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Chapter 31 - The Defense Of Mrs. Beaully

THE days that elapsed before Major Fitz-David's dinner-party were precious days to me.

My long interview with Miserrimus Dexter had disturbed me far more seriously than I suspected at the time. It was not until some hours after I had left him that I really began to feel how my nerves had been tried by all that I had seen and heard during my visit at his house. I started at the slightest noises; I dreamed of dreadful things; I was ready to cry without reason at one moment, and to fly into a passion without reason at another. Absolute rest was what I wanted, and (thanks to my good Benjamin) was what I got. The dear old man controlled his anxieties on my account, and spared me the questions which his fatherly interest in my welfare made him eager to ask. It was tacitly understood between us that all conversation on the subject of my visit to Miserrimus Dexter (of which, it is needless to say, he strongly disapproved) should be deferred until repose had restored my energies of body and mind. I saw no visitors. Mrs. Macallan came to the cottage, and Major Fitz-David came to the cottage--one of them to hear what had passed between Miserrimus Dexter and myself, the other to amuse me with the latest gossip about the guests at the forthcoming dinner. Benjamin took it on himself to make my apologies, and to spare me the exertion of receiving my visitors. We hired a little open carriage, and took long drives in the pretty country lanes still left flourishing within a few miles of the northern suburb of London. At home we sat and talked quietly of old times, or played at backgammon and dominoes--and so, for a few happy days, led the peaceful unadventurous life which was good for me. When the day of the dinner arrived, I felt restored to my customary health. I was ready again, and eager again, for the introduction to Lady Clarinda and the discovery of Mrs. Beaully.

Benjamin looked a little sadly at my flushed face as we drove to Major Fitz-David's house.

"Ah, my dear," he said, in his simple way, "I see you are well again! You have had enough of our quiet life already."

My recollection of events and persons, in general, at the dinner-party, is singularly indistinct.

I remember that we were very merry, and as easy and familiar with one another as if we had been old friends. I remember that Madame Mirriflore was unapproachably superior to the other women present, in the perfect beauty of her dress, and in the ample justice which she did to the luxurious dinner set before us. I remember the Major's young prima donna, more round-eyed, more overdressed, more shrill and strident as the coming "Queen of Song," than ever. I remember the Major himself, always kissing our hands, always luring us to indulge in dainty dishes and drinks, always making love, always detecting resemblances between us, always "under the charm," and never once out of his character as elderly Don Juan from the beginning of the evening to the end. I remember dear old Benjamin, completely bewildered, shrinking into corners, blushing when he was personally drawn into the conversation, frightened at Madame Mirriflore, bashful with Lady Clarinda, submissive to the Major, suffering under the music, and from the bottom of his honest old heart wishing himself home again. And there, as to the members of that cheerful little gathering, my memory finds its limits--with one exception. The appearance of Lady Clarinda is as present to me as if I had met her yesterday; and of the memorable conversation which we two held together privately, toward the close of the evening, it is no exaggeration to say that I can still call to mind almost every word.

I see her dress, I hear her voice again, while I write.

She was attired, I remember, with that extreme assumption of simplicity which always defeats its own end by irresistibly suggesting art. She wore plain white muslin, over white silk, without trimming or ornament of any kind. Her rich brown hair, dressed in defiance of the prevailing fashion, was thrown back from her forehead, and gathered into a simple knot behind--without adornment of any sort. A little white ribbon encircled her neck, fastened by the only article of jewelry that she wore--a tiny diamond brooch. She was unquestionably handsome; but her beauty was of the somewhat hard and angular type which is so often seen in English women of her race: the nose and chin too prominent and too firmly shaped; the well-opened gray eyes full of spirit and dignity, but wanting in tenderness and mobility of expression. Her manner had all the charm which fine breeding can confer--exquisitely polite, easily cordial; showing that perfect yet unobtrusive confidence in herself which (in England) seems to be the natural outgrowth of pre-eminent social rank. If you had accepted her for what she was, on the surface, you would have said, Here is the model of a noble woman who is perfectly free from pride. And if you had taken a liberty with her, on the strength of that conviction, she would have made you remember it to the end of your life.

