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Chapter 9 - The Defeat Of The Major

MAJOR FITZ-DAVID'S visitor proved to be a plump, round-eyed overdressed girl, with a florid complexion and straw colored hair. After first fixing on me a broad stare of astonishment, she pointedly addressed her apologies for intruding on us to the Major alone. The creature evidently believed me to be the last new object of the old gentleman's idolatry; and she took no pains to disguise her jealous resentment on discovering us together. Major Fitz-David set matters right in his own irresistible way. He kissed the hand of the overdressed girl as devotedly as he had kissed mine; he told her she was looking charmingly. Then he led her, with his happy mixture of admiration and respect, back to the door by which she had entered--a second door communicating directly with the hall.

"No apology is necessary, my dear," he said. "This lady is with me on a matter of business. You will find your singing-master waiting for you upstairs. Begin your lesson; and I will join you in a few minutes. *Au revoir*, my charming pupil--*au revoir*."

The young lady answered this polite little speech in a whisper--with her round eyes fixed distrustfully on me while she spoke. The door closed on her. Major Fitz-David was at liberty to set matters right with me, in my turn.

"I call that young person one of my happy discoveries;" said the old gentleman, complacently. "She possesses, I don't hesitate to say, the finest soprano voice in Europe. Would you believe it, I met with her at the railway station. She was behind the counter in a refreshment-room, poor innocent, rinsing wine-glasses, and singing over her work. Good Heavens, such singing! Her upper notes electrified me. I said to myself; 'Here is a born prima donna--I will bring her out! She is the third I have brought out in my time. I shall take her to Italy when her education is sufficiently advanced, and perfect her at Milan. In that unsophisticated girl, my dear lady, you see one of the future Queens of Song. Listen! She is beginning her scales. What a voice! Brava! Brava! Bravissima!"

The high soprano notes of the future Queen of Song rang through the house as he spoke. Of the loudness of the young lady's voice there could be no sort of doubt. The sweetness and the purity of it admitted, in my opinion, of considerable dispute.

Having said the polite words which the occasion rendered necessary, I ventured to recall Major Fitz-David to the subject in discussion between us when his visitor had entered the room. The Major was very unwilling to return to the perilous topic on which we had just touched when the interruption occurred. He beat time with his forefinger to the singing upstairs; he asked me about *my* voice, and whether I sang; he remarked that life would be intolerable to him without Love and Art. A man in my place would have lost all patience, and would have given up the struggle in disgust. Being a woman, and having my end in view, my resolution was invincible. I fairly wore out the Major's resistance, and compelled him to surrender at discretion. It is only justice to add that, when he did make up his mind to speak to me again of Eustace, he spoke frankly, and spoke to the point.

"I have known your husband," he began, "since the time when he was a boy. At a certain period of his past life a terrible misfortune fell upon him. The secret of that misfortune is known to his friends, and is religiously kept by his friends. It is the secret that he is keeping from You. He will never tell it to you as long as he lives. And he has bound *me* not to tell it, under a promise given on my word of honor. You wished, dear Mrs. Woodville, to be made acquainted with my position toward Eustace. There it is!"

"You persist in calling me Mrs. Woodville," I said.

"Your husband wishes me to persist," the Major answered. "He assumed the name of Woodville, fearing to give his own name, when he first called at your uncle's house. He will now acknowledge no other. Remonstrance is useless. You must do what we do--you must give way to an unreasonable man. The best fellow in the world in other respects: in this one matter as obstinate and self-willed as he can be. If you ask me my opinion, I tell you honestly that I think he was wrong in courting and marrying you under his false name. He trusted his honor and his happiness to your keeping in making you his--wife. Why should he not trust the story of his troubles to you as well? His mother quite shares my opinion in this matter. You must not blame her for refusing to admit you into her confidence after your marriage: it was then too late. Before your marriage she did all she could do--without betraying secrets which, as a good mother, she was bound to respect--to induce her son to act justly toward you. I commit no indiscretion when I tell you that she refused to sanction your marriage mainly for the reason that Eustace refused to follow her advice, and to tell you what his position really was. On my part I did all I could to support Mrs. Macallan in the course that she took. When Eustace wrote to tell me that he had engaged himself to marry a niece of my good friend Doctor Starkweather, and that he had mentioned me as his reference, I wrote back to warn him that I would have nothing to do with the affair unless he revealed the whole truth about himself to his future wife. He refused to listen to me, as he had refused to listen to his mother; and he held me at the same time to my promise to keep his secret. When Starkweather wrote to me, I had no choice but to involve myself in a deception of which I thoroughly disapproved, or to answer in a tone so guarded and so brief as to stop the correspondence at the outset. I chose the last alternative; and I fear I have offended my good old friend. You now see the painful position in which I am placed. To add to the difficulties of that situation, Eustace came here this very day to warn me to be on my guard, in case of your addressing to me the very request which you have just made! He told me that you had met with his mother, by an unlucky accident, and that you had discovered the family name. He declared that he had traveled to London for the express purpose of speaking to me personally on this serious subject. 'I know your weakness,' he said, 'where women are concerned. Valeria is aware that you are my old friend. She will certainly write to you; she may even be bold enough to make her way into your house. Renew your promise to keep the great calamity of my life a secret, on your honor and on your oath.' Those were his words, as nearly as I can remember them. I tried to treat the thing lightly; I ridiculed the absurdly theatrical notion of 'renewing my promise,' and all the rest of it. Quite useless! He refused to leave me; he reminded me of his unmerited sufferings, poor fellow, in the past time. It ended in his bursting into tears. You love him, and so do I. Can you wonder that I let him have his way? The result is that I am doubly bound to tell you nothing, by the most sacred promise that a man can give. My dear lady, I cordially side with you in this matter; I long to relieve your anxieties. But what can I do?"

