilight began to fall around us while we were still on the road.

The direction in which we drove took us (as well as I could judge) toward the great northern suburb of London.

For more than an hour the carriage threaded its way through a dingy brick labyrinth of streets, growing smaller and smaller and dirtier and dirtier the further we went. Emerging from the labyrinth, I noticed in the gathering darkness dreary patches of waste ground which seemed to be neither town nor country. Crossing these, we passed some forlorn outlying groups of houses with dim little scattered shops among them, looking like lost country villages wandering on the way to London, disfigured and smoke-dried already by their journey. Darker and darker and drearier and drearier the prospect drew, until the carriage stopped at last, and Mrs. Macallan announced, in her sharply satirical way, that we had reached the end of our journey. "Prince Dexter's Palace, my dear," she said. "What do you think of it?"

I looked around me, not knowing what to think of it, if the truth must be told.

We had got out of the carriage, and we were standing on a rough half-made gravel-path. Right and left of me, in the dim light, I saw the half-completed foundations of new houses in their first stage of existence. Boards and bricks were scattered about us. At places gaunt scaffolding poles rose like the branchless trees of the brick desert. Behind us, on the other side of the high-road, stretched another plot of waste ground, as yet not built on. Over the surface of this second desert the ghostly white figures of vagrant ducks gleamed at intervals in the mystic light. In front of us, at a distance of two hundred yards or so as well as I could calculate, rose a black mass, which gradually resolved itself, as my eyes became accustomed to the twilight, into a long, low, and ancient house, with a hedge of evergreens and a pitch-black paling in front of it. The footman led the way toward the paling through the boards and the bricks, the oyster shells and the broken crockery, that strewed the ground. And this was "Prince Dexter's Palace!"

There was a gate in the pitch-black paling, and a bell-handle--discovered with great difficulty. Pulling at the handle, the footman set in motion, to judge by the sound produced, a bell of prodigious size, fitter for a church than a house.

While we were waiting for admission, Mrs. Macallan pointed to the low, dark line of the old building.

"There is one of his madnesses," she said. "The speculators in this new neighborhood have offered him I don't know how many thousand pounds for the ground that house stands on. It was originally the manor-house of the district. Dexter purchased it many years since in one of his freaks of fancy. He has no old family associations with the place; the walls are all but tumbling about his ears; and the money offered would really be of use to him. But no! He refused the proposal of the enterprising speculators by letter in these words: 'My house is a standing monument of the picturesque and beautiful, amid the mean, dishonest, and groveling constructions of a mean, dishonest, and groveling age. I keep my house, gentlemen, as a useful lesson to you. Look at it while you are building around me, and blush, if you can, for your work.' Was there ever such an absurd letter written yet? Hush! I hear footsteps in the garden. Here comes his cousin. His cousin is a woman. I may as well tell you that, or you might mistake her for a man in the dark."

A rough, deep voice, which I should certainly never have supposed to be the voice of a woman, hailed us from the inner side of the paling.

"Who's there?"

"Mrs. Macallan," answered my mother-in-law.

"What do you want?"

"We want to see Dexter."

"You can't see him."

"Why not?"

"What did you say your name was?"

"Macallan. Mrs. Macallan. Eustace Macallan's mother. Now do you understand?"

The voice muttered and grunted behind the paling, and a key turned in the lock of the gate.

Admitted to the garden, in the deep shadow of the shrubs, I could see nothing distinctly of the woman with the rough voice, except that she wore a man's hat. Closing the gate behind us, without a word of welcome or explanation, she led the way to the house. Mrs. Macallan followed her easily, knowing the place; and I walked in Mrs. Macallan's footsteps as closely as I could. "This is a nice family," my mother-in-law whispered to me. "Dexter's cousin is the only woman in the house--and Dexter's cousin is an idiot."

We entered a spacious hall with a low ceiling, dimly lighted at its further end by one small oil-lamp. I could see that there were pictures on the grim, brown walls, but the subjects represented were invisible in the obscure and shadowy light.

Mrs. Macallan addressed herself to the speechless cousin with the man's hat.

"Now tell me," she said. "Why can't we see Dexter?"

The cousin took a sheet of paper off the table, and handed it to Mrs. Macallan.

"The Master's writing," said this strange creature, in a hoarse whisper, as if the bare idea of "the Master" terrified her. "Read it. And stay or go, which you please."

She opened an invisible side door in the wall, masked by one of the pictures--disappeared through it like a ghost--and left us together alone in the hall.

Mrs. Macallan approached the oil-lamp, and looked by its light at the sheet of paper which the woman had given to her. I followed and peeped over her shoulder without ceremony. The paper exhibited written characters, traced in a wonderfully large and firm handwriting. Had I caught the infection of madness in the air of the house? Or did I really see before me these words?

"NOTICE.--My immense imagination is at work. Visions of heroes unroll themselves before me. I reanimate in myself the spirits of the departed great. My brains are boiling in my head. Any persons who disturb me, under existing circumstances, will do it at the peril of their lives.--DEXTER."

Mrs. Macallan looked around at me quietly with her sardonic smile.

"Do you still persist in wanting to be introduced to him?" she asked.

The mockery in the tone of the question roused my pride. I determined that I would not be the first to give way.

"Not if I am putting you in peril of your life, ma'am," I answered, pertly enough, pointing to the paper in her hand.

