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Chapter 41 - Mr. Playmore In A New Character

BY that night's post--although I was far from being fit to make the exertion--I wrote to Mr. Playmore, to tell him what had taken place, and to beg for his earliest assistance and advice.

The notes in Benjamin's book were partly written in shorthand, and were, on that account, of no use to me in their existing condition. At my request, he made two fair copies. One of the copies I inclosed in my letter to Mr. Playmore. The other I laid by me, on my bedside table, when I went to rest.

Over and over again, through the long hours of the wakeful night, I read and re-read the last words which had dropped from Miserrimus Dexter's lips. Was it possible to interpret them to any useful purpose? At the very outset they seemed to set interpretation at defiance. After trying vainly to solve the hopeless problem, I did at last what I might as well have done at first--I threw down the paper in despair. Where were my bright visions of discovery and success now? Scattered to the winds! Was there the faintest chance of the stricken man's return to reason? I remembered too well what I had seen to hope for it. The closing lines of the medical report which I had read in Mr. Playmore's office recurred to my memory in the stillness of the night--"When the catastrophe has happened, his friends can entertain no hope of his cure: the balance once lost, will be lost for life."

The confirmation of that terrible sentence was not long in reaching me. On the next morning the gardener brought a note containing the information which the doctor had promised to give me on the previous day.

Miserrimus Dexter and Ariel were still where Benjamin and I had left them together--in the long room. They were watched by skilled attendants, waiting the decision of Dexter's nearest relative (a younger brother, who lived in the country, and who had been communicated with by telegraph. It had been found impossible to part the faithful Ariel from her master without using the bodily restraints adopted in cases of raging insanity. The doctor and the gardener (both unusually strong men) had failed to hold the poor creature when they first attempted to remove her on entering the room. Directly they permitted her to return to her master the frenzy vanished: she was perfectly quiet and contented so long as they let her sit at his feet and look at him.

Sad as this was, the report of Miserrimus Dexter's condition was more melancholy still.

"My patient is in a state of absolute imbecility"--those were the words in the doctor's letter; and the gardener's simple narrative confirmed them as the truest words that could have been used. He was utterly unconscious of poor Ariel's devotion to him--he did not even appear to know that she was present in the room. For hours together he remained in a state of utter lethargy in his chair. He showed an animal interest in his meals, and a greedy animal enjoyment of eating and drinking as much as he could get--and that was all. "This morning," the honest gardener said to me at parting, "we thought he seemed to wake up a bit. Looked about him, you know, and made queer signs with his hands. I couldn't make out what he meant; no more could the doctor. _She_ knew, poor thing--She did. Went and got him his harp, and put his hand up to it. Lord bless you! no use. He couldn't play no more than I can. Twanged at it anyhow, and grinned and gabbled to himself. No: he'll never come right again. Any person can see that, without the doctor to help 'em. Enjoys his meals, as I told you; and that's all. It would be the best thing that could happen if it would please God to take him. There's no more to be said. I wish you good-morning, ma'am."

He went away with the tears in his eyes; and he left me, I own it, with the tears in mine.

An hour later there came some news which revived me. I received a telegram from Mr. Playmore, expressed in these welcome words: "Obliged to go to London by to-night's mail train. Expect me to breakfast to-morrow morning."

The appearance of the lawyer at our breakfast-table duly followed the appearance of his telegram. His first words cheered me. To my infinite surprise and relief, he was far from sharing the despondent view which I took of my position.

"I don't deny," he said, "that there are some serious obstacles in your way. But I should never have called here before attending to my professional business in London if Mr. Benjamin's notes had not produced a very strong impression on my mind. For the first time, as _I_ think, you really have a prospect of success. For the first time, I feel justified in offering (under certain restrictions) to help you. That miserable wretch, in the collapse of his intelligence, has done what he would never have done in the possession of his sense and his cunning--he has let us see the first precious glimmerings of the light of truth."

"Are you sure it _is_ the truth?" I asked.

"In two important particulars," he answered, "I know it to be the truth. Your idea about him is the right one. His memory (as you suppose) was the least injured of his faculties, and was the last to give way under the strain of trying to tell that story. I believe his memory to have been speaking to you (unconsciously to himself) in all that he said from the moment when the first reference to 'the letter' escaped him to the end."

"But what does the reference to the letter mean?" I asked. "For my part, I am entirely in the dark about it."

"So am I," he answered, frankly. "The chief one among the obstacles which I mentioned just now is the obstacle presented by that same 'letter.' The late Mrs. Eustace must have been connected with it in some way, or Dexter would never have spoken of it as 'a dagger in his heart'; Dexter would never have coupled her name with the words which describe the tearing up of the letter and the throwing of it away. I can arrive with some certainty at this result, and I can get no further. I have no more idea than you have of who wrote the letter, or of what was written in it. If we are ever to make that discovery--probably the most important discovery of all--we must dispatch our first inquiries a distance of three thousand miles. In plain English, my dear lady, we must send to America."