We got on together admirably. I was introduced as "Mrs. Woodville," by previous arrangement with the Major--effected through Benjamin. Before the dinner was over we had promised to exchange visits. Nothing but the opportunity was wanting to lead Lady Clarinda into talking, as I wanted her to talk, of Mrs. Beaully.

Late in the evening the opportunity came.

I had taken refuge from the terrible bravura singing of the Major's strident prima donna in the back drawing-room. As I had hoped and anticipated, after a while Lady Clarinda (missing me from the group around the piano) came in search of me. She seated herself by my side, out of sight and out of hearing of our friends in the front room; and, to my infinite relief and delight, touched on the subject of Miserrimus Dexter of her own accord. Something I had said of him, when his name had been accidentally mentioned at dinner, remained in her memory, and led us, by perfectly natural gradations, into speaking of Mrs. Beaully. "At last," I thought to myself, "the Major's little dinner will bring me my reward!"

And what a reward it was, when it came! My heart sinks in me again--as it sank on that never-to-be-forgotten evening--while I sit at my desk thinking of it.

"So Dexter really spoke to you of Mrs. Beaully!" exclaimed Lady Clarinda. "You have no idea how you surprise me."

"May I ask why?"

"He hates her! The last time I saw him he wouldn't allow me to mention her name. It is one of his innumerable oddities. If any such feeling as sympathy is a possible feeling in such a nature as his, he ought to like Helena Beaully. She is the most completely unconventional person I know. When she does break out, poor dear, she says things and does things which are almost reckless enough to be worthy of Dexter himself. I wonder whether you would like her?"

"You have kindly asked me to visit you, Lady Clarinda. Perhaps I may meet her at your house?"

"I hope you will not wait until that is likely to happen," she said. "Helena's last whim is to fancy that she has got--the gout, of all the maladies in the world! She is away at

some wonderful baths in Hungary or Bohemia (I don't remember which)--and where she will go next, it is perfectly impossible to say.--Dear Mrs. Woodville! is the heat of the fire too much for you? You are looking quite pale."

I _felt_ that I was looking pale. The discovery of Mrs. Beaulys absence from England was a shock for which I was quite unprepared. For a moment it unnerved me.

"Shall we go into the other room?" asked Lady Clarinda.

To go into the other room would be to drop the conversation. I was determined not to let that catastrophe happen. It was just possible that Mrs. Beaulys maid might have quitted her service, or might have been left behind in England. My information would not be complete until I knew what had become of the maid. I pushed my chair back a little from the fire-place, and took a hand-screen from a table near me; it might be made useful in hiding my face, if any more disappointments were in store for me.

"Thank you, Lady Clarinda; I was only a little too near the fire. I shall do admirably here. You surprise me about Mrs. Beauly. From what Mr. Dexter said to me, I had imagined--"

"Oh, you must not believe anything Dexter tells you!" interposed Lady Clarinda. "He delights in mystifying people; and he purposely misled you, I have no doubt. If all that I hear is true, _he_ ought to know more of Helena Beaulys strange freaks and fancies than most people. He all but discovered her in one of her adventures (down in Scotland), which reminds me of the story in Auber's charming opera--what is it called? I shall forget my own name next! I mean the opera in which the two nuns slip out of the convent, and go to the ball. Listen! How very odd! That vulgar girl is singing the castanet song in the second act at this moment. Major! what opera is the young lady singing from?"

The Major was scandalized at this interruption. He bustled into the back room--whispered, "Hush! hush! my dear lady; the 'Domino Noir'"--and bustled back again to the piano.

"Of course!" said Lady Clarinda. "How stupid of me! The 'Domino Noir.' And how strange that you should forget it too!"

I had remembered it perfectly; but I could not trust myself to speak. If, as I believed, the "adventure" mentioned by Lady Clarinda was connected, in some way, with Mrs. Beaulys mysterious proceedings on the morning of the twenty-first of October, I was on the brink of the very discovery which it was the one interest of my life to make! I held the screen so as to hide my face; and I said, in the steadiest voice that I could command at the moment,

"Pray go on!--pray tell me what the adventure was!"