He stopped, and waited--gravelly waited--to hear my reply.

I had listened from beginning to end without interrupting him. The extraordinary change in his manner, and in his way of expressing himself, while he was speaking of Eustace, alarmed me as nothing had alarmed me yet. How terrible (I thought to myself) must this untold story be, if the mere act of referring to it makes light-hearted Major Fitz-David speak seriously and sadly, never smiling, never paying me a compliment, never even noticing the singing upstairs! My heart sank in me as I drew that startling conclusion. For the first time since I had entered the house I was at the end of my resources; I knew neither what to say nor what to do next.

And yet I kept my seat. Never had the resolution to discover what my husband was hiding from me been more firmly rooted in my mind than it was at that moment! I cannot

account for the extraordinary inconsistency in my character implies. I can only describe the facts as they really were.

The singing went on upstairs. Major Fitz-David still waited impenetrably to hear what I had to say--to know what I resolved on doing next.

Before I had decided what to say or what to do, another domestic incident happened. In plain words, another knocking announced a new visitor at the house door. On this occasion there was no rustling of a woman's dress in the hall. On this occasion only the old servant entered the room, carrying a magnificent nosegay in his hand. "With Lady Clarinda's kind regards. To remind Major Fitz-David of his appointment." Another lady! This time a lady with a title. A great lady who sent her flowers and her messages without condescending to concealment. The Major--first apologizing to me--wrote a few lines of acknowledgment, and sent them out to the messenger. When the door was closed again he carefully selected one of the choicest flowers in the nosegay. "May I ask," he said, presenting the flower to me with his best grace, "whether you now understand the delicate position in which I am placed between your husband and yourself?"

The little interruption caused by the appearance of the nosegay had given a new impulse to my thoughts, and had thus helped, in some degree, to restore me to myself. I was able at last to satisfy Major Fitz-David that his considerate and courteous explanation had not been thrown away upon me.

"I thank you, most sincerely, Major," I said "You have convinced me that I must not ask you to forget, on my account, the promise which you have given to my husband. It is a sacred promise, which I too am bound to respect--I quite understand that."

The Major drew a long breath of relief, and patted me on the shoulder in high approval of what I had said to him.

"Admirably expressed!" he rejoined, recovering his light-hearted looks and his lover-like ways all in a moment. "My dear lady, you have the gift of sympathy; you see exactly how I am situated. Do you know, you remind me of my charming Lady Clarinda. _She_ has the gift of sympathy, and sees exactly how I am situated. I should so enjoy introducing you to each other," said the Major, plunging his long nose ecstatically into Lady Clarinda's flowers.

I had my end still to gain; and, being (as you will have discovered by this time) the most obstinate of living women, I still kept that end in view.

"I shall be delighted to meet Lady Clarinda," I replied. "In the meantime--"

"I will get up a little dinner," proceeded the Major, with a burst of enthusiasm. "You and I and Lady Clarinda. Our young prima donna shall come in the evening, and sing to us. Suppose we draw out the _menu?_ My sweet friend, what is your favorite autumn soup?"

"In the meantime," I persisted, "to return to what we were speaking of just now--"

The Major's smile vanished; the Major's hand dropped the pen destined to immortalize the name of my favorite autumn soup.

"_Must_ we return to that?" he asked, piteously.

"Only for a moment," I said.

"You remind me," pursued Major Fitz-David, shaking his head sadly, "of another charming friend of mine--a French friend--Madame Mirliflore. You are a person of prodigious tenacity of purpose. Madame Mirliflore is a person of prodigious tenacity of purpose. She happens to be in London. Shall we have her at our little dinner?" The Major brightened at the idea, and took up the pen again. "Do tell me," he said, "what _is_ your favorite autumn soup?"