This, naturally enough, took me completely by surprise. I waited eagerly to hear why we were to send to America.

"It rests with you," he proceeded, "when you hear what I have to tell you, to say whether you will go to the expense of sending a man to New York, or not. I can find the right man for the purpose; and I estimate the expense (including a telegram)--"

"Never mind the expense!" I interposed, losing all patience with the eminent Scotch view of the case which put my purse in the first place of importance. "I don't care for the expense; I want to know what you have discovered."

He smiled. "She doesn't care for the expense," he said to himself, pleasantly. "How like a woman!"

I might have retorted, "He thinks of the expense before he thinks of anything else. How like a Scotchman!" As it was, I was too anxious to be witty. I only drummed impatiently with my fingers on the table, and said, "Tell me! tell me!"

He took out the fair copy from Benjamin's note-book which I had sent to him, and showed me these among Dexter's closing words: "What about the letter? Burn it now. No fire in the grate. No matches in the box. House topsy-turvy. Servants all gone."

"Do you really understand what those words mean?" I asked.

"I look back into my own experience," he answered, "and I understand perfectly what the words mean."

"And can you make me understand them too?"

"Easily. In those incomprehensible sentences Dexter's memory has correctly recalled certain facts. I have only to tell you the facts, and you will be as wise as I am. At the time of the Trial, your husband surprised and distressed me by insisting on the instant dismissal of all the household servants at Gleninch. I was instructed to pay them a quarter's wages in advance, to give them the excellent written characters which their good conduct thoroughly deserved, and to see the house clear of them at an hour's notice. Eustace's motive for this summary proceeding was much the same motive which animated his conduct toward you. 'If I am ever to return to Gleninch,' he said, 'I cannot face my honest servants after the infamy of having stood my trial for murder.' There was his reason. Nothing that I could say to him, poor fellow, shook his resolution. I dismissed the servants accordingly. At an hour's notice, they quitted the house, leaving their work for the day all undone. The only persons placed in charge of Gleninch were persons who lived on the outskirts of the park--that is to say, the lodge-keeper and his wife and daughter. On the last day of the Trial I instructed the daughter to do her best to make the rooms tidy. She was a good girl enough, but she had no experience as a housemaid: it would never enter her head to lay the bedrooms fires ready for lighting, or to replenish the empty match-boxes. Those chance words that dropped from Dexter would, no doubt, exactly describe the state of his room when he returned to Gleninch, with the prisoner and his mother, from Edinburgh. That he tore up the mysterious letter in his bedroom, and (finding no means immediately at hand for burning it) that he threw the fragments into the empty grate, or into the waste-paper basket, seems to be the most reasonable conclusion that we can draw from what we know. In any case, he would not have much time to think about it. Everything was done in a hurry on that day. Eustace and his mother, accompanied by Dexter, left for England the same evening by the night train. I myself locked up the house, and gave the keys to the lodge-keeper. It was understood that he was to look after the preservation of the reception-rooms on the ground-floor; and that his wife and daughter were to perform the same service between them in the rooms upstairs. On receiving your letter, I drove at once to Gleninch to question the old woman on the subject of the bedrooms, and of Dexter's room especially. She remembered the time when the house was shut up by associating it with the time when she was confined to her bed by an attack of sciatica. She had not crossed the lodge door, she was sure, for at least a week (if not longer after Gleninch had been left in charge of her husband and herself. Whatever was done in the way of keeping the bedrooms aired and tidy during her illness was done by her daughter. She, and she only, must have disposed of any letter which might have been lying about in Dexter's room. Not a vestige of torn paper, as I can myself certify, is to be discovered in any part of the room now. Where did the girl find the fragments of the letter? and what did she do with them? Those are the questions (if you approve of it) which we must send three thousand miles away to ask--for this sufficient reason, that the lodge-keeper's daughter was married more than a year since, and that she is settled with her husband in business at New York. It rests with you to decide what is to be done. Don't let me mislead you with false hopes! Don't let me tempt you to throw away your money! Even if this woman does remember what she did with the torn paper, the chances, at this distance of time, are enormously against our ever recovering a single morsel of it. Be in no haste to decide. I have my work to do in the city--I can give you the whole day to think it over."

"Send the man to New York by the next steamer," I said. "There is my decision, Mr. Playmore, without keeping you waiting for it!"

He shook his head, in grave disapproval of my impetuosity. In my former interview with him we had never once touched on the question of money. I was now, for the first time, to make acquaintance with Mr. Playmore on the purely Scotch side of his character.

"Why, you don't even know what it will cost you!" he exclaimed, taking out his pocket-book with the air of a man who was equally startled and scandalized. "Wait till I tot it up," he said, "in English and American money."