Lady Clarinda was quite flattered by my eager desire to hear the coming narrative.

"I hope my story will be worthy of the interest which you are so good as to feel in it," she said. "If you only knew Helena--it is _so_ like her! I have it, you must know, from her maid. She has taken a woman who speaks foreign languages with her to Hungary and she has left the maid with me. A perfect treasure! I should be only too glad if I could keep her in my service: she has but one defect, a name I hate--Phoebe. Well! Phoebe and her mistress were staying at a place near Edinburgh, called (I think) Gleninch. The house belonged to that Mr. Macallan who was afterward tried--you remember it, of course?--for poisoning his wife. A dreadful case; but don't be alarmed--my story has nothing to do with it; my story has to do with Helena Beauly. One evening (while she was staying at Gleninch) she was engaged to dine with some English friends visiting Edinburgh. The same night--also in Edinburgh--there was a masked ball, given by somebody whose name I forget. The ball (almost an unparalleled event in Scotland) was reported to be not at all a reputable affair. All sorts of amusing people were to be there. Ladies of doubtful virtue, you know, and gentlemen on the outlying limits of society, and so on. Helena's friends had contrived to get cards, and were going, in spite of the objections--in the strictest incognito, of course, trusting to their masks. And Helena herself was bent on going with them, if she could only manage it without being discovered at Gleninch. Mr. Macallan was one of the strait-laced people who disapproved of the ball. No lady, he said, could show herself at such an entertainment without compromising her reputation. What stuff! Well, Helena, in one of her wildest moments, hit on a way of going to the ball without discovery which was really as ingenious as a plot in a French play. She went to the dinner in the carriage from Gleninch, having sent Phoebe to Edinburgh before her. It was not a grand dinner--a little friendly gathering: no evening dress. When the time came for going back to Gleninch, what do you think Helena did? She sent her maid back in the carriage, instead of herself! Phoebe was dressed in her mistress's cloak and bonnet and veil. She was instructed to run upstairs the moment she got to the house, leaving on the hall table a little note of apology (written by Helena, of course!), pleading fatigue as an excuse for not saying good-night to her host. The mistress and the maid were about the same height; and the servants naturally never discovered the trick. Phoebe got up to her mistress's room safely enough. There, her instructions were to wait until the house was quiet for the night, and then to steal up to her own room. While she was waiting, the girl fell asleep. She only awoke at two in the morning, or later. It didn't much matter, as she thought. She stole out on tiptoe, and closed the door behind her. Before she was at the end of the corridor, she fancied she heard something. She waited until she was safe on the upper story, and then she looked over the banisters. There was Dexter--so like him!--hopping about on his hands (did you ever see it? the most grotesquely horrible exhibition you can imagine!--there was Dexter, hopping about, and looking through keyholes, evidently in search of the person who had left her room at two in the morning; and no doubt taking Phoebe for her mistress, seeing that she had forgotten to take her mistress's cloak off her shoulders. The next morning, early, Helena came back in a hired carriage from Edinburgh, with a hat and mantle borrowed from her English friends. She left the carriage in the road, and got into the house by way of the garden--without being discovered, this time, by Dexter or by anybody. Clever and daring, wasn't it? And, as I said just now, quite a new version of the 'Domino Noir.' You will wonder, as I did, how it was that Dexter didn't make mischief in the morning? He would have done it no doubt. But even he was silenced (as Phoebe told me) by the dreadful event that happened in the house on the same day. My dear Mrs. Woodville! the heat of this room is certainly too much for you, take my smelling-bottle. Let me open the window."

I was just able to answer, "Pray say nothing! Let me slip out into the open air!"

I made my way unobserved to the landing, and sat down on the stairs to compose myself where nobody could see me. In a moment more I felt a hand laid gently on my shoulder, and discovered good Benjamin looking at me in dismay. Lady Clarinda had considerably spoken to him, and had assisted him in quietly making his retreat from the room, while his host's attention was still absorbed by the music.

"My dear child!" he whispered, "what is the matter?"

"Take me home, and I will tell you," was all that I could say.