My mother-in-law returned to the hall table, and put the paper back on it without condescending to reply. She then led the way to an arched recess on our right hand, beyond which I dimly discerned a broad flight of oaken stairs.

"Follow me," said Mrs. Macallan, mounting the stairs in the dark. "I know where to find him."

We groped our way up the stairs to the first landing. The next flight of steps, turning in the reverse direction, was faintly illuminated, like the hall below, by one oil-lamp, placed in some invisible position above us. Ascending the second flight of stairs and crossing a short corridor, we discovered the lamp, through the open door of a quaintly shaped circular room, burning on the mantel-piece. Its light illuminated a strip of thick tapestry, hanging loose from the ceiling to the floor, on the wall opposite to the door by which we had entered.

Mrs. Macallan drew aside the strip of tapestry, and, signing me to follow her, passed behind it.

"Listen!" she whispered.

Standing on the inner side of the tapestry, I found myself in a dark recess or passage, at the end of which a ray of light from the lamp showed me a closed door. I listened, and heard on the other side of the door a shouting voice, accompanied by an extraordinary rumbling and whistling sound, traveling backward and forward, as well as I could judge, over a great space. Now the rumbling and the whistling would reach their climax of loudness, and would overcome the resonant notes of the shouting voice. Then again those louder sounds gradually retreated into distance, and the shouting voice made itself heard as the more audible sound of the two. The door must have been of prodigious solidity. Listen as intently as I might, I failed to catch the articulate words (if any) which the voice was pronouncing, and I was equally at a loss to penetrate the cause which produced the rumbling and whistling sounds.

"What can possibly be going on," I whispered to Mrs. Macallan, "on the other side of that door?"

"Step softly," my mother-in-law answered, "and come and see."

She arranged the tapestry behind us so as completely to shut out the light in the circular room. Then noiselessly turning the handle, she opened the heavy door.

We kept ourselves concealed in the shadow of the recess, and looked through the open doorway.

I saw (or fancied I saw, in the obscurity) a long room with a low ceiling. The dying gleam of an ill-kept fire formed the only light by which I could judge of objects and distances. Redly illuminating the central portion of the room, opposite to which we were standing, the fire-light left the extremities shadowed in almost total darkness. I had barely time to notice this before I heard the rumbling and whistling sounds approaching me. A high chair on wheels moved by, through the field of red light, carrying a shadowy figure with floating hair, and arms furiously raised and lowered working the machinery that propelled the chair at its utmost rate of speed. "I am Napoleon, at the sunrise of Austerlitz!" shouted the man in the chair as he swept past me on his rumbling and whistling wheels, in the red glow of the fire-light. "I give the word, and thrones rock, and kings fall, and nations tremble, and men by tens of thousands fight and bleed and die!" The chair rushed out of sight, and the shouting man in it became another hero. "I am Nelson!" the ringing voice cried now. "I am leading the fleet at Trafalgar. I issue my commands, prophetically conscious of victory and death. I see my own apotheosis, my public funeral, my nation's tears, my burial in the glorious church. The ages remember me, and the poets sing my praise in immortal verse!" The strident wheels turned at the far end of the room and came back. The fantastic and frightful apparition, man and machinery blended in one--the new Centaur, half man, half chair--flew by me again in the dying light. "I am Shakespeare!" cried the frantic creature now. "I am writing 'Lear,' the tragedy of tragedies. Ancients and moderns, I am the poet who towers over them all. Light! light! the lines flow out like lava from the eruption of my volcanic mind. Light! light! for the poet of all time to write the words that live forever!" He ground and tore his way back toward the middle of the room. As he approached the fire-place a last morsel of unburned coal (or wood) burst into momentary flame, and showed the open doorway. In that moment he saw us! The wheel-chair stopped with a shock that shook the crazy old floor of the room, altered its course, and flew at us with the rush of a wild animal. We drew back, just in time to escape it, against the wall of the recess. The chair passed on, and burst aside the hanging tapestry. The light of the lamp in the circular room poured in through the gap. The creature in the chair checked his furious wheels, and looked back over his shoulder with an impish curiosity horrible to see.

"Have I run over them? Have I ground them to powder for presuming to intrude on me?" he said to himself. As the expression of this amiable doubt passed his lips his eyes lighted on us. His mind instantly veered back again to Shakespeare and King Lear. "Goneril and Regan!" he cried. "My two unnatural daughters, my she-devil children come to mock at me!"

"Nothing of the sort," said my mother-in-law, as quietly as if she were addressing a perfectly reasonable being. "I am your old friend, Mrs. Macallan; and I have brought Eustace Macallan's second wife to see you."

The instant she pronounced those last words, "Eustace Macallan's second wife," the man in the chair sprang out of it with a shrill cry of horror, as if she had shot him. For one moment we saw a head and body in the air, absolutely deprived of the lower limbs. The moment after, the terrible creature touched the floor as lightly as a monkey,

on his hands. The grotesque horror of the scene culminated in his hopping away on his hands, at a prodigious speed, until he reached the fire-place in the long room. There he crouched over the dying embers, shuddering and shivering, and muttering, "Oh, pity me, pity me!" dozens and dozens of times to himself.

This was the man whose advice I had come to ask--who assistance I had confidently counted on in my hour of need.