"Pardon me," I began, "we were speaking just now--"

"Oh, dear me!" cried Major Fitz-David. "Is this the other subject?"

"Yes--this is the other subject."

The Major put down his pen for the second time, and regretfully dismissed from his mind Madame Mirliflore and the autumn soup.

"Yes?" he said, with a patient bow and a submissive smile. "You were going to say--"

"I was going to say," I rejoined, "that your promise only pledges you not to tell the secret which my husband is keeping from me. You have given no promise not to answer me if I venture to ask you one or two questions."

Major Fitz-David held up his hand warningly, and cast a sly look at me out of his bright little gray eyes.

"Stop!" he said. "My sweet friend, stop there! I know where your questions will lead me, and what the result will be if I once begin to answer them. When your husband was here to-day he took occasion to remind me that I was as weak as water in the hands of a pretty woman. He is quite right. I _am_ as weak as water; I can refuse nothing to a pretty woman. Dear and admirable lady, don't abuse your influence! don't make an old soldier false to his word of honor!"

I tried to say something here in defense of my motives. The Major clasped his hands entreatingly, and looked at me with a pleading simplicity wonderful to see.

"Why press it?" he asked. "I offer no resistance. I am a lamb--why sacrifice me? I acknowledge your power; I throw myself on your mercy. All the misfortunes of my youth and my manhood have come to me through women. I am not a bit better in my age--I am just as fond of the women and just as ready to be misled by them as ever, with one foot in the grave. Shocking, isn't it? But how true! Look at this mark!" He lifted a curl of his beautiful brown wig, and showed me a terrible scar at the side of his head. "That wound (supposed to be mortal at the time) was made by a pistol bullet," he proceeded. "Not received in the service of my country--oh dear, no! Received in the service of a much-injured lady, at the hands of her scoundrel of a husband, in a duel abroad. Well, she was worth it." He kissed his hand affectionately to the memory of the dead or absent lady, and pointed to a water-color drawing of a pretty country-house hanging on the opposite wall. "That fine estate," he proceeded, "once belonged to me. It was sold years and years since. And who had the money? The women--God bless them all!--the women. I don't regret it. If I had another estate, I have no doubt it would go the same way. Your adorable sex has made its pretty playthings of my life, my time, and my money--and welcome! The one thing I have kept to myself is my honor. And now _that_ is in danger. Yes, if you put your clever little questions, with those lovely eyes and with that gentle voice, I know what will happen. You will deprive me of the last and best of all my possessions. Have I deserved to be treated in that way, and by you, my charming friend?--by you, of all people in the world? Oh, fie! fie!"

He paused and looked at me as before--the picture of artless entreaty, with his head a little on one side. I made another attempt to speak of the matter in dispute between us, from my own point of view. Major Fitz-David instantly threw himself prostrate on my mercy more innocently than ever.

"Ask of me anything else in the wide world," he said; "but don't ask me to be false to my friend. Spare me _that_--and there is nothing I will not do to satisfy you. I mean

what I say, mind!" he went on, bending closer to me, and speaking more seriously than he had spoken yet "I think you are very hardly used. It is monstrous to expect that a woman, placed in your situation, will consent to be left for the rest of her life in the dark. No! no! if I saw you, at this moment, on the point of finding out for yourself what Eustace persists in hiding from you, I should remember that my promise, like all other promises, has its limits and reserves. I should consider myself bound in honor not to help you--but I would not lift a finger to prevent you from discovering the truth for yourself."

At last he was speaking in good earnest: he laid a strong emphasis on his closing words. I laid a stronger emphasis on them still by suddenly leaving my chair. The impulse to spring to my feet was irresistible. Major Fitz-David had started a new idea in my mind.

"Now we understand each other!" I said. "I will accept your own terms, Major. I will ask nothing of you but what you have just offered to me of your own accord."

"What have I offered?" he inquired, looking a little alarmed.

"Nothing that you need repent of," I answered; "nothing which is not easy for you to grant. May I ask a bold question? Suppose this house was mine instead of yours?"

"Consider it yours," cried the gallant old gentleman. "From the garret to the kitchen, consider it yours!"

"A thousand thanks, Major; I will consider it mine for the moment. You know--everybody knows--that one of a woman's many weaknesses is curiosity. Suppose my curiosity led me to examine everything in my new house?"

"Yes?"

"Suppose I went from room to room, and searched everything, and peeped in everywhere? Do you think there would be any chance--?"

The quick-witted Major anticipated the nature of my question. He followed my example; he too started to his feet, with a new idea in his mind.