"I can't wait! I want to make more discoveries!"

He took no notice of my interruption; he went on impenetrably with his calculations.

"The man will go second-class, and will take a return-ticket. Very well. His ticket includes his food; and (being, thank God, a teetotaler) he won't waste your money in buying liquor on board. Arrived at New York, he will go to a cheap German house, where he will, as I am credibly informed, be boarded and lodged at the rate--"

By this time (my patience being completely worn out) I had taken my check-book from the table-drawer, had signed my name, and had handed the blank check across the table to my legal adviser.

"Fill it in with whatever the man wants," I said. "And for Heaven's sake let us get back to Dexter!"

Mr. Playmore fell back in his chair, and lifted his hands and eyes to the ceiling. I was not in the least impressed by that solemn appeal to the unseen powers of arithmetic and money. I insisted positively on being fed with more information.

"Listen to this," I went on, reading from Benjamin's notes. "What did Dexter mean when he said, 'Number Nine, Caldershaws. Ask for Dandie. You shan't have the Diary. A secret in your ear. The Diary will hang him?' How came Dexter to know what was in my husband's Diary? And what does he mean by 'Number Nine, Caldershaws,' and the rest of it? Facts again?"

"Facts again!" Mr. Playmore answered, "muddled up together, as you may say--but positive facts for all that. Caldershaws, you must know, is one of the most disreputable districts in Edinburgh. One of my clerks (whom I am in the habit of employing confidentially) volunteered to inquire for 'Dandie' at 'Number Nine.' It was a ticklish business in every way; and my man wisely took a person with him who was known in the neighborhood. 'Number Nine' turned out to be (ostensibly) a shop for the sale of rags and old iron; and 'Dandie' was suspected of trading now and then, additionally, as a receiver of stolen goods. Thanks to the influence of his companion, backed by a bank-note (which can be repaid, by the way, out of the fund for the American expenses), my clerk succeeded in making the fellow speak. Not to trouble you with needless details, the result in substance was this: A fortnight or more before the date of Mrs. Eustace's death, 'Dandie' made two keys from wax models supplied to him by a new customer. The mystery observed in the matter by the agent who managed it excited Dandie's distrust. He had the man privately watched before he delivered the keys; and he ended in discovering that his customer was--Miserrimus Dexter. Wait a little! I have not done yet. Add to this information Dexter's incomprehensible knowledge of the contents of your husband's diary, and the product is--that the wax models sent to the old-iron shop in Caldershaws were models taken by theft from the key of the Diary and the key of the table-drawer in which it was kept. I have my own idea of the revelations that are still to come if this matter is properly followed up. Never mind going into that at

present. Dexter (I tell you again) is answerable for the late Mrs. Eustace's death. _How_ he is answerable I believe you are in a fair way of finding out. And, more than that, I say now, what I could not venture to say before--it is a duty toward Justice, as well as a duty toward your husband, to bring the truth to light. As for the difficulties to be encountered, I don't think they need daunt you. The greatest difficulties give way in the end, when they are attacked by the united alliance of patience resolution--and_economy."

With a strong emphasis on the last words, my worthy adviser, mindful of the flight of time and the claims of business, rose to take his leave.

"One word more," I said, as he held out his hand. "Can you manage to see Miserrimus Dexter before you go back to Edinburgh? From what the gardener told me, his brother must be with him by this time. It would be a relief to me to hear the latest news of him, and to hear it from you."

"It is part of my business in London to see him," said Mr. Playmore. "But mind! I have no hope of his recovery; I only wish to satisfy myself that his brother is able and willing to take care of him. So far as _we_ are concerned, Mrs. Eustace, that unhappy man has said his last words."

He opened the door--stopped--considered--and come back to me.

"With regard to that matter of sending the agent to America," he resumed--"I propose to have the honor of submitting to you a brief abstract--"

"Oh, Mr. Playmore!"

"A brief abstract in writing, Mrs. Eustace, of the estimated expenses of the whole proceeding. You will be good enough maturely to consider the same, making any remarks on it, tending to economy, which may suggest themselves to your mind at the time. And you will further oblige me, if you approve of the abstract, by yourself filling in the blank space on your check with the needful amount in words and figures. No, madam! I really cannot justify it to my conscience to carry about my person any such loose and reckless document as a blank check. There's a total disregard of the first claims of prudence and economy implied in this small slip of paper which is nothing less than a flat contradiction of the principles that have governed my whole life. I can't submit to flat contradiction. Good-morning, Mrs. Eustace--good-morning."

He laid my check on the table with a low bow, and left me. Among the curious developments of human stupidity which occasionally present themselves to view, surely the least excusable is the stupidity which, to this day, persists in wondering why the Scotch succeed so well in life!