"Would there be any chance," I went on, "of my finding my own way to my husband's secret in this house? One word of reply, Major Fitz-David! Only one word--Yes or No?"

"Don't excite yourself!" cried the Major.

"Yes or No?" I repeated, more vehemently than ever.

"Yes," said the Major, after a moment's consideration.

It was the reply I had asked for; but it was not explicit enough, now I had got it, to satisfy me. I felt the necessity of leading him (if possible) into details.

"Does 'Yes' mean that there is some sort of clew to the mystery?" I asked. "Something, for instance, which my eyes might see and my hands might touch if I could only find it?"

He considered again. I saw that I had succeeded in interesting him in some way unknown to myself; and I waited patiently until he was prepared to answer me.

"The thing you mention," he said, "the clew (as you call it), might be seen and might be touched--supposing you could find it."

"In this house?" I asked.

The Major advanced a step nearer to me, and answered--

"In this room."

My head began to swim; my heart throbbed violently. I tried to speak; it was in vain; the effort almost choked me. In the silence I could hear the music-lesson still going on in the room above. The future prima donna had done practicing her scales, and was trying her voice now in selections from Italian operas. At the moment when I first heard her she was singing the beautiful air from the *Somnambula*, "Come per me sereno." I never hear that delicious melody, to this day, without being instantly transported in imagination to the fatal back-room in Vivian Place.

The Major--strongly affected himself by this time--was the first to break the silence.

"Sit down again," he said; "and pray take the easy-chair. You are very much agitated; you want rest."

He was right. I could stand no longer; I dropped into the chair. Major Fitz-David rang the bell, and spoke a few words to the servant at the door.

"I have been here a long time," I said, faintly. "Tell me if I am in the way."

"In the way?" he repeated, with his irresistible smile. "You forget that you are in your own house!"

The servant returned to us, bringing with him a tiny bottle of champagne and a plateful of delicate little sugared biscuits.

"I have had this wine bottled expressly for the ladies," said the Major. "The biscuits came to me direct from Paris. As a favor to *me*, you must take some refreshment. And then--" He stopped and looked at me very attentively. "And then," he resumed, "shall I go to my young prima donna upstairs and leave you here alone?"

It was impossible to hint more delicately at the one request which I now had it in my mind to make to him. I took his hand and pressed it gratefully.

"The tranquillity of my whole life to come is at stake," I said. "When I am left here by myself, does your generous sympathy permit me to examine everything in the room?"

He signed to me to drink the champagne and eat a biscuit before he gave his answer.

"This is serious," he said. "I wish you to be in perfect possession of yourself. Restore your strength--and then I will speak to you."

I did as he bade me. In a minute from the time when I drank it the delicious sparkling wine had begun to revive me.

"Is it your express wish," he resumed, "that I should leave you here by yourself to search the room?"

"It is my express wish," I answered.

"I take a heavy responsibility on myself in granting your request. But I grant it for all that, because I sincerely believe--as you believe--that the tranquillity of your life to come depends on your discovering the truth." Saying those words, he took two keys from his pocket. "You will naturally feel a suspicion," he went on, "of any locked doors that you may find here. The only locked places in the room are the doors of the cupboards under the long book-case, and the door of the Italian cabinet in that corner. The small key opens the book-case cupboards; the long key opens the cabinet door."

With that explanation, he laid the keys before me on the table.

"Thus far," he said, "I have rigidly respected the promise which I made to your husband. I shall continue to be faithful to my promise, whatever may be the result of your examination of the room. I am bound in honor not to assist you by word or deed. I am not even at liberty to offer you the slightest hint. Is that understood?"

"Certainly!"

"Very good. I have now a last word of warning to give you--and then I have done. If you do by any chance succeed in laying your hand on the clew, remember this--the discovery which follows will be a terrible one. If you have any doubt about your capacity to sustain a shock which will strike you to the soul, for God's sake give up the idea of finding out your husband's secret at once and forever!"

"I thank you for your warning, Major. I must face the consequences of making the discovery, whatever they may be."

"You are positively resolved?"

"Positively."

"Very well. Take any time you please. The house, and every person in it, are at your disposal. Ring the bell once if you want the man-servant. Ring twice if you wish the housemaid to wait on you. From time to time I shall just look in myself to see how you are going on. I am responsible for your comfort and security, you know, while you honor me by remaining under my roof."

He lifted my hand to his lips, and fixed a last attentive look on me.

"I hope I am not running too great a risk," he said--more to himself than to me. "The women have led me into many a rash action in my time. Have _you_ led me, I wonder, into the rashest action of all?"

With those ominous last words he bowed gravely and left me alone in the room.